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## Critical Perspectives on Undergraduate Black Women

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If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.

*Audre Lorde*

This project is one of reclamation, an attempt to explore and name Black undergraduate women's experiences in higher education scholarship. As a Black queer trans person, Audre Lorde knew all too well the ways in which society defined Black women and the dangers associated with the confinement embedded in those definitions. Today, there are many fantasies about Black women in higher education that must be critically interrogated and examined to illuminate the complexities of our experiences across the higher education landscape. This project is one effort devoted to the interruption of epistemic violence enacted to silence, marginalize, and dehumanize Black women, particularly at the undergraduate level. Scholars and practitioners know little about the experiences of Black undergraduate women, and what is presumed to be known has in large part been constructed outside Black women's communities, devoid of a critical lens, and treated as insignificant.

The limited body of scholarship currently available about Black women in college is helpful in illuminating their isolating experiences as they endure racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization (Chambers and Sharpe, 2012; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education [JBHE]*, 2006; Moses, 1989; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Most scholarship however, rarely if ever centers on the voices of Black women. Instead, Black women's experiences exist as part of a larger discussion of "diverse" populations in higher education. A mere exploration of peer-reviewed journal articles on access, retention, leadership, persistence,

discipline-specific foci, or any other topical area that is not solely couched within diversity discourses would reveal very little that primarily emphasizes the experiences of Black undergraduate women. This book disrupts the usual by placing an intentional and thoughtful emphasis on research and scholarship devoted to the experiences of Black undergraduate women. We invite readers to grapple with the current fantasies and definitions that are shaping the discourses surrounding Black women undergraduates. Some of these recent, albeit not entirely new, fantasies include being defined as more academically successful than Black men, being referenced as the “new” model minority, and the Black Girl Magic moniker.

## **Fantasies of Academic Success**

A major existing narrative about Black women and success in college is fueled by statistical comparisons of traditional outcomes data (enrollment, retention, graduation rates) between Black women and Black men in college. While the statistics paint a picture of success for Black undergraduate women, these same women are not central to the success discourse. More explicitly, Black women’s successes are certainly included, but their experiences are either subsumed under the study of “Black students” broadly, or they are used as props to sustain a zero-sum argument for initiatives to support Black men. As the narrative goes, *Black women are faring better than their Black men counterparts because they are entering higher education in greater numbers and earning more degrees than Black men; thus they are successful* (Butler, 2013; McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed, 2011; Roach, 2001; Strayhorn, 2016). This well-intentioned and seemingly neutral narrative singlehandedly contributes to a divisive discourse that positions Black women and men against one another for no substantiated reason. This discourse also fails to account for an analysis (and definition) of success beyond numbers, one that considers a larger context in which intersections identities and systems of oppression create uniquely raced, gendered, and classed experiences for Black women. The failure to account for racism/white supremacy and gender/patriarchy when considering Black collegiate women’s experiences is nonsensical at least and absurd at best. Despite the failure of their acknowledgement, we contend, however, that such contexts matter.

If the definition of college success is limited only to enrollment, retention (or persistence), and graduation rates provided via the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, a positive narrative could be constructed. For example, in 2013, 37.6 percent of Black women ages 18–24 were enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (NCES, 2013). Black women receive more than 50 percent of all degrees conferred to Black students across degree and institutional types (NCES, 2012). The fact that Black women exceed their male counterparts on narrowly defined predictors of success should not be surprising. The same is true across most racial ethnic groups, including White, Latina, and Asian women. Yet, Black women are treated as exceptional for numerically outpacing their men counterparts. We wonder why this is the case? How does the critical

mass, or numerical representation narrative, support or hinder Black women in college? How does this narrative mask oppressive, systemic, and structural barriers these women face? Scholars suggest that Black women are “resilient,” rely on spirituality and religion to cope (Donahoo, 2011; Patton and McClure, 2009; Watt, 2003), and participate in communities of women of color, sister circles, or sororities (Lee Williams and Nichols, 2012; Patton and Harper, 2003) to survive toxic campus environments. These research findings are undoubtedly important; however, they also point to a larger issue facing Black undergraduate women—that is, Black women have been navigating higher education, while postsecondary institutions have been overwhelmingly irresponsible in addressing racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that affect Black women.

Moreover, beyond the numerical conversation, little known about how Black women access college, what shapes their college choice, which experiences and opportunities contribute to their retention (or attrition), and the costs associated with their survival and capacity to thrive in college. For example, Black women are primarily entering the postsecondary sector through community colleges and for-profit institutions. According to data presented by Iloh and Toldson (2013), 41 percent of Black undergraduate women are attending public two-year institutions, and 23 percent are attending for-profit institutions. Twenty-four percent of Black collegiate women are enrolled in public four-year institutions and 10 percent in private nonprofit four-year institutions. Where Black women attend college matters because it has implications for (four-year and advanced) degree attainment, career choice, and lifetime earnings. While community colleges serve a necessary function, providing opportunities for some in minoritized communities to pursue postsecondary education in more equitable ways, these institutions have been critiqued as organizations that in many ways reproduce the inequities they were intended to disrupt (Iloh and Toldson, 2013). With regard to for-profit education, Black women are disproportionately matriculating at these institutions, many of which are known to engage in predatory admissions and financial aid practices (Iloh and Toldson, 2013). Similar to community colleges, they provide access to communities who might not otherwise have these opportunities; however, for-profit institutions have been scrutinized for their high costs (read: high student debt) and low job-attainment outcomes (Iloh and Toldson, 2013). Entry via these mediums has not provided radical shifts in the overall wealth gaps of Black women in U.S. society (Cohen and Nee, 2000; Insight Center for Community Economic Development [Insight], 2010; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2011). Overall, the discourse about Black women’s college success is woven with incomplete and in most cases nonexistent information, aside from numerical figures about their access, retention, and graduation. Simply stated, more information and research is needed about Black women that moves beyond their treatment as a monolithic group and explicitly grapples with the systemic inequities that shape and influence their lives while attending college. If Black women represent an academic success story,

why aren't there more proof-positive narratives in peer-reviewed academic journals, books, the media, and other relevant venues? What is the benefit of wrapping Black women's collegiate experiences in nice fantasies that ignore their realities?

### **The “New” Model Minority Fantasy**

One of the narratives more recently assigned to Black women is the “new model minority” (Kaba, 2008). Kaba (2008) asserted, “If the central argument of the model minority concept in the USA pertains to groups that once experienced severe economic, social, and political isolation and managed to rise up despite those difficulties, then one could expand the model minority concept to include Black American females” (p. 310). We completely disagree. Ironically, Kaba contends that Black women are the new model minority while simultaneously acknowledging they continue to lag behind other communities with respect to economic, social, and educational factors. Most problematic about Kaba's analysis is the failure to consider how the model minority narrative was initially constructed and the extent to which it is even appropriate or necessary to consider Black women within this framework. While model minority status may be a seemingly positive signifier that indicates Black women's abilities to work hard and succeed in higher education despite the odds, numerous scholars have argued against the use of this framing. The original model minority narrative has been used to perpetuate stereotypes, particularly within and across Asian communities (Museus and Kiang, 2009; Wing, 2007). In order to problematize and question the appropriateness of defining Black women as the second wave of model minorities or the “new model minority,” it is important to briefly explore the underpinnings of the concept.

Prior to the 1960s, Asian communities, both domestic and international-born, were constructed in less than model ways, including being “portrayed as uncivilized, sinister, heathen, filthy, yellow hordes that threatened to invade the US and ‘mongrelize’ the white ‘race’” (Wing, 2007, p. 457). Chinese communities were racialized as the “Yellow Peril” in the media, and Japanese communities were placed in internment camps during World War II. A full description of acts against Asian diaspora communities in the United States is beyond the scope of this book; however, it is important to note that up until the Civil Rights Movement, individually and collectively Asian communities were constructed (and treated) in dehumanizing ways. Sociologist William Petersen, a professor at the University of California Berkeley, coined the concept of model minorities in a 1966 article in the *New York Times*. In “A success story, Japanese-American style,” Petersen wrote:

Once the cumulative degradation has gone far enough, it is notoriously difficult to reverse the trend. When new opportunities, even equal opportunities, are opened up, the minority's rejection to them is likely to be negative—either self-defeating apathy or a hatred so all-consuming as to

be self-destructive. ... we barely know how to repair the damage that the slave traders started. The history of Japanese Americans, however, challenges every such generalization about ethnic minorities, and for this reason alone deserves far more attention that it has been given. Barely more than 20 years after the end of the wartime camps, this is a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed. (p. 1)

In the article, Petersen argued that despite the oppression faced by Japanese - communities in the United States, including denial of citizenship, myriad forms of discrimination, and the internment camps, they were able—collectively through family, education, religion, and ultimately hard work and respect for authority—to overcome their circumstances and integrate successfully into American cul-ture with little to no aid. Following Petersen, other press and media outlets (i.e., Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, Time) began to also tell “success” stories about other Asian groups turning the tide of racial, ethnic, and economic oppression through hard work, perseverance, and self-determination. Moreover, these articles perpetuated the idea that Asian groups made these strides without the resentment and anger displayed by other racially and ethnically marginalized groups (Petersen, 1966).

Scholars have engaged in unpacking the model minority myth in higher - education at multiple levels. For example, Museus and Kiang (2009) posited that the model minority stereotype is problematic because it prompts some Asian students to attempt to emulate this achievement stereotype simply because they are Asian identified. Additionally, others have found that Asian students may grapple with internalized oppression due to pressures associated with this stereotype and may be less likely to seek student support services on campuses (Yang, Byers, Ahuna, and Castro, 2002). In relation to group level membership, critical scholars argue that the model minority myth is harmful because it (1) essentializes and homogenizes Asian communities; (2) positions them as not racially or ethnically minoritized, therefore not experiencing racism; and (3) suggests that Asian communities do not require institutional support or resources (Museus and Kiang, 2009). Collectively, these narratives mask the needs of Asian students and absolve institutions of any responsibility for providing resources to the diverse communities that comprise “Asian” student populations (Suzuki, 2003). Furthermore, scholars have noted how the model minority myth results in the theoretical absence and erasure of Asian communities in higher education research and scholarship (Museus and Kiang, 2009).

At structural and systemic levels, the extension of the model minority stereotype to Black women is overwhelmingly dangerous and leads to similar stereotypes directed toward this population. The “new model minority” also treats

Black women as a monolithic group, while simultaneously dismissing the matrix of oppression that is ever-present in their lives. The “new model minority” myth suggests that Black women enter and graduate from college free of any real challenges or obstacles. The myth also insidiously operates to discourage Black women from engaging in campus politics or solidarity building with other groups, since they are positioned as “exceptional” or “not like the others.” As a result, this myth also promotes divisiveness among Black students, creating a tension in which Black women are deemed better or more successful and Black men are subjected to lowered expectations. Critical race scholars describe this process as differential racialization (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Specifically, differential racialization means that racially minoritized groups have been individually racialized over time in different ways to meet the needs of white supremacy in the United States. The new model minority myth is toxic because it discredits the need for research on Black women in college, contributing to the invisibility that is characteristic of Black women’s treatment in higher education literature and beyond. The “new model minority” myth creates a positive narrative of Black women’s “success” in college, requiring those interested in studying Black women to focus more prominently on Black women’s “problems” rather than developing a balanced view that grapples with challenges and successes. Last but not least, the myth essentially ignites stereotypes of the Black matriarch and superwoman (which we address in the next section), which suggests that no matter what, Black women are “need free.” As with Asian communities, the myth absolves institutions, policymakers, and leaders from directing attention to Black women’s experiences in college. Kaba (2008) uses postsecondary educational attainment as a measure of model minority status, and in the context of this book, a measure of Black women’s “success.” Given the historical construction and present-day implications of the model minority myth, it is critical that educators and researchers consider how this narrative contributes to the construction of Black women’s college success. As long as Black women remain invisible and marginalized, fantasies about their “new model minority” status will prevail; hence the value of this project, one of many that empowers us to write ourselves into existence.

## **#BlackGirlMagic Fantasies**

While the previously discussed narratives have been constructed primarily outside of Black women’s communities, the Black Girl Magic narrative was created by and for Black women as an effort to name and reclaim our contributions, identities (individual and collective), and successes in positive and affirming ways. In a phone interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, coiner CaShawn Thompson shared, “I say ‘magic’ because it’s something that people don’t always understand. ... Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other black women” (Thomas, 2015). Wilson (2016) defined Black Girl Magic as “a term used to illustrate the

universal awesomeness of Black women. It's about celebrating anything we deem particularly dope, inspiring, or mind-blowing about ourselves" (np.). While the purpose of the Black Girl Magic message across Black women's communities is rooted in self-empowerment and uplift, the message has also been mishandled and used as a trope to diminish the complexity of its meaning for Black women, who are almost always forced to define and redefine themselves beyond stereotypical notions of resilience and success.

In early 2016, Dr. Linda Chavers attempted to write a critique of Black Girl Magic in an Elle.com article. Chavers argued that Black Girl Magic was simply a new name for an old caricature—the strong Black (super)woman archetype. The strong Black woman archetype suggests that Black women are fiercely independent and able to overcome any and all obstacles, and that they do so with a negative attitude. Chavers (2016) writes:

The “strong, black woman” archetype, which also includes the mourning black woman who suffers in silence, is the idea that we can survive it all, that we can withstand it. That we are, in fact, superhuman....Black girl magic suggests we are, again, something other than human. That might sound nitpicky, but it's not nitpicky when we are still being treated as sub-human. And there's a very long history of black women being treated as subhuman.... (np)

Chavers presents this critical interpretation of Black Girl Magic, also acknowledging the simultaneity of joy it elicits for her. While Black Girl Magic promotes positivity, it also reminds her—as a Black woman with multiple sclerosis—that she is not magic. Failure to understand the complexity of Black Girl Magic discounts the fact that Black women, like Chavers, have to work diligently to get through their daily lives and that attributing these travails to “magic” can be perceived as dismissive of the reality this work.

In response, Ashely Ford countered Chavers's points by explaining that Black Girl Magic is about reclamation rather than tapping into a supernatural force that the word “magic” elicits. Ford (2016) explains,

Magic is about knowing something that others don't know or refuse to see. When a black woman is successful, and the world refuses to see her blood, sweat, and tears behind the win, what does it look like? Magic. It's not for them. It's for us....Black Girl Magic moves way beyond the trope of impenetrable strength, and because it was created by a black woman, includes the inside joke of calling what we've always known to be real about our capabilities “magic.” (np)

As Black women scholars, we too honor Black women's celebration of one another; to be clear, others rarely will celebrate us. In order for Black women to

be celebrated, to feel empowered and recognized, we are primarily responsible for creating the language to ensure these moments happen. We also must remain mindful of how those beyond our communities can use the language we create to reshape the narrative in ways that can ultimately disadvantage us. As a point of departure, we take up Ford's conceptualization of Black Girl Magic and ask: If the unseen or the things people refuse to see in Black women's lives are not made visible, how can we collectively and radically eliminate experiences and systems that are unnecessarily causing the blood, sweat, and tears we experience? In this sense, Black Girl Magic can potentially—and certainly not in all cases—reinforce already established assumptions about Black women's "success" in college; that is, they are always and already capable of succeeding and even outpacing their men counterparts, despite racism, sexism, classism, and the other forms of oppression they experience in higher education. Although Black Girl Magic is for "us," not "them," the white supremacist patriarchy (the proverbial *them*) masterfully penetrates many communities of color, Black women included. Thus, Black women must be careful to ensure that our inside joke does not become a joke on us. Our call for caution with this particular narrative is in no way about silencing Black women as we define ourselves for ourselves; rather, it a call for more expansive and critical explorations of how narratives about Black women come to be and how they can be easily misinterpreted and used against Black women. For example, if Black girls are "magic," why would an institution shift resources and support to ensure their success in college? In other words, what happens to Black women in college when an "inside joke" of Black Girl Magic is reinterpreted by their institutions to mean something completely different? What types of pressures does this narrative place on academically struggling Black women students? How might institutions use such narratives to retain and support Black women students or continue their failure to effectively do so? How do researchers wrap their minds around the study of a presumably "magic" population?

### **The Need to Center Black Undergraduate Women in Educational Research**

In the previous section, we shared three major narratives that have and continue to shape how educators, researchers, and the general public make sense of Black women's collegiate experiences. The narratives we presented are hardly exhaustive. However, they serve as a pivotal turning point for us to reaffirm the need to center Black women in educational research. The reality is that we know very little about their experiences in college, which translates into limited resources and attention being devoted to them. The goal of this book is to call attention to Black women in college and to encourage scholars, researchers, educators, and institutional leaders to realize the ultimate value in studying this population from multiple perspectives and to do so by asking critical questions and using relevant frameworks. More importantly, the book was written as one contribution



to what we consider a growing interest and unwavering need to study Black women's college experiences, particularly the contexts that influence success, broadly defined. The authors of each chapter ask important questions about Black women's college success, and their ideas are intricately filtered through lenses such as black feminist thought, intersectionality, respectability politics, and stereotypes. Using diverse terminology, theories, and methodological approaches each chapter is designed to present a summary of cutting-edge, thoughtful research or critiques of the research. These chapters should be both informative and help readers generate additional research questions that should be explored in order to support Black women's college success.

### **How this Book is Organized**

This edited volume is divided into four sections. The chapters in Section I present critical perspectives about Black undergraduate women through historical and generational framings. In Chapter 1, Linda Perkins provides a historical account of Black women's coeducational college experiences. Focusing primarily on Fisk University, Howard University, and Tuskegee Institute, Perkins shares how the contrasts between these institutions and the campus context shaped Black women's sense-making of college and campus environments. Chapter 2 also places a historical lens on Black women's college experiences, particularly at Midwestern liberal arts colleges. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart provides a critical race counter-narrative to situate the invisibility, segregation, and marginalization that was an influential aspect of Black women's college experiences at the time, despite their successes. Chapter 3 transitions from history toward a generational outlook on Black women's college success. Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, Courtney Luedke, and Carmen McCallum offer readers an opportunity to consider the nuanced nature of college advice from Black women as shared with future generations of Black women to help them succeed in college.

Section II emphasizes the role of the discourses and identity politics that shape Black women's experiences. Saran Donahoo illuminates the objectifying gaze and its ever-presence in Black women's lives through film in Chapter 4. Rather than focusing on actual college students, Donahoo examines fictional portrayals of Black undergraduate women and how these depictions promote and disrupt stereotypes. In the chapter, she makes consistent comparisons and observations that demonstrate the nature of film in influencing and reinforcing stereotypical notions of Black women's college success. In Chapter 5, Kimberly Everett and Natasha Croom also examine discourses but focus on the higher education research literature rather than film. Everett and Croom uncover seemingly neutral discourses about Black women that remain embedded in academic journals. Their chapter prompts readers to consider how academic journals set and dictate the research agenda about and for Black undergraduate women. In Chapter 6, Christa Porter shares scholarship on an emergent model of Black women's identity

development in college. She highlights the interactions and influences prominent in Black women's socialization toward an understanding of their identities. In Chapter 7, Kimberly Griffin, Chrystal George Mwangi, and Shawna Patterson focus on Black immigrant women and their college transitions. These authors pay specific attention to how these women's social identities and immigrant back-grounds converged with their new academic climate and the subsequent challenges that emerged as they pursued a college education.

In Section III, the contributed chapters center Black undergraduate women's diverse experiences, particularly in relation to respectability politics and resistance. Tomika Ferguson and James Satterfield introduce the concept of hyperfemininity in Chapter 8. The authors describe how Black women athletes enhance their physical attributes and external features to grapple with social acceptance and resist standard notions of beauty and femininity. In Chapter 9, Tracey Owens Patton enlightens readers about the politics surrounding Black women's hair in extremely white campus environments. She also reveals how these hair politics are multi-layered and intricately linked to the university, the city, and the state. Chapter 10 focuses on constructions of Black womanhood at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Authors Nadrea Njoku and Lori Patton discuss how the constructed environment at some HBCUs both restricts conceptions of Black womanhood while also allowing a space for Black undergraduate women to resist these limitations. Jennifer Johnson examines the experiences of working class Black undergraduate women at an Ivy League university in Chapter 11. She describes how interactions of class, race, and gender feature prominently for these women who, by virtue of their socioeconomic status, are situated at a prestigious institution.

The final section of the book offers chapters that deal primarily with Black women's socialization, well-being, mental health, and support structures in college. In Chapter 12, Sha'Kema Blackmon and Laura Coyle investigate the concept of flourishing for Black women in college. They also examine how Black women's racial/ethnic socialization relates to flourishing and the implications of flourishing on Black women's well-being and mental health. Roxanne Donovan and Nichole Guillory also focus on well-being in Chapter 13, particularly the impact of negative environmental stressors on Black women and the need for institutions to address the isolation and disconnect that characterizes many Black women's collegiate experiences. Finally, in Chapter 14, Mahauganee Shaw points out that Black women are often penalized because they struggle more successfully than others. She encourages institutions to diligently work to establish support structures for Black women that acknowledge the challenges they face and to engage in the necessary assessment procedures to ensure such programs promote Black women's college success.

Taken together, the chapters in this book present extremely important research and scholarship that has major implications for Black women's college success beyond numerical figures. Many of the chapters have overlapping content, which demonstrates the possibilities of researching diverse topics related to

Black women's collegiate experiences. Our hope is that readers will recognize the intersectionality of Black women's experiences in college as well as the role of larger discourses and particular contexts that influence this population and their success in college. Moreover, various themes will emerge from the collective work, including the ongoing stereotypes that Black women must face, the need for perspectives by and about women (e.g., Black feminist thought), and the promise for future research and scholarship that picks up where the chapter authors left off. We hope scholars and researchers will read this book and use the information as an inspiration to conduct cutting-edge research about Black undergraduate women to inform practice and practice. Similarly, we hope practitioners, educators, and institutional leaders will read this book, share it with colleagues, and begin the necessary work of centering Black women. Most important, we want readers to realize the dire need to examine Black undergraduate women using a critical lens and allow the experiences to shape what college success means beyond numerical hype.

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