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# The Intersection of Gender and Race in Adult Education Research

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# The Intersection of Gender and Race in Adult Education Research

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**Abstract:** *Across a fifteen year career, this researcher has labored to conduct research through a perspective that equally considered and honored gender and race, with an acceptance of the complex and often contested passion that recognized a universality to gender that is not consistent in the multifaceted system of race/racism. After an introduction of the two theoretical frames that have guided this researcher's publications, this paper follows the progression of five exemplars chosen from over 100 publications: *Women of Color in the Academy: Where's Our Authority in the Classroom*; *Everyday Perspectives on Feminism: African American Women Speak Out*; *Sonia Sanchez: Telling What We Must Hear*; *Harriet Buckley: An Artist Storyteller*; and *Different Worlds and Divergent Paths: Academic Careers Defined by Race and Gender*.*

## Responsive Theoretical Frames

Two theoretical frames that have guided this researcher's work: Black Feminism and Critical Race Feminism. By definition Black feminism is a woman's movement that addresses the issues of racism and sexism as they oppress African American women. Additionally, the movement takes into account issues of class since African American women and their children represent the largest segment of the poor in America (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Geschwender & Carroll-Seguín, 1990; Newsome & Doodoo, 2002). African American women stand in the peculiar position as the conduit between two of the major movements of this century, the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement. By our very embodiment, we are members of both groups. The second frame used is critical race feminism (CRF). CRF is a conceptual frame with five components: 1) a belief that racism and sexism are endemic to American life; 2) a direct and overt challenge to hegemonic discourse; 3) a commitment to social justice; 4) an honoring the experiential base of marginalized women; and a multi-faceted disciplinary viewpoint.

The ways in which Black feminism and Critical Race Feminism influence the research and writing is manifested in several ways: is the researcher and the participant are co-researchers (a method of managing power dynamics); an approach to the research that structures and embeds the work's design with a social justice perspective; and an ethic of care that directs the relationship with the research participants.

## Feminist Pedagogy as an Adult Educator's Tool

Feminist pedagogy, the topic of *Women of Color in the Academy: Where's Our Authority in the Classroom*, has revolutionized the academy and has powerfully informed and transformed teaching and learning. By addressing the power issues that are inherent in the classroom, feminist pedagogy has asked academicians to examine their individual practices, curriculum, and perspectives for subjugation by gender, race, and class. Furthermore, feminist pedagogy has encouraged teaching practices that empower students because it asks teachers to develop styles that are non-authoritative and nurturing. The literature abounds with definitions of feminist

pedagogy (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, & Tarule, 1986; Boxer, 1998; Fisher, 2001; Golberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky, 1996; hooks, 1989). For our discussion, we define feminist pedagogy as a method of teaching and learning that employs a political framework that attends to or encourages consciousness raising, activism, and a caring and safe environment. Implicit in this form of teaching, which is rooted in social justice, is an understanding of the universality of gender oppression and a critique of Western rationality, androcentric theories, structured inequalities, and unequal societal power relations. In addition, the practices that flow from feminist pedagogy center on connected teaching (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), which involves the teacher and students jointly in constructing knowledge, engaging in self-reflection, and practicing self-revelation. This definition of feminist pedagogy has been a wellspring to our praxis. The pedagogical practices and tenets recommended by feminist pedagogy have provided a sound political and ethical framework for our academic classrooms. This feminist pedagogy, however, is the one of our dreams. As Rose Chepyator-Thomson reminds us, this is not a perfect world, and many factors enter into how we want to and intend to practice: "Education, an apparent instrument of anything 'good' to be passed on from generation to generation, depends on whose educational knowledge and whose 'goodness' is being passed on and who is doing the passing" (10). Therefore, there is no generic feminist pedagogy. The feminist pedagogy of my practice is one that is informed and honed by my positionality as a Black woman. There is no one-size-fits-all feminist pedagogy, however, and the combination of feminist pedagogy and women of color can make for a dangerous liaison. My place in the academy was a tenuous one that was not under-girded by institutional power, so I should be prepared to have my knowledge base questioned, and my authority would often be challenged.

However, implicit in this form of teaching, which is rooted in social justice, is an understanding of the universality of gender oppression and a critique of Western rationality, androcentric theories, structured inequalities, and unequal societal power relations. In addition, the practices that flow from feminist pedagogy center on connected teaching (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), which involves the teacher and students jointly in constructing knowledge.

### **Adult Women Living Oppositional Lives**

In *Everyday Perspectives on Feminism: African American Women Speak Out*, the attitudes and beliefs of nine African American women regarding the relevance of feminism to their lives are examined. The study sketches their experiences of feminism against the backdrop of their daily lives, reviewing the women's perceptions as compared to the ideas presented in the literature by feminist scholars. The study revealed that African American women see themselves as different from White women and do not feel that the feminist movement in this country addresses the concerns of the average African American woman. In addition, while they feel that they are. Feminism as a phenomenon in the academy is surreal in that is posed as a discourse that is intellectually elitist and intentionally exclusionary and is bound by the parameters of the White middle class woman's existence. Rarely are the voices of poor women and women of color included in discussions of feminism, unless the discussion turns to Welfare. When the voices of everyday women are present, they are usually audible in Women Studies anthologies that relate their narratives where they shed their exotic blood as a means of informing the masses and where these women are portrayed as a monolithic group who are socio-economically disadvantaged and under-educated. As an African American woman academician, I have been dismayed by the

artificial nature of this discussion and the elite parameters that bound or contain the debate. Since the African American woman's existence is one of resistance, her life is, more often than not, a study in feminism (Breines, 1997; Brewer, 1999; Christian, 1994; Guy-Sheftall, 1995, 2000). However, if you asked an African American woman how she gets by in a world that is often hostile toward her, she is likely to say that she's just "strong" or that she "just does what she has to do."

### **Representing the Other in Poetry and Art**

In *Flat-Footed Truths: Telling Black Women's Lives*, a book edited by the author contains two chapters written by the author: *Sonia Sanchez: Telling What We Must Hear*; *Harriet Buckley: An Artist Storyteller*. The purpose of the chapters was to present the two nationally famous artists, Sonia Sanchez and Harriet Buckley, using their words to tell why they work and what they are trying to teach the adult women who are their audience and consumers.

The first subject Harriet Buckley was inspired by such artists as Mary Greer and David Green, she draws herself and her communities. Formally educated as a painter and graduated from the Memphis College of Art, she works in the medium demanded by the subject. Her art often appears three-dimensional combining quilting, photography, painting, leather, and metal to create unique forms. She is most prolific in watercolors although she strives to learn innovative techniques so that new images can emerge. (One of her watercolors, "Keepers of the Culture," is featured on the cover of the cover of *Flat-footed Truths: Telling Black Women's Lives*) Her colors communicate an Afro-Caribbean pallet celebrating scenes as familiar as hair rituals and as unnerving as genital mutilation. Harriet constantly sketches throughout the day, filling journal after journal with the private language of art. She does not want to "miss a thing." At her home in the midst of quilts, oil paintings, sketchbook journals, ancestral boxes and drums, larger than life papier mache sculptures, and watercolors, a wire sculpture jumps out. It is a woman's head with jeweled-fire eyes, leather-worked facial features, and a mass of color-beaded dreadlocks. She calls it "Dreaded Me," and explains that it sometimes refers to her dreadlocks and at other times to her persona.

Harriet has definitive goals as an adult educator. She addresses Black women collectively and tries to make spirit/message objects to resonate her African ancestry. She considers her work to be narrative art that speaks to personal experiences and believes that women are the keepers of the culture and pass on the norms and traditions of the community.

The second artist, Sonia Sanchez, is a poet with over 14 books, tells her life as an adult educator in *Sonia Sanchez: Telling What We Must Hear*. According to Sonia, she is perpetually the watcher, keeper, and lover of her people. Her poems are womanist or woman-centered. This is quite a feat since she has grown to love in a world where she was socialized to hate other women, as are most females. Now in her college classes and in her poetry reading she greets all women as sister. And attempts to use her work as an extension of her activism. She has been at the forefront of community social activism in Black communities in Philadelphia and across the U.S. as the opportunity presents itself and firmly believes that until we organize women in this country the way we should be organized we are in a lot of trouble. She explains that she is not doing anything new -- not inventing anything new -- just picking up on the ideology of my *ancestral teaching*.

## Life As An Educator and Practitioner

What I will say of my life as an academic is that it is the best job in the world, but it has a special intellectual and elitist brand of hell. My five years in rank as an assistant professor and five years in rank as an associate professor are not typical for a Black woman in higher education. Women faculty and faculty of color routinely spend more time in rank than their White male counterparts who average the obligatory five years at each rank (Menges & Exum, 1983; Bronstein, Rothblum, & Solomon, 1993; Winkler, 2000). Being a professor has been a more challenging experience than I ever could have imagined, and therefore I research and write about my life in higher education because it helps me survive. In meditative hours, I recall what a poet once explained to me during an interview: "Writing . . . kept me alive. It kept me breathing. It kept me human. . . . It kept me from killing people. It kept me from killing myself" (Johnson-Bailey, 1998, p. 60). The benefits of my job as a faculty member are bountiful: I've dipped my toes in the Nile, seen the stars from Down Under, met incredible scholars, and had the wonderful freedom that comes with being in the professoriate — the luxury of being paid to nurture my intellect and live in my own mind. However, I have also faced challenges and suspicions from my colleagues and students about my place and intellect, struggled with self-doubt, and wrestled with my imposed outsider status and my isolation. While these issues are part of the life of many academics, I believe that they are exacerbated by the racism and sexism extant in our society, and that the academy is a reflection of that society.

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