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Black Women Teacher Educators: Creating Enduring Afriographies as Leaders and Change Makers  
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### Abstract

Within the womanist tradition, Black women have fought against multiple oppressions through the construction of enduring afriographies, as leaders and change-makers, and as scholars committed to research and service in and for communities of color (Henry, 1998; Hill, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1996). This study investigated the perspectives, experiences, and practices of three Black women teacher educators using womanist theory and portraiture methodology. In interviewing and shadowing participants, and reviewing documents related to their teaching practices, two questions were posed: a) In what ways are their teaching practices informed by their experiences?; and, How does the theme of "race uplift" help to shape their work within the academy? This paper explores findings from the latter question and considers participants' power to lead and effect change in their academic roles and in their creation of enduring afriographies.

Black Women Teacher Educators:

Creating Enduring Afriographies as Leaders and Change Makers

Although faculty women of color have obtained academic positions, their successful navigation of the road to tenure and to retention within higher education is fraught with challenges and difficulties. Despite active recruitment efforts to join elite institutions of higher education, women of color find themselves, upon arrival, confined to designated places or "outsider-within locations" (Collins, 1998). As outsiders-within, women of color faculty experience feelings of isolation, discrimination, and tokenism. They also report incidents of student resistance across disciplinary fields, questioning of their credentials, confrontational situations with students and colleagues, and even verbal and physical threats of violence (Gregory, 1999; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; James & Farmer, 1993; Turner, 2002). Additionally, as Turner notes, junior level Black women faculty work under social constraints that White colleagues do not labor under. Her work also highlights the "black tax" Black faculties incur on student evaluations, describing how student responses are consciously filtered through a racial (and we would argue, a gendered) lens (p. 356). These situations incur negative expenditures of energy in ways that distract and redirect Black women faculty from meaningful work that contributes directly to tenure and promotion.

The womanist tradition illuminates how Black women have fought against multiple oppressions as builders/creators of enduring afriographies, as leaders and change-makers, and as scholars committed to research and service in and for communities of color (Collins 2000; Henry, 1998; Hill, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1996). This study investigated the perspectives, experiences, and practices of three Black women teacher educators. Interviews, observations, document review, and portraiture methodology were guided by two overarching questions: a) In what ways are Black women teacher educators pedagogical practices informed by their experiences?; and b) How does the theme of "race uplift" help to shape their work within the academy? Here, race uplift is defined as teaching for the educational betterment of the African-American community and the larger American community . This paper highlights study findings related to the way in which participants overcame their outsider-within status through a womanist ethic of care for leadership and change. We present each participant's enduring afriography related to how they "professionally maneuvered" (Dingus, 2006) within the academy to help create individual and institutionalized change.

## Methodology

At the time of the study, each participant was a member of the faculty at three different Carnegie Foundation (2000) classified institutions, including comprehensive I, doctoral/research I, and liberal arts II. One research site was also a historically Black higher education institution; another site was partly founded by members of the Caribbean community, which the college has mostly served. As such, these environments provided a rich context for analyzing how race uplift might inform pedagogy.

The selection of participants was based on six criteria: each participant earned a doctoral degree in education or social science; taught, advised, and/or supervised pre-service students at their respective college or university; taught pre-service courses in educational foundations and/or pedagogy; was at least a second year faculty member at their current institution; had prior experience teaching in a K-12 setting; and had a womanist perspective. Respondents' perspectives and criteria were assessed through a preliminary interview.

Transcribed interviews, observation and shadowing notes, and selected documents were analyzed for emergent themes that revealed similarities, as well as differences, among the participants. Data analysis was ongoing, occurring simultaneously with data collection. Portraits were developed to describe the respective research sites, participant life histories, and individual pedagogies. This type of qualitative research methodology, also referred to as portraiture, allowed the researcher to organize a narrative around central themes within the data and write layered stories (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture has been considered a suitable methodology for capturing the "complexity and aesthetic of human experience" (p. 4). Portions of participants' portraits have been highlighted in this paper and noted as their enduring afriography.

## Study Participants

Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani were professors at three different higher education institutions in the North and Southeast regions of the United States . Olivia taught at a suburban comprehensive university where students and faculty of color number approximately 30% each. As 4.4% of the full-time university faculty, Black women teacher-educators in the College of Education were less than one-fourth of the total percentage of faculty of color.

Tulip taught at a liberal arts college in a largely Caribbean community. At this institution, students of color exceeded the percentage of faculty of color, with respective rates at 97.7% and 90%. Out of a total of 11 full-time faculty members in the Department of Education (where Tulip taught), three members were Black women.

Tulani taught at a historically Black research university where the percentage of students of color was 99%

of the total student body and where the percentage of faculty of color was 90%. Black women comprised 44% of the full-time faculty.

Despite the fact that two study participants taught at institutions where they may have found cultural and ethnic similarities to their groups of origin, all of the participants have and continue to experience positions as "outsiders-within." Collins' (1998) notion of "outsider-within," characterized by the locations or border-zones that Black women professors and other marginalized groups tend to occupy as faculty in institutions of higher education, accurately characterized Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani's experiences in becoming and being teacher-educators. "We are newcomers to a world defined and controlled by discourses that do not often address our realities, that do not affirm our intellectual contributions and that do not seriously examine our worlds" (Turner, 2002, p. 75). This experience led many Black women academics to ask: "Can I be both Black and a professor without compromising my principles or my identity?" For this reason, professors of color often live contradictions, an experience that confirms their status as outsiders-within.

Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani were outsiders-within as graduate students, learning in environments that did not support diverse perspectives. As professors they were outsiders-within by nature of the limited numbers of women of color in higher education institutions, and by virtue of frequently being the only Black female professor or the only professor of color at an upper level rank in their department or college. However, in spite of their outsider-within status participants were aware of and effectively exercised their power to lead and to effect change. Data suggest that this power is exemplified in two ways: in their academic roles and in their creation of enduring afriographies. Above and beyond experiences in individual institutions as outsiders-within, Black women teacher educators find themselves working in a field where whiteness is centered, as evidenced in programs addressing the experiences of White middle-class student dispositions and views. While this work is necessary given the overwhelming presence of White teachers in culturally, linguistically and economically diverse classrooms, it often precludes the experiences of pre-service teachers of color.

### Academic Roles: The Power of Being a Teacher Educator

There is power in educating other people's children (Apple, 1995; Bey, 1995; Delpit, 1995). Teachers have the power to pass on values, morals, and viewpoints to their students. They have the power to transform and change one's consciousness, to uplift. Gordon (1986) contended that because teachers were at least a part of two worlds--a larger society and the educational mechanism and its power structure--they hold the key to transforming those worlds. Teacher educators have the power to educate not only students in their classes, but to also indirectly influence those who are subsequently taught by their students in positive and negative ways. Annette Henry (1994), an Afro-Canadian woman professor, declared, "I am a teacher educator because I believe in the power to change people's understandings about themselves, others and the world" (p. 1).

Like the leadership observed in the past example, Olivia, Tulip, and Tulani also provided guidance that sought to reveal and thwart dominant perspectives. For example, as chairperson of her department, Olivia acted as a member of the retention committee at the college, the faculty council, and the faculty senate. She was also a member of the search and screen committee for college-wide departments. Being department chair and a member of these committees gave Olivia the authority and power to add her perspective to a table comprised mostly of those from the dominant majority. In this way, Olivia had an opportunity to make decisions, develop courses, and provide information to faculty; this situation also helped her to make explicit the underlying power relations within the institution and to reveal conditions of those who were kept out of the mainstream. During data collection for this study, for example, Olivia was co-planning a multicultural education course with another professor. In a post-shadowing interview, Olivia explained, "I don't think that students are getting what they may need in terms of multiculturalism in their classes. I think there needs to be a separate course that helps students understand the intricacies of multicultural education."

This course, *Teaching Diverse Learners*, was approved and accepted in the revised post-baccalaureate curriculum for secondary teacher certification at her university.

Tulip has held many power-filled positions in education that identify her as an agent of change. For example, she was a Director of Special Programs and Grants for Auxiliary Services for several high schools, Coordinator for Special Education Title I, and Educational Consultant for the Public high schools Division on Multicultural Education. Tulip's womanist perspective in these roles aided in her goal to "help prevent injustice."

As a graduate student Tulani noticed the exponential power of effective education. She felt that it was important to "share this information with thirty people and then they go back to their classrooms of thirty and so on." In fact, recognition of this power was what helped her to make the decision to pursue a Ph.D.--a choice that allowed her power to be seen in her teaching and scholarship. She recently received an "Excellence in Teaching" award from her institution. Tulani holds a leadership position as a book review editor of a scholarly journal and she has published in both referred and non-refereed journals.

Olivia also recognized her power to effect change by teaching a class of thirty teachers who will in turn teach in K-12 classrooms. She has seen her power as a continuation of the education that students have received in all other academic settings. "It's really a continuation, because some of the students are now teaching students I would have taught, maybe, eight years ago, as ninth or tenth graders, so it's really a continuation." It was interesting to consider whether this was a continuation of the inequalities of social class or a continuation of leadership that sought to diminish inequalities in the system. Of course, Olivia was hopeful that her strategies and leadership were those that other teacher educators would share to gain further impact.

Olivia was apprehensive when she started teaching at a predominately White institution, but she was pushed by the need for teacher educators of color, the reality that most teachers are middle-class White women, and the power to be a part of a professoriate that prepares teachers for urban classrooms: "There's going to be a need for teacher educators, and the people who are going to be teaching out there are going to be these White students that I am instructing. They might very well wind up in an urban setting either against their will, or as something that they decided they wanted to do." Olivia recognized her power to prepare White teachers for urban classrooms: "I have not seen [the K-12 students they will teach], but their teachers will, under my tutelage. So I'm touching them." Olivia felt that by educating teachers she was touching more students, thereby uplifting a mass of people. By teaching teachers, she was able to effect change on a greater scale than if she were teaching in her own K-12 classroom. In the next section, we highlight participants enduring life stories describing how they professionally maneuvered within the academy to help create individual and institutionalized change.

### Enduring Afriographies--A Lived Experience

Participants' recognition of their power to effect change is also illustrated individually through enduring afriographies. Three themes emerged that describe how race uplift informs the work of these three Black women teacher educators. Tulani emphasizes praxis, Tulip models a love for the teaching profession, and Olivia emphasizes a notion of teaching for right now in her classes.

#### Tulani--Emphasizing Praxis

*We can't only talk in terms of Black and White because then we are leaving many people out of the discussion. We often do this in classrooms.*

In recognition of her power to effect change, Tulani has emphasized praxis. She stressed an acquisition of



knowledge over grades and assigned work that pushed students to theorize their everyday lives. For example, in her introduction to the course, *Multicultural Education and the Community*, she talked about grades: "The whole purpose of this is not about grades. If this was up to me I would get rid of grades. What we get out of this is not the grade."

Tulani recalled her own experience in a gifted and talented elementary school where the mission was to obtain knowledge for its own sake. Speaking to the students at this specialized school about their suburban counterparts, she explained:

They can have knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but we don't have that luxury. We need to be able to do something with our knowledge. We are privileged by being here (at this university). I am suggesting that we move towards a Freirian model, which suggests a concept of praxis and liberatory pedagogy. How can I use new information to change or rethink something? Or we could use an African centered principle, like *Nia*, which means purpose. We are going to build ourselves up to the place we can be.

Here, Tulani indicated a sense of educational and political empowerment of African-Americans. She urged students to ask how they can use this new knowledge to uplift or improve lives.

By assigning students work that pushed them to apply their experience of everyday life, Tulani emphasized praxis. As evidence, assignments in her multicultural education course included reaction papers in response to readings, analysis of a movie of their choice, a public observation, and a cultural activity. Each assignment directed students to "apply the theory and concepts from class to your experience."

Tulani's intent is indicative of a womanist ethic of care that emphasizes knowledge. Her theoretical vision is linked with an application of knowledge in order to change one's life, curriculum, teaching practice, workplace, or community. Thus, her emphasis of knowledge over grades also represents a type of visionary pragmatic pedagogy, likening a caring theoretical vision to informed practical struggle.

Although Tulani focused on praxis, she was aware of the difficulties involved in doing so. Tulani has found that educating teachers about concepts of self and identity was "the hardest part about preparing White teachers to educate our students." For instance, Tulani taught predominately White students at a previous institution; she recalled how students understood the degradation of ascribing the town football team with a Native American name. Still, they would attend games and shout the moniker with pride. "I asked them at the end of the class once, 'how many people get this'? And they all raised their hands. And I asked, 'how many people are going to do something different'? And they're like, 'Realistically, no. We have season tickets. Sorry'." Tulani saw the difficulty in applying theory to life, but drew upon her spirituality praying for change in her students' behaviors and responses. "How can they have this knowledge and not use it?" she wondered.

Interestingly, Tulani encountered this same difficulty in educating Black teachers at her current institution. She led activities with students to try to give them the skill of being able to center themselves:

So I tell them to create an African centered school, or create a Black school, if that makes people feel more comfortable, and inevitably they start talking about, "well maybe we shouldn't make it Black, maybe we should." and I am thinking, "we are in class, no one can hear you. There is no ramification, and you still can't center yourself."

Here, Tulani found that even prospective African-American teachers, when given a culturally relevant assignment, also found it difficult to center themselves. Tulani's challenge was to make theory real for all students. Her power to lead and to effect change was found in her insistence upon helping students to locate praxis and to use knowledge as power.

## Tulip--Modeling a Love for the Teaching Profession

*I try to instill love, love for the profession, and love for humanity. And I do it--I try to do that by example. Because you can tell people to do it this way and that way, but students learn from what they see you do.*

Tulip envisioned and understood her power in teacher education as a quest to "instill love for the profession and humanity." A power such as this can only produce caring educators who love their students and who believe in change. "And I see teaching as a mission, and a calling in my life. And I feel that I'm fulfilling that calling." Tulip's description was similar to that of Kemp's (1997) respondent, who also spoke about her work in teacher education as a "mission." Yet, where the mission of Kemp's respondent was to increase the number of Black and Hispanic teachers by creating an environment that supports their growth, Tulip's mission was to teach and to claim knowledge. One rewarding aspect of teaching at the college level, Tulip asserted, is to see students "using what I have taught them in the classroom."

Tulip was the only study participant who has lived and taught long enough to see her students become successful professionals. She recalled an experience during her tenure as an assistant principal in which one of the students she had previously taught became a teacher at her school:

This young woman came over to me, she said, "Are you Miss Wise?" I said, "No, I'm not, I'm Mrs. Ofelder." And she said, "But were you ever Wise?" I said, "Yes." And she said, "Well, you were my sixth grade teacher, or seventh grade teacher." And at that time, they had district people who were speech coordinators or speech therapists and she was one of them for my school. She was one of the students from that Jewish Yeshiva, and she said, "You taught me something that I'll never forget." This was a Black school. She said, "I want to reach out and help people in need, and I want to instill the kinds of things in children that you instilled in me. I'm so glad that you were here to see me do it today!"

In this example, Tulip was able to see the "fruits of her labor" as an elementary school teacher. She made such an impression on this particular student's life that she (the new speech therapist) wanted "to instill the kinds of things in children" that Tulip, as her teacher, had taught to her. She was elated that Tulip was going to witness her effort to "model a love for the profession."

But there was another example of Tulip's capacity to recognize her power to affect change. After a student presentation on classroom bias, Tulip urged students to do something about it: "There are a lot of biases in schools and classrooms. They are biased according to what? Race, learning styles, etc. Now what I am expecting you to do is to change the system, to get in there and begin to react to these situations." Here, Tulip taught students to teach and to change the system of oppression.

## Olivia--Teaching for Today

*And again, you are preparing them for life now; you want them to problem-solve and think creatively right now.*

Some enter teaching to prepare productive citizens for society, implying that students will not be productive citizens until they reach adulthood. Conversely, Olivia found it necessary to prepare students "for life right now." For example, throughout both observed classroom sessions, Olivia repeated the quote "you are preparing students for life right now" in an effort to assist teachers in their understanding of and capacity to use the real-life situations that students encounter daily. "You want (students) to problem-solve, think creatively," so that they may apply critical understandings to their own lives. Focusing on the present with students and supervisees, Olivia emphasized knowledge for right now to students in any grade or at any age. When preparing teachers for student teaching, for example, Olivia tried "to be realistic about what students will be confronted with in the classroom."

Olivia's emphasis on knowledge is indicative of a womanist ethic of care that emphasized the sharing of knowledge to enhance and support community. The grounding structures of meaning and value (as components of a Black knowledge base) directly contradict both views forwarded by colorblind theories of care and perceptions of innocence often found in White literature (Thompson, 1998). The racial difference is easily understood--one must have knowledge in order to act upon experienced oppressions. Knowledge of how to think critically about life in the present helps students seek to change and act upon present oppressions in their everyday lives. This kind of teaching is rooted in Freire's (1996) notion of liberatory pedagogy and is also indicative of Tulani's personal views on praxis.

In an interesting way, Olivia's agency to prepare students for the here and now interrupts the need to make society more just for "generations yet unborn." Olivia's perspective calls for preparing educators who can design and implement learning activities that simultaneously develop students' academic skills and capacities to critique and act on the structures of oppression which impose on their daily lives (Larkin, 1995). Of course, these actions ultimately impact the future, but they are grounded in the knowledge that justice denied now is justice denied in the future as well.

Similarly, interviews conducted by Ladson-Billings (2001) indicated that African-American teacher educators expressed a desire to engage prospective teachers in more thoughtful and rigorous conceptions of teaching that challenged social inequity and cultural ignorance. This kind of perspective also sought to prepare teachers for the current realities of teaching in diverse classrooms. Olivia continued to comment about what she shares with prospective teachers:

Just really being truthful and giving a candid account of the realities of teaching, and how it's immediate and teaching is not a job that stops at three, but can go well into the wee hours of the night, if you're grading papers and preparing and planning. Then it just becomes a part of you.

Emphasizing a here and now concept means educating pre-service teachers about the realities of teaching. These realities may include the unpredictability of student outcomes, the difficulty of assessing students' learning, the impact of teacher attitudes on instruction and management, and the drama and immediacy of teaching (Parkay & Stanford, 1998).

## Conclusion

The experiences and practices of the Black women teacher educators in this study are indicative of the womanist tradition as these women are also builders of enduring afriographies as well as teacher-leaders and change agents. Participants' interviews, classrooms observations, and reviews of documentation indicate that the concept of race uplift as well as the participants' work in the academy are strongly related to a womanist ethic of care that, while different for each participant, emphasizes shared knowledge and experience. Olivia's emphasis on the here and now, Tulip's modeling a love for the teaching profession, and Tulani's emphasis on praxis are three themes that emphasize knowledge: knowledge for right now, knowledge about the profession, and knowledge about applying theory to life. Within the current and third phase of womanist theory, womanism takes on a different and enhanced meaning that builds upon the notion of visionary pragmatism. This development posits that the struggle for freedom is different for everyone involved yet it still accomplishes the same goal of a just society (Collins, 1998). That is, womanist teaching is seen (in the third phase of womanism) through change agents who continue to fight against multiple oppressions by creating innovative academic curricula, fulfilling community-based leadership roles, and by teaching courses that allow students to analyze their perspectives in relation to the oppression in society. Hill (2005) explored how race uplift created an academic other mother identity. This notion of agency seems to also recognize the power to lead and effect change.

"Race uplift" is exemplified in participants' leadership as professors, department chairpersons, or program

coordinators, all of which produce a type of power that afford a wide-angle vision or perspective advantage (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Thus, those with outsider-within status have an advantage that "does not speak to the economic, social, and political advantage that subordinated groups experience, but rather to the way that not being positioned in the center allows for 'wide-angle' vision" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 3).

Similarly, Goodwin's study (1996) implies that the experiences of teacher education faculty of color "give them a unique perspective on the teacher education enterprise" (p. 17). This perspective guides their teaching, advisement, and supervision of students so that questions of culture are central to their work.

In this paper we presented each participant's individual and enduring afriography as related to their leadership role and how they "professionally maneuvered" within the academy to help create institutionalized change. These findings are one way of understanding how race uplift informs and shapes the teaching practices of three Black women teacher educators and, judging from contributions to students, how it has potential to influence new generations.

Hill (2003) uses the term Afriography to describe a kind of chronicle of the past, a story, or a record of experiences about people of African descent as told through the eyes of Black women.

Novelist Alice Walker (1983) describes a womanist as one whom "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength; sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually; committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health; traditionally universalist... Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless" (xii). Walker's description provides a framework for womanist leadership in that a womanist recognizes that struggle exists, yet, is motivated by love to actively work toward the collective well-being. A womanist leader is one who thinks broadly; she sees her leadership role as intricately connected to the fate of her people.

Collins (2000) defines black feminist thought as a theory of empowerment and activism based Black woman's experience and legacy of struggle. Black feminist theory highlights the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression; calls to replace denigrating images of black women with self-defined images; and shows Black women's activist nature in mothering, teaching, and leading the community.

All names and study settings are pseudonyms.

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