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Expanding Intersectionality: Fictive Kinship Networks as Supports for the Educational Aspirations of Black Women

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Abstract

In this article, we use the concepts of fictive kinship networks (Cook, 2011; Fordham, 1996; Stack, 1974) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to explore the deeply embedded attitudes found in certain religious doctrine about the value of education for Black females and how these beliefs shape the educational aspirations of Black females. Especially for Black women from more conservative, religious backgrounds, we identify fictive kinship networks as important to creating the vital emotional, spiritual and intellectual spaces necessary to imagine and explore educational possibilities. As an important protective factor, a fundamental function of fictive kin relationships is the nurturing and embracing of black women's intellect.

As iron sharpens iron, so one [wo]man sharpens another.
Proverbs 27:17

The final stanza of Jordan’s Poem About My Rights echoes the sentiments and stance of many African American females in higher education - both faculty and graduate students. As Jay, Packer-Williams and Jackson (2010) observe, “Given the relative push to diversify the academy, institutions seem to be diligently attempting to increase their numbers of faculty of color without attending to the hostile environments we are invited to enter” (p. 103). Arguably, the hostility directed at females of color, and females in general in the broader American society, begins much earlier. Scholars have been writing, speaking and raising our awareness of the cradle to grave epidemic of violence for females (Cohen, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991; West, 2004, 2003, 1999; Hall, 1983). If we understand violence as both symbolic and material, it is incumbent upon us to strategize about the ways in which black women in higher education are often subjected to hostile work contexts and the
impacts of these daily microaggressions. To be clear, we are not making the claim or comparison that being physically assaulted (e.g. cold-cocked) is equivalent to being harassed in the day-to-day work in a university classroom. These claims are counterproductive and meaningless in helping understand the daily macro and micro aggressions in the lives of black females. Rather, in this article, we are interested in deepening the analysis of how conflicting narratives around what it means to be black and female and educated informs and pushes our understanding of the necessary work of black women scholars.

In this article, we explore the deeply embedded attitudes and beliefs about the value of education for Black females and how these beliefs shape the educational outcomes of black girls. We both come from southern, Christian, black households yet our radically different experiences in these contexts highlight the diversity within black communities. Grounded in our analysis of these experiences, we argue that these early narratives about the value of education for black females have significant impact on recruiting and retaining black female faculty. In expanding the articulation of intersectionality to account for religion and faith in conjunction with race, class and gender, this article is structured around the dialogue about Williams' experiences that she created as part of a narrative writing assignment as a student in Cook's graduate course on Race, Research and Narrative.

Before presenting the method of constructing the narrative and the narrative itself, we want to provide a brief overview of the genesis of the course and the culminating assignment. Designed and taught by Cook in the fall of 2011, the course - Race, Research & Narrative- explored relationships between life and narrative. Using creative non-fiction texts such as Henrietta Skloot’s (2010) The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks and Dave Eggers (2009) Zeitoun coupled with various peer reviewed articles on narrative, theory and experience, the course engaged with narrative as a methodological and theoretical approach to inquiry. The aims of the class were to help students understand how we make meaning of our individual and collective experiences and the stories we tell about those experiences, how these experiences inform the choices we make, how we understand history, and explain (co)existing hierarchies (e.g. social, political, religious, economic). The use of interdisciplinary scholarship was an important context for deepening the conversation about challenges confronting schooling and education.

As a professor and scholar, I was drawn to qualitative research due in large part to my attraction to the power of story and storytelling to highlight nuances, emphasize complexity and expose neglected truths. As a literary genre, creative non-fiction includes personal essays, memoir, nature writing, cultural criticism, literary journalism, and travel writing. Using creative non-fiction in my teaching and research enabled a means to center the modes of knowledge production by people of color (Cook, 2013). So, for the final assignment, students were prompted to create a compelling race story from an event, conversation, or moment from their experience. To compose their final narratives for the course, students were instructed to draw upon document analysis, research, and critical reflection. In addition, students used their personal recollections, memories and artifacts (e.g. journals) as background and historical context to inform the writing of the race story. The final part of the assignment was a reflexive analysis of their narrative that connected the story to relevant readings and insights from the class. As a graduate student in the course, Williams’ final assignment serves as the point of analysis for this article.

What follows is a concise review of key concepts—fictive kinship and intersectionality—which shape the analysis. Then we discuss the implications of this work for recruiting, retaining and receiving tenure faculty of color.

**Conceptual Framework**

Our work is heavily informed by black liberation theology (e.g. James H. Cone (1969, 1984), Katie Cannon (1995), black educational philosophy (e.g. Asa Hilliard (1995); Theresa Perry (2003); black feminist theory (e.g. Patricia Hill Collins, 1999; bell hooks, 1984, 1989, 2000); and Critical Race Theory (e.g. Kimberle Crenshaw, 1991; Derrick Bell, 2009). The collective of these theoretical traditions converge around not only understanding race and racism in American society with clear attention to the effects on black people but the ways in which black people have not been bound intellectually and spiritually by hegemonic constructions of their blackness. For instance, emerging from the black power movement, black liberation theology squarely centered liberation within Christian theology (see Cone, 1969, 1984). Cone (1980), the main architect of black liberation theology, aptly notes, “When the meaning of the Christian faith is derived from the bottom and not from the top of those on the socioeconomic ladder, from people who are engaged in the fight for justice...
and not from those who seek to maintain the status quo, then something radical and revolutionary happens to the function of the holy in the context of the secular" (p. 154). This sentiment echoes the work of critical race theorists (Matsuda, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995) who not only center race and racism in their social analysis but also use the experiences of people of color to pinpoint the ways in which race and racism function in American society.

Grounded in criticisms of critical legal studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s following the Civil Rights Movement. Critical Legal Studies (CLS) scholars wanted to reclaim the merits of legal realism particularly the notion that history and culture influence law and legal jurisprudence. This notion contradicted the popular belief of the law as objective and removed from the influence of society. Although many scholars of color found utility in acknowledging the socio-cultural aspects of legal jurisprudence, they were dissatisfied with Critical Legal Studies' lack of fully engaging the question of race. The desire by legal scholars of color to have a framework with the explanatory power to capture the lived experiences of people of color resulted in the emergence of Critical Race Theory. The recognition that the struggle against racial oppression lies within structures is an important conceptual point emerging from CRT. Since knowledge and its production are not a neutral undertaking (Crenshaw, 1995), Critical Race Theorists contest the terrain and terms of the racial discourse in order to change the "...vexed bond between law and racial power" (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995, p. xiii).

According to Tate (1997), Critical Race Theory is a multi-epistemological tool and as an analytical tool is informed by three suppositions. First, race is a significant factor in the construction of inequity in the United States. Second, in the United States, property rights were chosen over human rights. Finally, race and property are key analytical tools for understanding how oppression and hegemony operate in the United States. Dixson and Rousseau (2006) identified eight constructs in CRT that scholars use to analyze race and racism: (1) Whiteness as property; (2) Intersectionality; (3) Critique of liberalism and colorblindness; (4) Interest-Convergence; (5) Racial realism; (6) Restrictive versus expansive notions of equality; (7) Voice/Counterstory; and (8) Social Change.

Two aspects of CRT relevant for this work are intersectionality and the use of narrative. We will take up intersectionality more fully later in the paper. However, we want to concisely touch upon narrative. The use of narrative is an important tool utilized by CRT to dismantle hegemonic knowledge and discourse (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 2000). CRT scholars’ use of narrative originates with Derrick Bell, often referred to as the father of CRT. Bell (1987) asserts that narrative corresponds more closely to how the human mind makes sense of experience. Dominant narratives emerge from the experience of dominant groups thereby informs institutions charged with the creation, maintenance and exchange of knowledge. Thus, the creation and exchange of stories about individual situations not only collectively creates social reality (Delgado, 2000) but also informs our understanding of that reality. Accordingly, stories are important in challenging traditional explanations of power relationships via an emphasis on the role of context in meaning making (Guinier and Torres, 2002). Narratives that look to the bottom both acknowledge that "...those who lack material wealth or political power still have access to thought and language, and their development of those tools ...differs from that of the most privileged" (p. 65) thus challenging normative assumptions about power relationships (Matsuda, 1995). The CRT way of storytelling is grounded in the experiences of those with the least advantage and privilege. This understanding of storytelling serves many purposes including (1) psychic preservation by not silencing the experiences of the oppressed and thus exposing neglected evidence (counter storytelling); (2) challenging normative reality through an exchange that overcomes ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world one way; and (3) listening to the voices of people of color as the basis for understanding how race and racism function (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1994). For the purposes of this article, we focus on two concepts found either implicitly and explicitly, in the aforementioned interdisciplinary body of work - fictive kinship and intersectionality.

Intersectionality. With a focus on capturing the simultaneous and interactive role of race, class and gender, Crenshaw’s (1991) conceptualization of intersectionality is crucial to understanding the experiences of Black women. As Crenshaw (1991) notes, “...to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people -and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful-is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the processes of subordination...
and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them” (p. 1296-1297). In this sense, intersectionality acknowledges the limitations of the either/or binary as it pertains to understanding the ways in which societal values foster the creation of social hierarchies that privilege some and marginalize others. If social identities might be best understood as being constructed at the intersections of multiple dimensions, then those interested in understanding how inequality functions in order to effectively challenge inequality must also identify how a person’s social identities may be oppositional to one another. For instance, how are our racialized and gendered experiences as Black women mediated by our perceived social class status? In what ways are the privileges associated with social class status mediated by our racialized and gendered experiences? Of particular interest to us is the role of religion in shaping the gendered experiences in racialized spaces. To be clear, we are not interested in ranking oppressions with this line of inquiry. Rather, we are attentive to the possibilities that intersectionality brings to the conceptual table of understanding how religion shapes the educational experiences of Black women.

An underlying theoretical aim of CRT was the development of a discourse that was intentionally self-conscious and critical, both acknowledging and analyzing experience (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller and Thomas, 1995). MacKinnon (2013) asserts, “intersectionality both notices and contends with the realities of multiple inequalities as it thinks about the interaction of those inequalities in a way that captures the distinctive dynamics at their multidimensional interface” (p. 1019, italics mine). Intersectionality moves analysis of experience towards understanding complexity while thinking about how we might disrupt processes that continue to lessen the value of black women in the realm of education.

Scholars have used intersectionality in education research (Parker & Lynn, 2002) and disability studies (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2013) to capture “the synergistic relation between inequalities as grounded in the lived experience of hierarchy [to change] not only what people think about inequality but the way they think” (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1028). Delgado’s (2011) reconsideration of intersectionality comments on the theoretical trajectory of intersectionality. He notes reasons for intersectionality not being relevant for contemporary discussions of inequality observing that the shift towards “potentially, infinitely divisible” (p. 1264) categories makes it difficult to focus energy and resources. With the co-opting of intersectional scholarship, it then becomes possible for adversaries of progressives to solve predicaments in ways that undermine the original intent - challenge discriminatory practices - of those employing intersectionality. Despite these potential limitations, we find intersectionality useful for understanding the intersecting dimensions of race, gender and religion on the educational lives of Black women. What would it mean for our understanding of black women’s educational experience if we (1) parse out the distinction between faith and religion and (2) problematize how religion, and some expressions of black faith, is complicit in undermining black women’s intellectual and educational opportunities? We aim to extend the conceptualization of intersectionality to include the role of religion as an interactive influence in the lives of black women.

**Fictive Kinship.** In an analysis of black educators in New Orleans post Katrina, Cook (2011) applied and extended Stack’s (1974) exploration of fictive kinship to focus on the ways in which fictive kinship operationalized the values of cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity in the everyday, lived experiences of these educators. Used to indicate people not related by birth with whom a person shares essential reciprocal social and economic relationships (Fordham 1996), fictive-kinship networks are sources of informal social and psychological support (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994). Fordham’s (1996) expansion of this definition captured the political and prestige function noting, “this porous system enables members of the community to gain prestige, obtain status, survive, and in some instances, thrive in a social context filled with obstacles and impediments to success” (35). In this sense, the focus is on the survival of the group rather than the individual within the African American imagined community of fictive kin.

Cook’s (2011) articulation of the functions of fictive kinship networks among Black educators in New Orleans provides another frame of analysis. Fictive-kinship networks (1) created an environment centered on cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity; (2) allowed black educators to advocate on behalf of their students, which included supporting their students’ nonacademic needs and (3) built resiliency in their students (Cook, 2011). These three functions of fictive kinship provide insight into how we create relationships that sustain and nurture black women along their educational journey. Taken together, the concepts of fictive kinship and intersectionality provide a useful frame of analysis for the narrative. Drawing on personal experience, docu-
ment analysis (e.g. journals) and contextual background (e.g. history of New Orleans), the narrative focuses on the early messages received by Williams about being black and female and holy and educated.

It has been three years since this narrative was composed. Since then, both authors have matriculated to different institutions - one as a doctoral student in a medium sized public, research intensive institution and the other as a tenure track professor at a flagship, public research I institution. A secondary data analysis was conducted of the narrative by both authors in order to identify themes in the narrative and inform our mutual understanding of the ways in which religion and faith intersect with race, class and gender in our experience. The discussion and analysis of these messages follows the narrative.

The Dinner: A Narrative Exploring Faith & Religion

All my life, my family and I lived in a shotgun home. Most of New Orleans was made up of shotguns, at least in the seventh ward where I lived. Shotgun homes were developed in New Orleans and became the city’s most prominent style of home architecture (Starr & Brantley, 2013). The homes were long, straight, rectangular, and raised on brick piers. Most had narrow porches with roof aprons ornamented by lace Victorian motifs supported by columns and brackets. In them, each room followed the first, like an irritating little brother chasing his sister trying to read her diary. My house was like that; a girl had no privacy. The only door I could hide behind was in the bathroom, and everyone’s time there was limited because our home only had one.

Shortly after high school, I purchased my first home, a two-story double gallery on Esplanade Avenue, not far from where I grew up. I was proud of myself and was no longer in search of privacy. The home’s facade had an asymmetrical arrangement at its openings and was supported by columns. I loved its high ceilings, French doors, and promenade details. A promenade is a square-dancing move where couples march counterclockwise in a ballroom. In architecture, it signifies movement and pathways. In my home, instead of a straight line, some of the walls were circular. In contrast to my childhood home, this simple architectural difference meant that I had privacy everywhere in the house.

The city of New Orleans is more European than American. It was founded in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville and named for Philippe d’Orléans, Duke of Orléans, Regent of France. The colony changed hands several times between the French and Spaniards until 1803 when Napoleon sold it to the United States through the Louisiana Purchase. It is affectionately nicknamed “N’awlins” by natives, and the Crescent City, with the latter referencing the city’s growth pattern along a large bend that passes through the Mississippi River delta. In the colonial and antebellum eras, New Orleans was a place where Africans, slave and free, and American Indians shared their lives and cultures with French and other European settlers. This intermingling created the unique socio-cultural foundation that continues to flavor the city today. I loved growing up in New Orleans with its numerous celebrations, Mardi Gras, or Carnival, being the most popular. It was then that my family and I would congregate under the Claiborne Bridge during parades to listen to jazz or watch the high school marching bands go by.

While the architecture of my life changed, my celebration of Mardi Gras continued as an adult. Early each February, I dusted my coconut collections and smiled at the one I earned racing my brother to the Zulu parade float one year. Sometimes this sweet reminiscing would be interrupted by a familiar smell from the kitchen. My cornbread was burning! “Get your head in the game, Katherine! Stop daydreaming!” The words would ring as if spoken by my mother standing in the doorway. Somehow daydreaming always felt easier in New Orleans, where I could drift away on an imaginary cloud, my journey limited only by how far I imagined I could go.

I always enjoyed dreaming big, or at least bigger than I was supposed to. As a single woman without children, some of how I lived stood in contrast to the way I was raised. For instance, when I was a child my mother sometimes told me, “Hopefully, the Lord will bless you to be a good wife and mother, Katherine. You have just got to be more submissive. Men don’t like women who are as opinionated as you.” Sometimes, reflecting on those moments, I’d wonder: was all that cooking together just training for finding my “woman’s place”, or did mother cherish the time we spent huddled over pots and pans?

Years later, stirring gumbo in my own house, “holy trinity” aromas would fill the hallways and creep from room to room. The “trinity”, as any good N’awlins cook knows, is a mix of onions, bell peppers, and celery. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the primary components of strong Christian faith, the vegetable trinity are the first components of gumbo, its foundation. The trinity is followed by the stock and plenty
additional ingredients that make it zesty and flavorful. In the gumbo of life, my mother said, before a woman created a home, she should have a husband, then two or maybe three children. Life was meant to abide by a certain order, my mother liked to remind me periodically. My life, however, had unfolded differently, and as time went by I watched the trinity and other components I was told would make my life flavorful pass me by. Each February, I stirred my gumbo pot, and memories of hundreds of onions diced for meals I helped my mother prepare would cause my heart to flutter, but tears no longer flowed.

The festivals, food, music, and people of New Orleans helped shape me into a woman of distinct tastes and textures, like an African tapestry or Creole beat. I often wondered if it was my local and Southern heritage that made me buck against the norms my parents tried to instill in me. New Orleans was like that. It had no single way of doing things. The way it incorporated different flavors and styles into its culture made me believe that if I could fit whatever it was I was trying to cook into the pot and seasoned it right, it would taste good to somebody. Ingredients from French, Spanish, Italian, African, Native American, Creole, with a hint of Cuban influences, merged to produce the unique and easily recognizable New Orleans flavor I had grown to love. Jambalaya, gumbo, po'boys, muffuletta, boiled seafood, and oysters on the half-shell: all made names for themselves in my hometown. With its blending of European instruments with African rhythms, New Orleans also birthed an indigenous music called jazz. Local cuisine, jazz and other music genres, and the many festivities the city hosts, give New Orleans a powerful sense of identity. Like my city, I realized as I entered my twenties, that I too desired a sense of identity. Like my city, I fluttered, but tears no longer flowed.

A few weeks before Fourth of July weekend in 2002, I received a phone call from my close friend, Monica. She said that she was joining our friends, Angie and Char, who were coming to town for the annual Essence festival, which draw major recording artists and entertainers together for three days to celebrate music and culture. The Essence organization also hosts empowerment seminars to motivate and enrich audience members’ lives. Monica’s call gave me short notice, but I was elated to hear from her. The girls had bought prime tickets for me to the Adele and Mary J. Blige concerts. This also meant we would get together, have fun, and eat! After talking to Monica, I decided to prepare the house, including meal planning. I decided to prepare a meal my friends would never forget. They were from different parts of the country but had all attended Xavier University in the early 1990s. They came to love New Orleans cuisine, so I decided to cook the dishes they had enjoyed while living here during their college years.

Xavier University of Louisiana was established in 1915 at the corner of Palmetto and Pine streets in mid-town New Orleans. It was initially a high school founded by St. Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, but was transformed into a four-year college in 1925 in an effort to help educate Native Americans and Blacks. The university remains the only historically Black, Catholic University in the United States. My friends were excited to be attending Xavier because, although they were not Catholic, it had a strong heritage of educating young Black students in medicine and the arts and sciences.

I did not attend Xavier myself; instead we met in a place central to all our lives – church. I grew up in St. Augustine Assembly that had a college outreach ministry. So after moving to the city to attend Xavier, my friends (Monica, Char, and Angie) were introduced and then joined the church. St. Augustine was my longtime home away from home, but its influence in my life was mixed. The church’s structure had originally been an old supermarket in the Lower Ninth Ward that was purchased by the pastor and renovated by parishioners, a testament of what Black folks could do under the Lord’s guidance and the pastor's will. On any given Sunday throughout my childhood, the pews were a sea of monochromatic color. The women dressed in shades of gray, navy, and black, their outfits adorned with feathered hats, sequined heels, and matching handbags, while the men wore standard issue black suits. At St. Augustine we were taught that it was not prudent for good Christians to wear colorful clothing because it was considered unseemly to bring attention to one’s self. The church First Lady (our pastor’s wife) would call out to the women: “We want to be like the Virtuous woman, ladies, not like Jezebels!” In layman’s terms, this meant women were not to be seen, much less heard. The pastor’s wife embodied what women of our congregation were supposed to aspire to, and her words were like holy manna for us to feast on whether we were hungry or not.

Although St. Augustine’s First Lady was a notably modest woman, I never understood why being the pastor’s wife made her “first”, nor was I completely comfortable with her use of biblical references regarding women. My understanding of the virtuous woman in Proverbs shows her as a property owner and business-
woman who makes fine clothes from rich and vibrantly colored fabrics for her husband and family (Proverbs 31:10-31 King James Version). Meanwhile, a woman in our church would be compared to Jezebel, the idolatress and harlot, if her skirt fell above the knee or she dared to wear makeup in the Lord’s house (1 Kings 18:4 New International Version). My proclivity for wearing makeup and vibrant colors pegged me as a dishonorable Jezebel. Thus, I eventually decided to leave St. Augustine Assembly because I did not think the Lord would have condoned me engaging in a violent outburst or opening a can of cayenne in the church parking lot.

In addition to my family, St. Augustine was a powerful part of the landscape out of which my story originated growing up in an apostolic church in the 1990s South. Religion, my time there showed me, was a vehicle to transmit status. Marriage and childbirth were status symbols; the more children a woman had, the more status she was given. Messages telling me if I was not successful as a wife and mother, I was not successful as a woman, reverberated in every corner and crevice of my life.

I left St. Augustine church in 1996, two years before Monica, Angie, and Char graduated. In spite of this, my friendships with them continued and flourished. My friends nicknamed me Katie, which my mother disliked because she thought my full name sounded regal. I liked being called Katie because it made me feel like I was a part of the group. My connection to these women remained after they graduated from Xavier and moved on to earn terminal degrees and certifications at other institutions. I was proud to be in the company of such intelligent women but also felt incompatible with them in one respect—my education. When I met Monica, Angie, and Char, I had not pursued education post high school and not doing so was taking an emotional toll on me. I would ruminate about the fact that I was among such ambitious, talented women, yet I myself had never seen the sacred halls of any university.

For years leading up to that Fourth of July weekend, I had talked myself out of college. My excuses had been that it would be too difficult and that I could not afford it. However, the deeper truth was that I was afraid. Specifically, I was afraid of success. To try and succeed meant that I would have to become something. If I had a degree, what would I do with it? The questions seemed endless. What would I study? What would I do after college? How would I find a job with that degree? Who would hire me? The questions scared me for so long that at the age of 27, I felt frozen, half alive. I had encountered that same feeling in St. Augustine church before I asked the Lord through muffled sobs, “Is this place your will for me?”

This swirl of emotion and personal history surrounded me the summer of 2002 as I set my table for the meal I had prepared for my dear friends. When they arrived, we hugged, and I gave them a tour of my house. As we walked from room to room, fear enveloped me, saying, “If you never try, you will die in this place.” Was the voice my own mind or the ghosts of former owners? Soon, another voice arose, “You will succeed if you try. Set your feet on the path; I will show up.” When this second voice spoke, I felt a calm and warmth that brought tears to my eyes. I felt like I was a young girl again and that God had answered me. It had taken 10 years, but I had received an answer. Monica looked at me in that moment and asked, “Is the Lord talking again?” I smiled, and then announced, “I think it’s time for me to start the next part of my journey—college.” Screams and claps echoed throughout the house as my friends embraced me. Angie waved her hand in the air, dancing, and said, “That’s my girl! Go Katie, go Katie!” Char, who was pregnant, jumped then sat down after her baby kicked in return, “Girl,” she said, “I’m so proud of you.” She raised her voice and started to sing in her Latina accent: “Can’t nobody do me like Jesus...He’s my friend!” I was glad for the song because I knew my decision would not be popular or the norm and felt like I would need a friend. My friends’ cheers and words of affirmation infused the entire weekend. We celebrated my new endeavor at the concerts and throughout the city. It was a sacred time, one I still cherish.

Almost four years later, sitting in my philosophy class waiting for the professor to begin, I thought about how my friends and I had been brought together under the metal roof of a church house and then over a meal at my dining room table. With over three years completed, and in my final semester of college, I daydreamed about walking across the stage in the university’s chapel with Monica, Angie, and Char screaming, matching my sense of accomplishment and joy, which only an education could bring me.

I am glad to be a woman, and one who has chosen my own path. Some may not consider me a good Christian woman, but I am glad that I am an educated woman. Walking the road less traveled has helped change the hearts and minds of those I hold dear to me. My mom, in particular, after innumerable not so subtle comments and near explosive conversations, has decided to let me do what I feel is best for me. She is finally okay with me being Katie, at least as much as she can handle in one setting. I am now a mother myself, having been
married and divorced, and am truly happy. My daughter expanded my already strong determination to continue my educational journey. In fact, I feel God’s humor is reflected in His giving me a daughter. Her birth was like Him saying to me, “Show her womanhood through your life. Show your daughter there are many options.”

I am glad my life has turned out the way it has, despite it not being what my religious upbringing encouraged. I’m proud of what I have learned thus far, whether through hard knocks or academia, through lessons some of which were easy, others-rough. Romans 8:28 reminds us: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (New International Version). I now know that I am called.

Discussion

Clearly, this narrative explores the intersection of gender, class, education, and religion in the early life of Williams. Most of the people around Williams were Black. However, a distinct aspect of Author 2’s experience was the personal struggle with education and conflicts between strong religious ties and female identity. Men were able to be both successful in their careers and family life. In addition, it was men who financially provided for their households; with no women role models, it was these men that Williams sought to emulate. The choice to become financially independent moved Williams into “a man’s place”; therefore, she became undesirable and unwanted as a bride and deemed unsuitable for marriage. The intersectionality of church, home life, and college became a recurring theme.

Another telling example is, before the age of 25, Williams had purchased a home and moved up the corporate ladder becoming a manager at local bank. She anticipated that despite not fulfilling the traditional role of a good Christian woman (e.g. being married with children), her parents would approve of her and her life hoping that her improved social class status (e.g. homeowner) would lessen the tensions with her parents. Yet, given that financial mobility and success was essentialized as a man’s terrain, the value (translated as approval) of financial independence was subverted. In essence, class mobility did not translate into how her religious community valued her as a member thereby.

Education was not encouraged and there were no mentors in the church or home environments. Curiously, the church essentialized the example of the woman in Proverbs 31 thereby ignoring the most complex rendering of what it might mean to be a woman of faith. Though Williams had gained all the necessary skills a woman was supposed to have as a wife and homemaker, pursuing financial independence, education and developing one’s intellect was explicitly discouraged.

Theresa Perry (2003) aptly reflects, “before we can theorize African-American school achievement, we need to have an understanding of what the nature of the task of achievement is for African Americans” (p. 4). Moreover, Perry (2013) challenges the dominant theoretical assumption that education and academic achievement is the same for all groups arguing “[the] task of achievement...is distinctive for African Americans because doing school requires that you use your mind, and the ideology of the larger society has always been about questioning the mental capacity of African Americans, about questioning Black intellectual competence” (p.5). In this paper, we extended Perry’s argument to explore the task of achievement for Black women in higher education with an explicit focus on the role of religion in shaping particular narratives about Black womanhood. Specifically, fictive kinship networks were identified as central to countering the traditional rendering of what a woman should and could be that was articulated in a specific religious context.

The presence of her sister friends became a fictive kin network out of which Williams was able to nurture her desire to pursue education. These women also presented and supported the development of a counter narrative to what it means to be a black woman of faith and educated.

The relationship with Char, Angie and Monica was an informal social and psychological support that reinforced Williams’ educational aspirations. This fictive kinship network enabled the creation of the emotional space necessary for her educational aspirations to be named, supported and lived. In her reflection on her narrative, Williams noted,

...in the course of having other women come into my life through the veil of religion, my views changed because of what I saw in them. My friends were in my opinion, good Christian woman yet educated and the myths and stories I had heard in my youth did not measure up to what I was beginning to understand [from being] around them.

In order for Williams to change her views on education, she had to change the stories she believed. If identity is understood as being intimately connected to the stories we are told about who we are and who we are supposed to be, then the supports of her fictive kinship network
were vital to reinforcing and validating her desire to pursue education.

**Conclusion**

Thinking about the possibilities of fictive kinship networks has implications for mentoring relationships between black women faculty and black women graduate students. As two women situated in a private research institution in the Midwest, we occupied different locations within the institution yet our experiences in those locations mirrored each other. The intersections of race, class, gender and religion shaped our relationship and understanding of our respective locations. An understanding of how fictive kinship functioned to support Williams’ entry into (and subsequent matriculation through to a doctoral program) demonstrates the ways in which relationships inform our persistence and work in the academy. During her master’s program, our (Cook & Williams) relationship extended the supports necessary for Williams to expand her educational aspirations. For instance, by inviting Williams to co-present at academic conferences, I was able to introduce her to my fictive kinship network resulting in her identifying an advisor (and subsequent doctoral program). Her advisor, an African American woman, was not only a strong fit for her scholarly interests but also one who was sensitive to her non-academic needs; she was actively involved in Williams obtaining funding for tuition, aided in securing housing and establishing social networks in a new place. When Williams questioned whether to continue her doctoral studies during the first year, the fictive kinship network between her mentors, both African American women, provided the necessary psychological and emotional support to build her resilience.

The preface of Darlene Clark Hines and Kathleen Thompson’s (1998) *The Shining Thread of Hope: Black Women in America* begins with a quote by Margaret Wilkerson that states,

> “Black women are a prism through which the searing rays of race, class and sex are first focused, then refracted. The creative among us transform these rays into a spectrum of brilliant colors, a rainbow which illuminates the experience of all mankind” (n.p.)

The rays first focused then refracted in Williams’ narrative and subsequent relationship between Cook and Williams highlights the role of fictive kin relationships as an important protective factor against the multiple affronts experienced by black women in graduate school and the academy writ large. In the academy, a fundamental function of fictive kin relationships is the nurturing and embracing of black women’s intellect. Especially for black women from more conservative, religious backgrounds, these relationships open up important emotional, spiritual and intellectual space to imagine and explore possibilities.

In this sense, an important function of fictive kin relationships among black women is to mitigate the personal costs associated with our not being valued professionally in the educational realm. An appropriate critique of critical race theory, and arguably much of what is deemed critical thought, is the absence of concrete practices that respond to the various raced, classed and gendered microaggressions experienced by black women. Yet, this work echoes the experiences of so many black women in education who have fictive kin relationships that reinforce not only our self-determination in academic spaces but our unapologetic acknowledgement of our right to be in these spaces.

**References**


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