CONTEMPORARY RACISM AND INTERSECTIONS: A LOOK AT HOW BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN EXPERIENCE RACE AND GENDER IN A "POST-RACIAL" SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

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Through the theoretical application of intersectionality, this study analyzes fifteen life history interviews with adult Black women. By asking Black women, as members of simultaneously marginalized racial and gender groups, to reflect on their life experiences with regard to race, this study attempts to interrogate the validity of notions of a currently colorblind United States. Further, the study investigates the intersection of race and gender in Black women's lives by exploring the unique nature of their experiences in contemporary "post-racial" America. Overall, the findings demonstrate that despite societal subscription to notions of "post-racialism" and colorblindness, the experience of living as a woman of color in a male- and white-dominated nation serves as a contradiction to the rhetoric of a currently-existing gender- and race-neutral society.

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Introduction

Using fifteen semi-structured life history interviews, **t**his project will explore the subjectivities of adult Black women and their understandings of their raced and gendered lives within the context of a "post-racial"[1] America. As markers of racial and gender equality are present in national discourse and collective memory, such as the Women's Liberation and Civil Rights Movements of the mid-twentieth century, these types of equality are often presumed to be present reality. More contemporarily, following the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, recent discourse has debated whether the society has transcended race as a significant factor to individual opportunity and experience (Schorr 2008; Cohen 2008; Wise 2009; Perry 2011; Bobo 2011).

However, the tangible inequalities associated with Black women's simultaneously marginalized racial and gender identities have significant impacts on their life experiences and their interpretation of those experiences (Hill Collins 2007: 210).[i] To be clearer, because Black women generally lack the gender privilege of Black men and the racial privilege of White females, they are situated in the particular position of living simultaneous racial and gender inequality (Hill Collins 1998; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Crenshaw 1991). Their exposure to concurrent racial and gender subordination may cause them to experience and interpret the significance of race and gender differently than those with access to the racial and/or gender privileges of being White and/or male (Hill Collins 2007).

Furthermore, because of the intersection of race and gender in their lives, these women

[1] The terms "colorblind" and "post-racial" are used interchangeably throughout the study. As race and skin color are often associated with one another, the notion of a society that ignores color may also be connected to the notion of a society that ignores race.

may provide unique, critical and experiential perspectives on the significance of race and gender to individual lives in "post-racial" America (Hill Collins 2000; Hill Collins 1998; Hill Collins 2007; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Crenshaw 1991). Therefore, by asking Black women to reflect on their life experiences with regard to race, this study attempts to interrogate the validity of notions of a currently colorblind United States. Further, the study investigates the intersection of race and gender in Black women's lives, exploring the unique nature of their subjectivities in contemporary "post-racial" America.

In addition to the aforementioned intentions of employing Black women's perspectives in the analysis of race and gender in contemporary "post-racial" U.S. society, the project has other central goals as well. The first of these goals includes contributing additional gendered perspectives to the body of scholarship on race and African American experiences. As noted by Black feminist sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins (1998; 2000; 2007), and African Americanist, Nathaniel Norment, Jr. (2007), Black women have been understudied in the academy;[ii] race scholarship tends to ignore Black women's gendered experiences while research on "women" tends to ignore their race.[iii] By allowing Black women to discuss their understandings of their Blackness *and* their womanhood in the contemporary United States, the project intends to contribute additional gendered perspectives to the existing canon of race scholarship.

Secondly, the project intends to help contemporize intersectionality literature by studying intersections of race and gender within the context of a "post-racial" America. Because intersectionality rose to popularity in the 1990s-early 2000s, the dominant literature is temporally limited, or does not discuss Black women's current experiences and perspectives on U.S. "post-racialism" (Krenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2000). Therefore, this project also intends to "update"

intersectional literature by analyzing intersections of race and gender within the context of a contemporary "post-racial," "post-Obama" United States.

Background: Race, Gender and Inequality in "Post-Racial" America

Undoubtedly, Blacks in the post-Civil Rights Movement era have made socioeconomic and political gains relative to their White counterparts. The emergence of the first Black female billionaire, Oprah Winfrey, and the 2008 election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, both serve as prime examples of this. Yet, more than examples of progress, many of these individuals and their successes are often employed discursively as proof that the society has moved beyond race as a significant factor in individuals' lives (Wise 2009; Wise 2010; Perry 2011).

For example, with the election of the first Black president, politicians such as former New York City mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, lauded America's entry into an era of racial transcendence (Wise 2009: 26). Similarly this victory, however individual the achievement might have been, led Senior National Public Radio news analyst, Daniel Schorr (2008), to ponder the emergence of a "color-blurred" generation of voters in January of 2008. And as highlighted by Tim Wise (2009), this unique election also prompted *Washington Post* columnist, Richard Cohen (2008), to beam that we have finally "overcome."

Yet despite markers of racial progress, Brown et al. (2003) find that most Blacks also remain highly segregated and have higher mortality rates when compared to Whites. These high relative levels of segregation persist despite nationwide bans on racial residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993). Further, they persist nationally, varying only slightly when factors of social class and income are introduced (Massey and Denton 1993).

Using the specific example of income, Sears et al. (2000: 3) demonstrate that as compared to Whites, most "Blacks today remain at a substantial disadvantage by most standard indicators." For instance, "in 2001, the real median income of Black families was sixty-two percent that of their Whites, only ten points higher than it was in 1947 when the ratio was fifty-two percent" (Brown et al. 2003: 13). According to journalist Jamie Holmes (2009), the National Urban League found that that 2009 figure had only risen to sixty-five percent.

Moreover, although Blacks collectively make a fraction of Whites' income, 2010 U.S. Census Bureau statistics report that Black women in particular are the lowest-earning group when compared to White men, White women and Black men (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). According to these figures, median and average annual incomes were highest among White males, who reported $34,047 and $48,768, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). White women reported median and average annual incomes of $20,947 and $30,316, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). And Black men reported a median annual income of $24,203, and average income of $31,908 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). However, these same median and average annual income figures for Black women were respectively $19,700 and $26,342 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a).

To shift the discussion on race and gender to personal experience and perspectives, a recent survey of 1,936 adults conducted by The Kaiser Family Foundation and *The Washington Post* produced interesting data. According to the findings, seventy-three percent of Black women said that now is a good time to be a Black woman in America (*Washington Post* 2012). However, forty-six percent of Black women and fifty-one percent of Black men surveyed were worried to moderately worried about encountering some type of discrimination (*Washington*

Post 2012). This compares to only thirty percent of White women and twenty-four percent of White men (*Washington Post* 2012). Moreover, thirty-nine percent of Black female respondents and forty-seven percent of Black male respondents affirmed that race affects various acts of mistreatment that they might encounter daily (*Washington Post* 2012). Only three percent of White women and one percent of White men gave the same answer (*Washington Post* 2012).

Ultimately, the aforementioned statistics and survey data demonstrate that despite racial progress, Black Americans of various social standings still face socioeconomic inequality as compared to Whites. Racial inequality continues and Blacks more frequently feel as though race affects their everyday experiences than their White counterparts (*Washington Post* 2012). Furthermore, Black women seem to experience inequality rather severely compared to other racial and gender groups, particularly with regard to the example of income. They report less income than Black men, White women and White men (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a).

In other words, these data raise important issues about America's present ability to reach a state of racial transcendence. However, such statistics not only raise questions about "overcoming" race in America – but in connection with Black intra-racial inequalities – about the intersection of race and gender on individual lives in contemporary America. These are the topics that this project intends to interrogate: the significance of race to individual lives in "post-racial" America, along with the intersection of race gender in Black women's lives in contemporary U.S. society.

Research Questions

Questions that will guide my research project are as follows: How do race and gender intersect in the lives of Black women today? How do Black women experience, articulate and

understand their simultaneously raced and gendered lives in contemporary U.S. society? What are their perspectives on "post-racialism"? How do they explain racism, as overt discrimination is no longer socially acceptable though racial inequality persists? How do they see themselves in a society where difference is rhetorically marginalized or minimized, though their experiences may speak to its significance?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: "Post-Racialism" Is a Myth to Black Women

My first hypothesis argues that Black women are unlikely to verbally affirm notions of "post-racialism." I propose that the notion of a "post-racial"/colorblind society, i.e., one in which race no longer significantly impacts lives of individuals, will overwhelmingly be discussed in most (if not all) interviews as a fallacy. Even when participants are proponents of "post-racialism," I hypothesize that the deeply raced and gendered nature of American society puts their life experience in contradiction with such beliefs. Though some may promote or confirm the existence of an egalitarian society, most will not, concurrently referencing points in their lives when race and gender significantly impacted their experiences.

Hypothesis 2: Participants Will Articulate Knowledge of Blackness and Womanhood

I posit that whether these women verbally affirm the presence of "post-racialism" or not, their unique awareness of living in simultaneously raced and gendered bodies will emerge – covertly or overtly – as they discuss it. As noted above, because of the shared nature of their racial and gender oppression, these women carry nuanced understandings of their Blackness and womanhood. That is, although they may identify with varied cultures, sexualities, class statuses, or other aspects of identity, these women will also carry sophisticated knowledge about the

influence of race and gender on their lives, particularly within a society that continues to ignore/attempts to minimize the realities of difference in favor of colorblind rhetoric.

Theory and Concepts

Theory: Intersections of Race and Gender

I employ intersectionality as the primary theoretical and analytic tool throughout this study. As a theoretical tool, intersectionality is simply used to explain incidents, trends, relationships and phenomena occurring in social life. Further, as an analytic device, intersectionality allows interrogation and explication of Black women's simultaneously raced and gendered experiences.

As noted above, Black women are typically lumped into analyses of "the African American" experience in studies of race (Norment 2007; Hill Collins 2007; Dill and Zambrana 2009), or placed within the overarching category of "woman/women" in gender studies (Mohanty 1988; Guy-Sheftall 1992). Consequently, scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) developed intersectional frameworks in critique of the omission of intra-racial/intra-gender differences in antiracist and feminist analyses.[iv] According to intersectional approaches, the experiences of women of color are typically the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, not a homogenized women's or Black experience alone (Crenshaw 1991: 1242). Their race often causes them to experience gender differently than White women; their gender causes them to experience race differently than Black men (Crenshaw 1991: 1252).

Like Crenshaw, Thornton-Dill's solitary work (1983) and collaborative research with Zambrana (Dill and Zambrana 2009) both reaffirm this stance. According to these scholars, "intersectional analyses, as knowledge generated from and about oppressed groups...reveal how

oppression is constructed and maintained through multiple aspects of identity simultaneously" (Dill and Zambrana 2009). Thus, rather than employing a singular approach to the explanation of inequality, proponents of intersectional approaches address its multiple causes and contend that inequality is maintained on multiple levels of identity at the same time.[v]

In addition, intersectionality theorizes that individuals experience varying amounts of privilege and oppression at the same time, based upon their simultaneous membership in marginalized or dominant genders, races, classes and sexualities (Crenshaw 1991; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Thornton-Dill 1983). Moreover, the theory argues that these aspects of identity (e.g., race, class and gender) cannot easily be decoupled from one another; their effects are often concurrently lived and experienced.

To draw an example from the group of significance to the study, Black women experience living as members of their race and gender groups at the same time. They are collectively located within both a marginalized race and a marginalized gender. Intersectionality maintains that membership in these simultaneously marginalized groups distinguishes their experiences from Black men, who share Black women's racial marginalization but still have access to the male privilege of living in a male-dominated society. Similarly, intersectionality distinguishes Black women's experiences from those of White women, who share Black women's marginalized gender status but have access to the racial privilege of living in a White-dominated society (Crenshaw 1991; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Thornton-Dill 1983).

It should also be noted that although race and gender may serve to connect some of the experiences of Black women, intersectionality also maintains that their intra-group experiences may be distinguished from one another via the intersecting privileges/marginalization associated

with their class statuses, ages, sexualities, ability, or other aspects of identity (Crenshaw 1991; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Thornton-Dill 1983). [vi]

In the analysis of the data, intersectional analyses are used to interrogate the ways race and gender collectively affect Black women's experiences. First, the study analyzes the women's understandings of themselves as raced individuals in the contemporary "post-racial" U.S. Next, the study interrogates perspectives on "post-racialism" held by Black women, using the concepts defined in the following section. Finally, the project investigates the intersections of race and gender on the experience of being a Black woman in the U.S. today.

Concepts: "Post-Racialism" and Enlightened Exceptionalism

"Post-racialism" is employed and analyzed throughout the interviews. It provides the social context for the study, as the central subject of interrogation is Black womanhood in a "post-racial" society. Therefore it is necessary to understand and define the term.

According to sociologist Lawrence Bobo (2011), "post-racialism" has varied meanings and levels of significance. "In its simplest and least controversial form, the term is tended merely to signal a hopeful trajectory for events and social trends, not an accomplished fact of social life" (Bobo 2011: 13). However, Bobo (2011: 14) also notes that

> perhaps the most controversial view of post-racialism has the most in common with the well-rehearsed rhetoric of colorblindness. To wit, American society, or at least a large and steadily growing fraction of it, has genuinely moved beyond race – so much so that we as a nation are now ready to transcend the disabling racial divisions of the past.

Essentially, as is shown by Bobo (2011) the term regards beliefs in the present existence of a U.S. society in which the affect of race on individuals' lives is minimized and marginalized.

Moreover, in concert with notions of "post-racialism" centering on the minimization of

racial difference, Wise (2009; 2010), Perry (2011), and Esposito and Finley (2009) identify the practice of "enlightened exceptionalism" and its connection to the maintenance of "post-racialism" in the U.S. This practice centers on emphasizing the successes of certain Blacks to demonstrate that race no longer significantly impacts individual lives. This was exemplified above via the assertions of the aforementioned politicians and political analysts. These individuals characterized the election of President Obama as the central marker of America's transformation into a "post-racial" society.

On one hand, the enlightened exceptionalism frame of thought celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color (Wise 2009; 2010). Yet, these individuals are believed to have transcended their Blackness in some way, thereby proving that racism has met its demise (Wise 2009). Similarly, as shown by Perry (2011: 47)

> For exceptionalized Blacks, the Barack Obamas and the Oprah Winfreys of the world, the rhetorical shape of their successes are often "successes against odds" stories that operate as positive, yet exceptionalizing racial narratives. Their stories can say "If you work hard, racism will not affect you" or "Look at the ascent of this person; clearly there is no racism" (Perry 2011: 47).

These individuals are often pinpointed as evidence that race, as characterized by Shelby Steele (2008: 8), is now a "negligible" characteristic of human difference. Moreover, these individuals are the upstanding Blacks who have transcended racial pitfalls; they are proof of the insignificance of race to experience and life chances.

Ultimately, as demonstrated by Perry (2011) and Wise (2009; 2010), this type of enlightened exceptionalism is not simply deleterious because it essentializes, idealizes and privileges the accomplishments of certain "good" Blacks over the "bad" behavior of a vast majority of others. It is also problematic because these individuals are used to reinforce the

erroneous notion that race and racism no longer significantly impact individuals' lives. The proof of America's racial transcendence lies in the accomplishments of a few successful individuals.

As noted above, the notion of "post-racialism" has gained popularity in recent years. Further, as was also discussed above, the practice of linking individual success to "post-racialism" has accompanied this popularity. The definition of these concepts and terms help provide the backdrop upon which the intersection of race and gender will be analyzed. Within the context of a society that both minimizes race and points to individual success as markers of racial transcendence, the study interrogates the significance of race to a marginalized racial group. Further, upon the backdrop of "post-racialism," the study investigates how race and gender intersect to affect Black women's lives.

Methods

Methods: Overview

Because the project centers on the exploration and analysis of Black women's experiential knowledge, it required participants to trace their awareness of race and gender throughout their personal histories. As a consequence, life history interviews were employed as the primary data collection tool. This method allowed participants to speak freely and extensively about the ways race and gender have affected their lives.

A total of fifteen interviews with adult Black women (ages 18-50) provide the data for this study. Interviews ranged in length from fifty-one minutes to over two hours. Participants were drawn as volunteers from student organizations, personal contacts and snowball sampling.[2]

[2] As a consequence of drawing volunteers from college-centered sources, participant contacts and professional acquaintances (i.e., snowball sampling), the study's sample was made completely of women who had some level of university education. Twelve of my fifteen

After the interviews were conducted and recorded, they were transcribed. Finally, interview data were coded for trends, commonality and adherence to/divergence from the theories that framed the project at its outset.

Table 1 displays the names, ages and professions of my fifteen interviewees.

Table 1 - Interview Participants

Name	Age	Profession
Lilly	22	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Rochelle	20	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Yvette	19	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Trisha	22	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Ashley	19	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Arianna	22	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Erika	33	Graduate Student at MSU
Antoinette	41	Graduate Student at MSU
Jackie	22	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Teresa	26	Graduate Student at MSU
Shante	45	Administrator at MSU
Lisa	50	Engineer
Tiana	23	Undergraduate Student at MSU
Brooklyn	26	Optician's Assistant
Victoria	48	Engineer

Methods: Location

Interviews were conducted in and around Michigan State University (MSU) and the

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participants were drawn from Michigan State University (MSU). Each had recently been, or was currently an MSU student. Those participants who were not Michigan State University students had attained some level of college education elsewhere. The implications of these sampling choices are discussed further in the “Conclusions and Reflections” section of the paper.

University of Delaware (UD). The counties and states surrounding these universities are predominately White and contain comparable Black/White population statistics. Specifically, in Ingham County, Michigan, where MSU is located, Whites make up 76.2% of the population, while Blacks are only 11.8% (U.S. Census Bureau 2010c). The statistics for the entire state of Michigan are comparable, with Whites and Blacks comprising 78.9% and 14.2% of the population, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010c).

Similarly, in New Castle County, Delaware, the location of UD, Whites are 65.5% of the population, while Blacks are merely 23.7% (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b). As with Michigan, the state statistics for Delaware are comparable to those of the county. Whites and Blacks in Delaware make up 68.9% and 21.4% of the population, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b).

With regard to gender, the respective county and state populations are almost identical. In Ingham County, Michigan, women are 51.4% of the population, and make up 50.9% of the state (U.S. Census Bureau 2010c). Comparatively, women in New Castle County and the state of Delaware are 51.6% of the population, according to both sets of statistics (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b).

Though there are a higher percentage of Blacks in New Castle County than in Ingham County, the aforementioned group still finds itself racially outnumbered by a significant margin. This is also the case for Blacks in both states. Furthermore, the Michigan and Delaware statistics on gender are almost identical. Consequently, parallels may be drawn between the experiences of Black women in Newark, Delaware and in East Lansing, Michigan.

Methods: Race and Gender

"Blackness" is defined within this project as African descent. Additionally, individuals were selected for participation only if they self-identify as "female" or "women," and classify themselves as having African American, African, Black, or Black American heritages. To provide clarifying examples, individuals who identify as Black with mixed parentage and women of Afro-Panamanian descent were included in the study, along with those who identify solely as African American. The purpose of including Black women of various ethnic and national backgrounds is to provide a clearer, more accurate and heterogeneous view of the perspectives of women who identify (or are identified) as Black.

Additionally, with regard to interactions with participants, I understand that my positionality allowed rapport that might not otherwise exist between all participants and researchers. As a Black woman interviewing Black women about race and gender, my participants often presumed my exposure to the topics they discussed, as well as the means they employed to do so. The assumption that I shared some of their experiences allowed me entry into sensitive discussion. A certain level of comfort was often present when discussing emotionally charged experiences with differential treatment. Moreover, the assumption that I was comfortable with traditional African American linguistic practices allowed a number of the interviewees a certain level of relaxation while expressing themselves during interviews.

Data and Findings

Data and Findings: Overview

A series of trends emerged during the coding and analysis of the data. This section will focus on the three themes that were most salient in the interviews. These include:

1) cognizance of self as a raced individual;
2) contemporary racism, "post-racial" America and enlightened exceptionalism;

3) and Black womanhood.

As noted above, one of the primary aims of the study is to interrogate Black women's understandings of their life experiences in a society that is presumed to be moving beyond race. The first theme, cognizance of oneself as a raced individual, centers on expressing an understanding of the influences of race on one's life. Whether personally initiated or societally imposed, the women's understandings of themselves as raced individuals are highly significant and inform other themes (e.g., "Black womanhood") throughout the study. Next, contemporary racism and "post-racial" America encompasses discussions of current forms of subtle racism; larger societal perceptions of the presence/absence of "post-racialism"; enlightened exceptionalism; and racial equality. Finally, the theme of Black womanhood includes discussions of pride; strength; "double jeopardy" (i.e., intersections of simultaneous race and gender marginalization); and perspectives on the overall experience of being a Black woman in contemporary America.

While these themes may be defined by their distinctions, they are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. For instance, participants' expressions of simultaneous racial and gender discrimination are obviously related to their knowledge of themselves as Black and female, along with their membership within a racially stratified society. Though I have chosen to distinguish between them, this point should be made clear.

Data and Findings: Cognizance of Self as a Raced Individual

Participants were asked to discuss the ways they identify themselves racially, recounting specific experiences in their lives that shaped their awareness of themselves as raced individuals. Without exception, each interviewee recalled a moment wherein the significance of her

Blackness to her life was externally reinforced – sometimes painfully so. Responses ranged from proud affirmations of multi-faceted racial identities to recollections of encounters with blatant, overt, or dangerous race-based incidents experienced by the participants or close acquaintances.

One aspect of this racial understanding emerged in participants' discussions of their multicultural, multi-ethnic identities. Some respondents asserted their adherence to a U.S.-centered notion of Blackness, equated with African American identity. Yet this was not the case for all participants. For instance, Arianna's strong sense of her transnational Black cultures was reinforced by her family; her Ghanaian and American roots fostered a multicultural or somewhat fluid perception of Blackness. Similarly, Lilly, Teresa and Ashley also discussed their ability to identify with African, Caribbean and African American frames of Blackness. That is, for these participants, Blackness was not solely confined to a U.S.-centered notion of African American identity, nor was it a marginal characteristic of their lives. To them, Blackness was a central, natural and inter-cultural aspect of identity that allowed connections with African Americans, Afro-Latinos, Africans, and/or Afro-Caribbeans.

Respondents also discussed early childhood cognizance of racial difference. This awareness came in varied forms. Yvette, for instance, happily reminisced about being raised in a church whose central tenets were: “Unapologetically Black. Unashamedly Christian.” However, other respondents' early experiences with race were not as positively discussed. Forty-five year-old Shante offered a tragic and painful childhood experience with racial hatred as an event that shaped her understanding of herself and the effect of her race on her life.

> Mama and I would love to go to that Jacobson and shop out there in Grosse Pointe. And so we were finished shopping one Saturday and we went to a Baskin and Robbins and it was like across the street. And I had my little chocolate ice cream on my cone and I was a little girl – maybe about six or seven. And it was a

> car full of White guys in a convertible going down the street. And they yelled out, "Look at that nigger eatin' that nigger ice cream!"

Ultimately, before they reached adulthood, a number of participants discussed being jolted out of the joyful utopia of childhood innocence into an awareness that something about each of them was dangerously different: race. Though these experiences are varied in their intensity, all are alike in their consequences: each experience made these women painfully aware of their positions as racially marginalized individuals in a predominately White society.

Consequently, through their discussions of the impact of race on their lives alone, these women's narratives strongly contradict the notion that America has moved beyond race as an influence on individual experiences. That is, their lived experience stands in contrast to assertions that America's racial climate has advanced so significantly that race no longer affects individual lives.

Data and Findings: Contemporary Racism & "Post-Racial" America

Each participant was also asked to discuss the nature of contemporary race relations, "post-racialism" as a myth or reality, as well as the racial equality of opportunity in the U.S. Overall, participants generally affirmed the notion that racism is not as pervasive as it was generations ago. As noted above, racial progress has definitely occurred over the course of the past fifty years. However, with this concession each woman in the study overtly and verbally rejected the notion that America is "post-racial."

Lilly provides an example of this rejection.

> Right now people think we live in colorblind society. I've heard the argument. What does it look like? It looks like bullsh--. It looks like we're still writing "nigger" on people's dorm room doors. It looks like we're executing Blacks like Troy Davis without sufficient evidence. It looks like we're still heavily incarcerating Blacks, putting them in worst conditions. So, I guess that's what a

> colorblind society looks like. It looks like bullsh--. It doesn't look like anything. It doesn't make sense.

Like those given by other participants, this quote demonstrates a contradiction between the rhetoric of "post-racialism" and personal or secondhand knowledge about the experience of being Black in America. Here, Lilly places "post-racial" attitudes in contradiction with the reality of racial inequality that she has witnessed.

Additionally, though these women shared critiques of "post-racialism," when asked why members of the American public espouse beliefs in "post-racialism," respondents also gave similar answers. A number of these responses centered on rebuttals of enlightened exceptionalist assertions. Brooklyn argued, "people think that just because we have a Black male president now that everything in the world is healed. That America is no longer racist." Similarly, Lisa noted,

> *White* (emphasis hers) people think that we are post-racial at this point…Hey, we've got a Black president! But if you look at the way he's been treated, the stuff that's been done to him and said about him, put in newspapers. The level of disrespect that he's been given speaks so loudly that racism is still here.

Thus, in their critiques of "post-racial" and enlightened exceptionalist stances, participants problematized the use of highly visible, successful Blacks to reinforce the "reality" of "post-racialism" in America. Additionally, as shown in the excerpt from Lisa, the women referenced concrete inequalities they have witnessed in their critiques of "post-racialism."

Nonetheless, the prospect of a "post-racial" America did seem to excite the participants. A number of them characterized a colorblind society as a utopia; a far-off, perfect world, but one that we cannot hope to reach in this lifetime. For example, Brooklyn humorously likened "post-racialism" to a promised land; one that we will not reach while alive. She linked "post-racialism" to the dream of "flying cars," and joked that she would have to "see Jesus" before it became real.

Further, Tiana noted,

> It's a utopia. It's something we're striving to get to. And I'm not trying to be pessimistic, but people are saying we're there now? Hell naw. But when you say post-racial society, I think of heaven. *Like, damn, I gotta die to see a post-racial society.* I'm gonna hafta straight up see Peter, Paul, God and be like, "What up?" Like, when you walk through the gates, there will be this waterfall that washes away all your preconceived notions about race and people, and it won't be no color. (emphasis hers)

Though both women inserted humor into their discussion, their stances are much like those of others in the study – they positioned a society wherein race does not significantly affect individuals, not as a current reality, but as a distant, seemingly perfect world. That is, in confirmation of my first hypothesis, these women did not see America as presently in possession of the aforementioned characteristics. And consequently, their perspectives stand in contrast to the public commentators, political analysts and radio personalities listed above, who situated President Obama's election as a mark of America's transition into "post-racialism."

Data and Findings: Black Womanhood

To shift the discussion to the final theme of Black womanhood, the women discussed this experience by referencing varied topics including pride, notions of strength and overlapping gender/racial discrimination. Through this theme I address my second hypothesis, which relates to Black women's understandings of themselves and their Black womanhood in contemporary "post-racial" America.

To begin with discussions of pride, participants connected this emotion both to their Blackness and womanhood. For instance, in framing the positive aspects of being a Black woman, Victoria stated, "To be a Black woman is wonderful!" Similarly, Lilly beamed as she talked about the many strong Black women she knows. She discussed their "flavor," and also

noted that being a Black woman provides strength to "handle [her] business." Tiana also linked Black womanhood to "an extreme will to live against all odds." Here, the women highlighted the intersection of their race and gender as a source of strength and motivation in their lives.[vii]

However, there are negative aspects of this strength: it can cause Black women to feel overexerted, or obligated to constantly overachieve (Perry 2011; Padilla 1994; Joseph and Hirshfield 2011; Wise 2009; Beaubouf-Lafontant 2009). According to Jackie, Black womanhood means

> having to be independent – it's not a choice. You have to. It's the only way you're gonna survive. Defensive, in a sense. Resilient. You have to be really strong. And I feel like it's not a choice. *When people tell you you're at the bottom rung, you're at the bottom. You don't compete because you're a woman and we live in a patriarchal society that values men. And in terms of race, Black isn't valued at all. And you're at the bottom there. And you're fighting two wars. What do you do?* (emphasis mine)

Like others, this excerpt connects Black womanhood to strength. Yet, it also highlights the unique position of being Black and woman, while pointing out the difficulty of experiencing multiple types of marginalization simultaneously.

That is, Black women are at "the bottom rung," according to Jackie, and they must work doubly as hard as their White and male counterparts to achieve similar results.[viii] Other respondents also expressed the additive nature of vulnerability to racial and gender discrimination and marginalization, as well as the need to work harder (read: be stronger) to fight it. As noted by Arianna,

> To be a Black woman is an experience that could only be made more difficult if I was LGBT identified. Or non-Christian. In every other sort of discourse and experience, being a Black woman is difficult. Because you're not only disadvantaged because of your race, but also your gender. And within social groups, you're ostracized by your Black male counterparts because of gender.

In each of these excerpts, racial marginalization is combined with that of gender. Lisa also discussed marginalization within multiple groups simultaneously and its effect on her professional experience. Ashley discussed having to work harder than Whites because of her race, and harder than men because of her gender. Further, in the excerpt that is shown, Arianna labeled her experience as a Black woman as one that could "only be made more difficult" with LGBT or non-Christian identification.

And this is in keeping with the aforementioned literature on intersectionality. The women referenced above discussed the sentiment of feeling and carrying the simultaneous effects of race and gender on their lives, and having their intersecting racial and gender identities as primary influences on their understandings of being Black women.

Conclusion and Reflections

Overall, the findings show that these women are well aware of "post-racial" rhetoric and are excited about the prospect of a truly "post-racial" America. Yet, they do not see this as a current reality in their lives. In addition to blatantly rejecting the notion that the U.S. is presently colorblind, the women also placed the reality of racial inequality that they have experienced and witnessed in contrast with the notion that race is now insignificant. That is, their life experiences, especially the way race and gender oppression affect their lives, stand in stark contrast to notions that America has transcended racial or gender inequality. Thus, the data confirm my first hypothesis: "post-racialism" is simply a myth to these women.

Additionally, participants presented nuanced understandings of the influences of race and gender on their lives. They articulated poignant understandings of their Blackness and their womanhood – particularly the way their life experiences as Black women are yet shaped by

simultaneous racial and gender marginalization. They also discussed unique understandings of "what it means to be a Black woman" in America today, describing it as a sort of bittersweet, beautiful, strengthening and painful experience. Not only do these findings confirm my second hypothesis. The findings also support intersectional scholars' positions that multiple aspects of oppression are experienced simultaneously and continue to shape life experiences. This is true even in "post-racial" America.

Still, it must be noted that Black women discussing racial/gender oppression or "post-racialism" are not novel phenomena. However, the contribution of this project lies in providing a lens into the intersections of race and gender on Black women's lives in a "post-racial" America. As noted above, the women often provided critiques of "post-racialism" by contrasting the notion of racial transcendence from experienced or witnessed accounts of continued race-based mistreatment. Thus, the findings definitely help to describe the experience of living as a racially/gender-marginalized individual contemporarily. These women affirm that race and gender continue to shape the experiences of marginalized individuals, in contradiction of the notion that the society has transcended such inequality.

Among the limitations to this study is the homogeneity of perspectives on "post-racialism." While my participants offered a wealth of knowledge and experience, they were all opposed to the idea that race and gender do not impact their lives. Some of the similarity in perspectives may be attributed to the source from which I drew the bulk of the sample. As noted above, twelve of my fifteen participants were, or had once been students at Michigan State University. It is likely that the shared experience of Black female student life at this university may be responsible for some of the consensus. Thus, the overabundance of willing participants

from MSU presents a limitation for the study.

Nonetheless, the fact that participants in East Lansing, Michigan and Newark, Delaware shared perspectives on "post-racialism" and Black womanhood suggests that in both locations, strong similarities exist in the experiences of living as members of a simultaneously marginalized racial and gender group. As displayed in the interviews, women in both regions expressed similar frustrations with gender and racial discrimination at work, in schools and in social interactions.

A second limitation for the study regards the education levels of participants. All of the interviewees shared a similar aspect of their backgrounds: each had some exposure to college education. Interviewees' professions included current undergraduate work, employment in the optical health field, engineering, and university administration. Participants' levels of education ranged from the completion of some college courses to possession of advanced degrees. Consequently, this project serves an unexpected purpose by providing a lens into middle class/professional Black women's perspectives on life in "post-racial" America. Yet, as noted above, this also serves as a limitation. Although a particular experience of Black womanhood is synthesized within the study, the perspectives of non-professional Black women are overlooked. The question of their views on Black women's lives remains unanswered, but will be a prospect for future study.

As I continue with this project, I may be able to draw a broader sample, including women without university training, or those who espouse "post-racial" perspectives. This may help provide counternarratives to the stances already addressed here. Further, given additional space and time, this project would have also discussed the ways that class, age and ability distinguish

the women's perspectives and experiences. For instance, growing up in post-1960s America; being first-generation college students; living in suburban vs. urban areas; having multiple parents/incomes – these are all factors that may have separated my participants' experiences from one another in ways that space did not allow me to explore in this project. They will be future subjects of discussion as the study expands and continues to develop. A more varied range of perspectives will undoubtedly enhance my contribution to both race literature and intersections scholarship.

Additionally, other prospects for future study include comparisons of perspectives on "post-racialism" across racial and gender groups. Although Black women stand at the intersection of racial and gender oppression, understanding how individuals of various backgrounds comprehend their experiences in this "post-racial" society will contribute to a clearer, more accurate understanding of race in contemporary America.

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[i] Hill Collins (2007) notes that oppression and privilege distinguish interpretations of reality. Though I have chosen to focus on the intersection of race and gender in "post-racial" America and connections between perspectives on race in Black women's experiences, access to different types of privilege and oppression may further distinguish these women's experiences from one another, and from members of other racial, gender, class, sexuality and ability groups.

[ii] With regard to sociology, Black feminist sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins (1998), discusses a survey of articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology,* one of the forerunning journals of sociological scholarship. Of all of the articles published from 1895-1995, the author found only two with explicit references to the analysis of Black women: one published in 1900/1901 and another published in 1973 (Hill Collins 1998: 98). Hill Collins argues that this speaks to a trend, both in sociology and in academe more generally (Hill Collins 1998: 98). Articles on race were not limited in this way, but those which specifically analyzed Black women's experiences were found to be comparatively lacking (Hill Collins 1998: 98).

[iii] Chandra Mohanty offers a criticism of this trend "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988). Though her focus is on "Third World Women," Mohanty (1988) problematizes the historical trend of feminist scholarship which argues for universalized notions of womanhood, while simultaneously implicitly normalizing the experiences of White (Western) women. Not only does this set the former as the standard to which "other" experiences are to be measured, it presupposes the standard "female" experience to be exclusive of racial oppression (Mohanty 1988; Guy-Sheftall 1992).

[iv] While my work disagrees with the notion that there is a singular standpoint of Black life or Black womanhood, Black feminist thought and intersectional frameworks are used in this study to engage the subjectivities of individuals simultaneously located in various genders, sexualities, races, classes, types of ability (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2000; Hill Collins 2007; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Weber 2010).

[v] Still, within that group experience Black women have access to varying degrees of privilege related to such aspects of identity as class, sexuality, nationality, and language. Specifically, to use the example of nationality, the term "Black" is used in this study as an umbrella term, which may include individuals of various ethnic/cultural backgrounds who identify as "Black" in the United States. However, as noted by Mary Waters (1999), in her work on Black identities, an individual may identify as Black, but refuse to see herself as the traditional "African American."

Yet, assumptions about her identity and attempts to erroneously lump her with African Americans might lead to identity conflicts and frustration as discussed by the study's interviewees, Teresa and Brooklyn. Further, these Black women and their families may have differential access to the linguistic and/or cultural privileges of being "African American" in an American society vs. multi-ethnic, multi-lingual/accented or multi-racial. Thus, while Black women share the experience of living in visibly raced and gendered bodies, access to certain privileges may also make Black women's experiences distinct from one another.

[vi] Numerous studies have demonstrated the ways characteristics such as class, sexuality and physical ability also affect subjective experiences. Judy Rohrer's (2005) "Toward a Full-Inclusion Feminism: A Feminist Deployment of Disability Analysis" and Joane Nagel's (2000) "Ethnicity and Sexuality" provide examples of such work.

[vii] For a detailed discussion of Black women and the many facets of their "strength," see Tamara Beaubouf-Lafontant's (2009) *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance.*

[viii] In terms of the consequences of notions of representativeness, scholarly literature asserts that these individuals often encounter "cultural taxation" (Padilla 1994; Joseph and Hirschfield 2011). Drawing from the example of academe, Amado Padilla (1994) notes that faculty of color are required to negotiate added burdens and barriers in connection to their respective races. Professionals who are culturally taxed are given more work than their White counterparts and may receive more critical scrutiny from professional superiors (Padilla 1994). According to Padilla (1994), this is because they are presumed to be better "racially suited" to perform in certain capacities or are the first "diversity" representatives of their race within those professional spaces. Further, Joseph and Hirshfield (2011) find that faculty of color are subject to claims that they were hired as affirmative action "tokens," and therefore are unqualified for their positions. Consequently, many of these individuals feel forced outperform White counterparts to receive comparable credit, to prove that they are qualified i.e., not "diversity hires," and to avoid unfair scrutiny. These are all stressors to which their White fellows are not subject to the same degree.