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## ***PATRICIA HILL COLLINS SYMPOSIUM***

### ***Intersectionality and the Study of Black, Sexual Minority Women***

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In my research on Black gay women creating families (Moore 2008, 2011), I talked several times at length with Zoe Ferron (a pseudonym). Zoe installs and maintains telephone lines and network optics for a major communications company. She stands about five feet, eight inches tall, weighs roughly 180 pounds, and at the time of interview wore her hair in dreadlocks that hung all the way down her back. Zoe was born in 1960 and raised in a predominantly white housing development in Canarsie, Brooklyn, during a time when African Americans were just beginning to integrate this tough white ethnic neighborhood. Asked how she thought of race, gender, and sexuality as identities that described her, Zoe said, “If I had to number them one, two, three? Probably Black and lesbian—real close, to be honest with you. I don’t know which would come up as one. Probably Black. Woman last.” When I asked, “What makes you say that?” she replied:

Because that is just what it is. People see your Blackness, and the world has affected me by my Blackness since the very inception of my life. . . . My sexuality is something that developed later on, or I became aware of later on, [because] I think *it’s always been what it’s been*, but I think that it was just something that developed in my psyche. But being Black is something that I’ve always had to deal with: racism since day one and recognizing how to navigate through this world as a Black person, and even as a Black woman.

From kindergarten through fourth grade, Zoe was the only African American in her classes for gifted children. She describes her years in school as a “volatile” time because of the protests around neighborhood integration that were taking place. During her first year in junior high, a bodyguard had to escort her to school each day to protect her from protesters in the neighborhood who shouted racial epithets at her, such as

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“Nigger, go home!” Race was continually salient for Zoe during her childhood, an identity on the basis of which she and other family members were forced to interact with others.

When thinking about why Zoe lists her gender last in the way she describes herself, she muses, “I would have made a better boy than a girl.” She elaborates:

I never felt like a girl. Never really understood what it felt like to feel like a girl in terms of roles on television. I think roles for me were always skewed, especially what we saw environmentally, what we saw visually. There weren't even Black people on TV when I was growing up. The white people were Barbie, and I am *not* Barbie. I didn't even feel like a Barbie.

At an early age, Zoe had a keen awareness of how she differed from the ideal gender type and of how her race as well as her physical mannerisms played a role in her inability to ever achieve this archetype. She felt a mismatch that stayed with her throughout childhood and even into adulthood. Race as well as gender expression made it difficult for her to see how her experience as a Black girl related to the image of Barbie as the ideal expression of female gender.

Sharing the life histories of lesbian women of color like Zoe Ferron reveals the critical importance of sexuality as an identity as well as a social location that structures individuals' lives alongside race, gender, and class. In the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes sexuality in three ways: as a free-standing system of oppression similar to oppressions of race, class, nation, and gender; as an entity that is manipulated within each of these distinctive systems of oppression; and as a social location or conceptual glue that binds intersecting oppressions together and that helps demonstrate how oppressions converge (2000, 134-35). In her later work, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, sexuality is further theorized through the lens of heterosexism, which she identifies as a freestanding system of power similar to racism, sexism, and class oppression that suppresses heterosexual and homosexual African American women and men in ways that foster Black subordination (2004, 19). Each of these conceptualizations reveals the ways intersecting oppressions rely on sexuality to mutually construct one another.

In these and other works, Collins's scholarship leaves us with the challenge of how to translate paradigmatic frameworks and use them for empirical study. In this essay I briefly examine the intersectionality paradigm as a tool that can further empirical analyses in the study of sexuality, particularly

for individuals with same-sex desire. The willingness of Black feminist scholars like Collins to integrate into their theoretical frameworks questions of power and oppression that extend to the particular experiences of same-gender-loving people can offer a significant contribution to the field of sexuality studies, and can facilitate a dialogue among African American studies/ethnic studies, gender and family studies, and sexuality-based programs like lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies. I use my own research as an example of how the work of Collins and others can help to more fully integrate studies of sexuality and family formation into the sociological imagination.

### INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSES OF SEXUALITY

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, gay sexuality has become a visible public issue, expressed through questions of same-sex marriage, adoption by lesbian and gay adults, and the right of lesbians and gay men to openly serve in the U.S. military. The visibility of these various political agendas has facilitated the growing acceptance of sexuality as a serious field of study in “mainstream” sociology. The study of LGBT sexuality has been dominated by particular spheres of ideological thought—postmodern thinkers and queer studies theorists—and its emphasis has been on white, middle-class subjects. Patricia Hill Collins is one of the few heterosexual sociologists to integrate lesbian feminist theory into larger conceptualizations of Black women’s sexuality. In both *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics*, she incorporates an understanding of the symbolic, structural, and ideological dimensions of heterosexism as a system of power, and says this heterosexism affects how we study sexuality and how we understand the sexuality of dominant and subordinate group members.

My book *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black Women* (2011) is a mixed-methods but primarily qualitative study of the ways race influences lesbian practice and lesbian family formation for middle-class and working-class Black gay women. In this work, I use Collins’s conceptualization of sexuality and heterosexism as an additional system of oppression to empirically evaluate the experiences of Black women with same-sex desire as they relate to the broader paradigm of intersectionality. In this conceptualization, sexuality is viewed as a specific site where heterosexism, class, race, nation, and gender converge as systems of power and consequently shape the construction and experience of identities, behavior, and social relationships for Black gay women.

The methodological approach that guides my analyses is intersectional in the sense that McCall (2005), Choo and Ferree (2010), and others define it. Hancock says intersectionality is both a theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research that emphasizes the interaction of such categories of difference as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (2007, 63-64). My use of intersectionality as a paradigm, or approach to conducting sexuality-based research, takes a specific form that Choo and Ferree name “group-centered” intersectional analyses. McCall refers to this as an “intracategorical” approach (2005, 1774) because, rather than compare women across racial categories or across sexuality groups, this method analyzes the experiences of individuals who lie at the intersection of single dimensions of race and other categories (i.e., ethnicity, class, gender presentation, motherhood status). It is the intersection of race, class, and gender presentation within a *single group*—Black lesbians—that is of interest in my work.

While the intersectional perspective Collins has advanced ultimately ties together the framework I use, and while Black lesbians are the perfect embodiment of an intersectional existence and agency, *Invisible Families* (Moore 2011) specifically recognizes the significance of race in structuring Black women’s lives and in defining their identities. Both Higginbotham (1992) and Dill (1983) have shown that political, religious, and other identities of African American women have historically been framed around and are embedded within the context of race. A close scrutiny of the ways Black lesbians experience these multiple statuses suggests something similar. Age, geographic region, racial socialization, and racial hierarchies in society, when taken together, produce particular understandings of gender through a racial lens. Although Black lesbians are multiply positioned, racial ideologies, racial identities, racialized social systems, and racial inequalities together create a framework for understanding and articulating their other statuses as women, as gay people, and as mothers (Moore 2011, 7). The lens of race does not negate the intersectional experience; rather, it guides Black lesbians’ interpretations of how gender, sexuality, social class, and other axes shape their lives. Collins’s work allows for a study of women of color and their lesbian sexuality in ways that have at their foundation not lesbian feminism but Black feminist ideologies, race consciousness, and structural experiences with racism and racial discrimination. I argue that these alternative foundations lead Black women to approach same-sex desire with different goals and objectives than previous theories of lesbian sexuality might predict.

In an intragroup (within-race) analysis, Black heterosexuality becomes normative while Black homosexuality remains deviant. While Collins argues

that Black homosexuality is perceived as deviant because of the total absence of heterosexuality, that is not quite the experience for those with a bisexual identity or who engage in sexual practices with women and men. These individuals are particularly scourged for engaging simultaneously in heterosexual and same-sex desires. Candice Jenkins (2007) argues that the vulnerability of Blackness makes the vulnerability of sexual intimacy more burdensome for Blacks, creating a double jeopardy. I show that in recent times we see a simultaneity of visibility for Black gays through race as well as a visibility of marked lesbian status expressed purposefully through same-sex weddings and other processes of lesbian family formation.

*Invisible Families* draws from the literature on Black women's discourses of respectability when trying to understand how Black lesbians interpret and portray their own sexuality (see, e.g., Higginbotham 1992, 1993; Hine 1994; Giddings 1984; Shaw 1996; White 1999; Wolcott 2001). Jenkins argues that Black women have been "scripted out of narratives of American national belonging" because of their alleged sexual and domestic character. The emphasis on respectability for the Black middle class goes beyond a general concern about the image that is portrayed to whites (2007, 5). It is equally important for Black women to be seen by other members of the racial community as "people of good character" (Shaw 1996). I find that Black lesbians navigate intersecting identities and social locations in ways that allow them to retain racial group commitments while simultaneously exposing themselves as autonomous sexual selves, even when the open expression of sexuality threatens to disrupt assumptions of particular (middle-class) versions of Black respectability. This tension is felt throughout the life stories of the lesbian mothers in my research. *Invisible Families* shows us how Black women choosing to live openly as lesbians offer a manifestation of respectability that is simultaneous with an active expression of Black women's sexual autonomy and freedom.

Other work that specifically draws on intersectional frameworks to directly incorporate understandings of sexuality as an axis of power and privilege include the foundational work of Smith (1983, 1999); Ford et al.'s (2007) work in the field of public health; identity-based research from Battle and Bennett (2005), Meyer and Ouellette (2009), and Hunter (2010); and international studies of Black South African lesbians by Potgieter (2003) on the relationships Black LGBT people have with extended family and larger racial communities. This work and other recent writings encourage others seeking to bridge African American studies with the fields of LGBT studies and gender and/or family studies to consider the intersectional paradigm as one useful tool, not just in sociology but in other related disciplines as well.

In 2011, openly gay Blacks are positioned at the juncture of middle-class morality and sexual agency. In advocating for social justice rights like same-sex marriage they reclaim their sexuality while simultaneously affirming their own representation of Black respectability. Black gay women are at the forefront of a new era of Black sexuality and offer a visible representation of female sexual expression. Patricia Hill Collins's work on Black sexuality offers a challenge to a new generation of scholars to empirically test intersectional approaches in ways that help foster a "fundamental paradigmatic shift" in how we think about and study inequality and oppression. Her work compels researchers to locate and analyze how power systems organized around social statuses interconnect to affect individual lives and group experiences. The study of Black women's sexuality in particular offers one space to explore the outcomes that reveal themselves when systems of inequality converge.

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