Building a Home for Black Women's Studies

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Our problem is that we do not have "home really fitted to our needs," for the study of women of color is itself a critique of Afro-American studies and of Women's Studies, yet these groups are hardly powerful institutions in the university and their validity is still in question. Consequently, even though we are often perceived as "asides" in these groups, we are in the unenviable position of having to protect them, since they are usually the only groups that even acknowledge our existence. (Christian 1989, p. 22)

In 1982, Hull, Smith, and Scott published an edited collection provocatively titled, All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave. They simultaneously announced the development of a new field called black women's studies (BWS), and they attempted to document and validate the lineage of this intellectual project in more than 100 years of black women's writing and activism. In their introduction, the editors laid out a visionary wish list of the types of institutional supports that would be needed to institute the field, including funding, establishment of journals and training of scholars. Nearly twenty-five years later, we write this article from a position that Hull, Smith, and Scott may have considered only a distant fantasy: we are both faculty members jointly appointed in women's studies and Afro-American and African studies at a prestigious and highly ranked university. Indeed, one of us (Haniff) was a graduate mentor to the other (Cole), so we represent two generations of BWS scholarship at this institution. We are neither isolated nor tokenized: We have a junior colleague who is similarly jointly appointed and colleagues who share our interests and are appointed in other departments. We also provide an undergraduate minor degree on gender, race, and ethnicity that is housed in the women's studies program, and our programs were given permission to search for

Black Studies

In a recent article, Colon (2003) traced the history of black studies from its intellectual roots three centuries deep to its modern history growing out of demands by student and community groups starting in the mid-1960s. The first four-year curriculum in black studies was offered in 1967 at San Francisco State University (Colon 2003, Hine 1992). By Marable's accounting (1992), between 1964 and 1976, 300 to 500 black studies departments, programs, and research centers were founded. All three historians of the discipline agree that the impetus for black studies was grounded in ambitions of developing scholarly knowledge of practical use in the struggle for black civil rights and improving the conditions of black people's material and cultural lives and well-being.

However, from its inception and continuing today, deep fissures have existed within the discipline. Colon (2003) made a distinction within the field between scholars working in the tradition of Carter G. Woodson, and the black cultural nationalists. These two approaches have direct descendents in the paradigms that Hine (1992) termed Traditionalist and Afrocentrist, respectively (see also Brewer's (2000) characterization of Spillers). In Hine's typology, the Traditionalists work within the disciplines (often in history
and literature) and aim to excavate the lives and contributions of people of African descent, particularly in the United States but also throughout the African Diaspora. In contrast, the Afrocentrists, also termed the Authenticists, view the traditional disciplines as fundamentally steeped in ways of knowing grounded in European experience. From this vantage point, one can only see African descendants through the eyes of their oppressors. Their project is to identify and develop African-centered epistemologies and methodologies (Adams 2000) to create knowledge that is authentically grounded in the experience of African descendants and that serves their interests.

Where does BWS stand in relation to these paradigms? Hine (1992) argued that black feminism constitutes the third paradigm or ideal type within black studies. However, others note that this paradigm is marginalized within the field (Collins 1993; Brewer 2000); similarly, King (1992) suggested feminism is a marginalized discourse in black political life, particularly in the public construction of black social issues. Colon’s (2003) analysis is perhaps more germane to the problem of BWS’s home. He suggested that interest in black women in the academy has followed two “developmental paths” (p. 151): one in women’s studies (where, for example, he places Hull, Scott, and Smith (2000)) and a second within the Afrocentric branch of black studies. This first path will be discussed at length in the section on BWS in women’s studies. The latter position is well represented in Aldridge and Young’s recent edited volume (2000). Separate essays by Gordon, Aldridge, and Hudson-Weems outlined some of the major tenets of BWS from this perspective. Aldridge and Young (2000) prefaced their volume with a chronology of key moments in Africana studies, including the publication of several different works refuting any place for feminism within black studies. In the chapters that followed, Gordon (2000) provided a rationale for this rejection, framing both feminism and sexism as originating in European thought; in contrast, in traditional African societies, she argued, men and women have separate but complementary and equally valued roles. This perspective makes a case for the integral inclusion of women and women’s studies into the black studies project, albeit with the understanding that acceptance of gender complementarity is necessary to strengthen the intellectual and political power of this endeavor (Aldridge 2003). This idea of gender complementarity is at the center of Africana womanism, an ideology Hudson-Weems (2000) clearly asserted is distinct from black feminism, African feminism, Alice Walker’s womanism (1983), and of course, white feminism. Although the ideal Africana woman is neither passive nor subjugated to men, she is family centered, male compatible, mothering, and nurturing (Hudson-Weems, cited in Aldridge 2000).

Scholars who work within the women’s studies tradition of BWS (and we count ourselves among them) may find fault with much of this conceptualization. At the very least, its idealization of women is rationalized by a gender essentialism that re-scribes heteronormativity and the relegation of women to the domestic sphere. However, the argument laid out by Aldridge and her colleagues supports the centrality of women to the black studies project. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the Traditionalist paradigm.

Because people teaching and writing within the framework of the Traditionalist paradigm work within their respective disciplines, they reproduce the omissions in those disciplines. Unlike Afrocentrism, the Traditionalist paradigm does not offer its own theory or methods, so the question of whether gender is addressed in teaching or in research, and to what extent, hinges on the individuals at the table: Are there faculty who use gender as a category of analysis? Do they have the social capital to get gender included in the mission? Indeed, Collins (1993) contended that within what Hine would call the Traditionalist paradigm of black studies is a strong tradition of “analytic class approaches consider[ing] questions of how changes in capitalism affect the politics, economics and culture of Black people” (p. 151). Against this backdrop, Collins contended that gender analysis has been accorded a distant third-place status in black studies, in which it has been allowed to have little impact on analyses that privilege race or class.

Several factors might contribute to what Collins (1993) has termed the “silence on gender” within the Traditionalist paradigm in African American studies. First, as Collins observed, when gender is included in research within this paradigm, it’s most often used descriptively and categorically in discussions of black women. Put another way, gender is rarely considered as either an attribute of men or as a category of analysis. The former silence tends to marginalize gender as a concept (black women are viewed as exceptions to blackness, a wrinkle in a “pure” category); the latter serves to neutralize gender’s ability to deeply problematize categories such as race or class.

Second, this silence reflects tensions within historical and contemporaneous black gender politics. Collins (2004) described how under slavery and Jim Crow, survival mandated that black women and men support each other, particularly in representing themselves to the outside world as united, “encouraging[ing] solidarity across differences of gender” (p. 253). Moreover, because black sexuality was maligned as deviant, consciously
or not, many blacks adopted a strategy of compliance with conventional gender roles in order to claim respectability, and hence entitlement, to respect and civil rights (White 2001). Perhaps as a result of this legacy, resistance has formed toward discussing black women’s experiences of patriarchy and even victimization in their relationships with black men (Guy-Sheftal, in Hammonds 1997). Finally, movements for black liberation have frequently embraced the powerful metaphor of the race as family, as a means to convey connectedness, common interests, and shared values, but this powerful metaphor includes gendered baggage: acceptance of patriarchy as desir- able and natural, an equation of black political crisis as a crisis of black masculinity (Gilroy 1992), and self-censorship in the service of unity (Cole 1994). For all these reasons, black scholars and laypeople alike tend to view black men and women as natural allies rather than as two groups who have both common and conflicting interests (Crenshaw 1994) and who must therefore actively work to build coalitions, with all the challenges and frustrations that process entails (Reagon 1983).

In contrast, women’s studies has focused a lot of attention on coalition building as the field has attempted to come to grips with the political and intellectual significance of creating spaces that fully include people who might have been considered marginal during an earlier phase of the movement’s development (e.g., Breines 2002; Scott 2005). Barbara Christian wrote of a black woman colleague’s description of how her interactions with white women colleagues felt less natural than interactions with black men: “I’ve worked with Black men all my life, sometimes in rage, sometimes in harmony, I understand the terrain. But it is only recently that I’ve begun working with white women, who after all until recently were conceptualized as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. I’m still learning to read their style which often spells ‘white’ to me rather than ‘women.’” (1989, p. 22). Perhaps it is this very lack of familiarity that has forced women of diverse backgrounds to expect to have to work to communicate; in contrast, the familiarity of black women’s relationships with black men brings with it familiar silences, omissions, and at times, accommodations to traditional gender roles and expectations. Finally, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) argued that striving for “respectability” through racial uplift has led to silencing discussion of issues “deemed too far away from respectability” (p. 272) such as sexuality and the HIV crisis, issues that are central to feminism.

In the past six years, a number of scholarly pieces have taken stock of black studies in the new millennium. These more recent developments suggest that while some of these longstanding difficulties remain, there has been movement forward. In an essay titled “Black Studies in the 21st Century” published in a special issue of The Journal of Black Studies addressing the state of the field, Mark Christian (2006) claimed that “the future of black studies scholarship is inextricably tied to the breadth and depth of women’s approaches” (p. 704). The journal Souls published an issue devoted to black feminist perspectives in 2001 (vol. II, no. 4). Indeed, the National Council for Black Studies is a partner in the founding of this very journal, Black Women, Gender, and Families. These developments stand in stark contrast to efforts to paint black studies as stagnant, struggling for relevance, and even obsolete (Wilson 2005).

In summary, black studies is an uneasy intellectual home for BWS by virtue of scholarly traditions that either embrace a prescriptive conceptualization of gender as essential, natural, and defined by complementary and separate roles for men and women, or regularly fail to account for gender at all. Scholars of BWS may find black studies departments themselves to be strongholds of unexamined male privilege and problematic gender relations mirroring those within African American communities in general. Moreover, black studies itself offers no theoretical position from which to ground a critique of the third-class status afforded gender within it. Nevertheless (or perhaps consequently?), for many BWS scholars, black studies does indeed feel like home, particularly in comparison to the academic disciplines and to women’s studies. Given that black faculty still regularly face blatant racism on predominantly white campuses (Painter 2005), some people may find black studies to be a welcome haven in a hostile environment. In the following section, we turn to a consideration of the challenges and rewards that women’s studies poses for the BWS scholar seeking an institutional home.

Women’s Studies

As with African American studies, women’s studies programs were initiated through activism (Franklin 2002). However, some students of the field’s history credit the activism of female faculty members rather than of students or community groups, which was the case with black studies (Boxer 1982; Fein and Hess 2000). By the late 1960s, women reached an unprecedented proportion of the faculty at colleges and universities. Some of these institutions began to offer noncredit courses on the subject of women (Boxer 1982). The first accredited women’s studies course, titled “Evolution of Female Personality,” was offered at Cornell in 1969; within two years more than 600 women’s studies courses were being offered at nearly 200 colleges and uni-
Smith identified another aspect of subtle racism, observing that her white colleagues in women’s studies too often manifested “the pernicious ideology of professionalism” (p. 97), which operated in two ways. First, the idea of professionalism was frequently invoked to claim legitimacy for work done by people in elite positions. Smith countered that the value of work lies in its quality and integrity rather than in the status of the person doing it. Second, Smith argued that the concept of professionalism was often used to separate academic work from grassroots work for social change, and thus it was ultimately a rationale for inaction. In Smith’s view, the schism between activism and academia practiced by some of her white colleagues in women’s studies was both immoral and fundamentally antifeminist. Thus, the racism Smith identified within women’s studies was not one of prejudiced attitudes but of neglect, exclusion, and marginalization. In a related critique, Zinn, Cannon, Higginbotham, and Dill (1986) noted that their white, middle-class colleagues in women’s studies were more comfortable with the academic system and often looked to white men in the academy for valuation and approval. As a result, they were less critical of the academic system and less prepared to cope when they experienced discrimination. Their observations suggest that women of color and white women, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, may view the risks and rewards of their work in the academy in dramatically different ways. These disparate worldview are another obstacle to working together.

Smith and Breines’ experiences reflected longstanding tensions between white women and women of color within feminism and women’s studies. Writing in 1993, Bhabani argued that in attempting to delineate a field of study called “Women’s Studies” many scholars have presumed a unity and set of women’s common interests, which cannot exist because women’s oppression is “informed by both racialized and gendered inequalities” (p. 28). Perhaps ironically, she then took a well-known critique of the mechanisms through which the disciplines have obscured women’s lives—erasure, denial, invisibility, and tokenism—and turned it back on feminism to argue that these same mechanisms have been employed to marginalize and eclipse women of color. Similar critiques are a refrain among scholars of black women’s studies (e.g., Zinn et al. 1986; for several examples, see Anzaldúa 1990).

Yet despite this conflict, we would argue that women’s studies differs from black studies in the extent to which it has struggled with these issues and attempted to respond to them. For example, in 1990, women of color and their allies at the annual meeting of the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) staged a walkout over institutional racism in the organization.
The third possible reason that theory is more central to women's studies than to black studies harkens back to our epigraph. Christian noted that "the study of women of color is itself a critique of Afro-American studies and of Women's Studies," (1989, p. 22). Arguably, since the late 1980s, the representation of women of color within women's studies has increased (both as scholars and as subjects of scholarship), and much work has been done within women's studies teaching and scholarship to respond to the critiques of women of color. Indeed, McCall (2005) recently argued in Signs, one of the premier journals in Women's Studies that intersectionality is the young field's "signal contribution. On the National Women's Studies Association Web site, the motto beside the logo reads, "Supporting and promoting feminist education and research. Working to end racism and all forms of oppression" (http://www.nwsa.org/index.php). Clearly by taking such critiques seriously, women's studies has broadened their definition and their mission. Wendy Brown (1997) noted that recognizing the interconnectedness of oppressions could threaten to make women's studies obsolete. But she also argued for the importance of engaging feminist scholars in a broader examination of power:

To the extent that women's studies programs can allow themselves to be transformed—in name, content, and scope—by these and allied projects, they will be renewed as sites of critical inquiry and political energy. To the extent that they refuse this task, and adhere to a founding and exclusive preoccupation with women and feminism, they will further entrench themselves as conservative barriers to the critical theory and research called for by the very scholarship they incited... (p. 8)

The growing scholarship by women of color that patiently reveals the intricate weaving of gender, race, and other forms of oppression, has compelled women's studies to increase the theoretical sophistication with which they understand gender. Because black studies has not engaged these critiques as broadly or deeply, there has been no necessity to re-theorize their founding principles.

Yet, the mainstreaming of race as an analytic lens and of women of color as legitimate subjects of study in women's studies has not been unproblematic. Rooks (2000) worried that although Black women scholars and scholarly attention to gender are still underrepresented in African American Studies, all too often Women's Studies scholars overlook black women's scholarship, even when they study black women. These observations led her to wonder whether despite the rise of BWS, "the fundamental dynamics of
space and power have been reconfigured in any significant way" (p. 121); see also DuGille 1994). Schiessler (2005) observed that despite the recent proliferation of titles published by women of color furthering the theorizing of the intersections of race, gender, and nation, white feminists continue to theorize gender in universal terms that are implicitly raced white.

In summary, just as we characterized black studies as an uneasy home for BWS, women’s studies comes with its own set of tensions and discomforts. Interactions between black and white women colleagues may not have the familiarity of home we sometimes find in our collegial relationships in black studies; and many BWS scholars have chronicled their frustration with a kind of exclusionary myopia operating in women’s studies. The greater institutionalization of women’s studies (compared to black studies), white women’s typically greater comfort with white men (Hurtado, 1986) who still hold disproportionate power in academia, and the perception that women’s studies has become distant from its originating activist mission may also add to some BWS scholars’ perception that women’s studies cannot provide an intellectual home for them. But there is also evidence that as a field, women’s studies has attempted to deeply and meaningfully engage the intellectual critique brought by women of color by incorporating critical examinations of race and other dimensions of difference into its scholarship and teaching.

Making Ourselves at Home: Transforming Interdisciplinary Fields

We agree with Brown (1997) that projects such as BWS that systematically consider the ways that gender, race, class, and sexuality mutually define and support each other have the power to revitalize black studies and women’s studies "as sites of critical inquiry and political energy" (p. 8). In this section, we discuss some specific ways that these interdisciplinary fields could be renewed and transformed by making room for BWS, using some of our own projects as examples. We argue that BWS has the potential to transform our pedagogy, the way we create knowledge, and the relationship between scholarship and activism within black studies and women’s studies.

Pedagogy. As a pedagogical tool, BWS is critical to meet the needs of our students as we prepare them for the challenges and opportunities they will encounter outside the academy. As Collins (1995) observed, in our teaching we face black students in need of knowledge that will help them see their "families, communities and culture not through denigrated Eurocentric models, but as part of a continuum of the African experience" (p. 133). We face students preparing for middle-class lives who need a class analysis that helps them understand racial oppression in the global context of international capitalism. We face students, men and women alike, whose gendered experiences shape, and are shaped by, their experiences of race and class. Giving our students access to a social analysis that includes race, class, and gender and their interplay helps all students see how structural barriers affect people’s lives and choices, even their own (Higginbotham 1990).

Social justice activism can be an important form of BWS pedagogy. For the past several years Nesha Haniff has conducted activist projects involving student and community transformation in Jamaica and South Africa. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has dealt a devastating blow to sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean; these regions rate respectively, first and second in the rates of HIV infection worldwide (UNAIDS 2006). Working in Jamaica, she developed a module to teach low-literate people HIV prevention, a pedagogy that could also be of use in Africa. At the heart of this methodology is the philosophy that people can take responsibility for themselves if given the right tools, and literacy is not a requirement for education. “The Pedagogy of Action” program aimed to create cadres of HIV prevention activists from among the university students in Haniff’s classes; these students would then travel to South Africa or Jamaica as a study abroad experience where they would teach local community activists the prevention module. These local contacts could then teach others, and so on. Through these encounters, the students and the community members were both transformed; as each had the experience of beginning as a student and then becoming a teacher, individuals experienced empowerment at the same time that potentially life-saving practical knowledge was transmitted. By giving students an opportunity to become members of a community outside the university as part of their university education, the pedagogy of action helped broaden their appreciation of what constitutes knowledge (for example, must it be characterized by complexity and literacy?).

To teach HIV prevention in a setting such as the townships in South Africa is both frightening and exciting. To presume that privileged American students can actually go to South Africa and teach people who speak in many different languages is a kind of arrogance or naiveté; on the other hand it was such a challenge that to achieve it would be an act of transformation for the students and maybe the community. The purpose of this education was not to prepare students for their careerist quest, but to develop a sense of accountability to the communities around them. Even students of color who felt politically disempowered and economically oppressed in the Unit-
ed States came to reflect on their own privilege in a global context. Central to these insights was first hand observation of the realities of marginalized communities—women living with HIV, the poor in the so-called "third world," and the draconian effects of gender discrimination and homophobia—and an intersectional analysis grounded in BWS to make sense of these potentially overwhelming observations and experiences.

Scholarship. Black women’s studies can offer better knowledge to the field that embraces it. The most important work in BWS reveals how failure to attend to the ways that social categories mutually construct each other renders our knowledge of any one category necessarily biased and partial (in both senses of the word). Indeed, Barbara Christian (1989) rejected the proposal that BWS ought to remedy its “homelessness” (p. 32) through the creation of black women’s studies institutes as both impractical and inappropriate. The isolation of such a field into its own entity would do nothing to challenge the idea of studying race or gender as “pure categories.” For example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) brilliantly demonstrated how race acts as a “meta-language” infusing American constructions of gender, class, and sexuality. In a foundational text, Crenshaw (1989b/1993) demonstrated how individuals facing discrimination based on their membership in two groups were essentially invisible under discrimination law, which was premised on protecting individuals who, but for one status (such as race or gender) would not face discrimination.

The power of this intersectional analysis is illustrated by one of Elizabeth Cole’s current projects. As part of a larger project documenting feminist movements from four different countries, Cole has been the coordinator of an effort to collect oral history interviews with U.S. scholar-activists whose political work addresses intersections between feminism and movements against racism, homophobia, or social class or disability status. The interview subjects were chosen to reflect the theoretical concept of intersectionality, an analytic approach that simultaneously considers the effects of multiple categories of social group membership (e.g., race, class, nation, etc.). Cole is currently working on writing projects that consider how these interviews allow us to translate knowledge from practice to theory, a move that Christian (1989) argued is a "common way to generate knowledge in black women's lived experience but that is rarely embraced in the academy."

Many of these interviews contain insights into finding common cause with others in order to create working coalitions. This suggests that intersectionality does not ultimately entail a politics of identity tailored to vanishingly small constituencies; rather, it provides a powerful tool for identifying potential sites of political common cause. In a well-known paper, Crenshaw (1994) argued "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend differences, ... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences," and she offered intersectionality as a corrective. Implicit in the idea of heterogeneity within groups is the corollary idea that even groups that our systems of categorization deem fundamentally different may have experiences in common. For example, women on welfare targeted by marriage incentive policies have important shared interests with gay men and lesbians whose sexuality and intimate partnerships are also stigmatized and proscribed (Cohen 1997). Feminist activists, particularly women of color, have long used this insight to mobilize coalitions for political work. In an interview for the project, scholar-activist Cathy Cohen explained that the recognition of intersectionality, far from being divisive, is a tool to identify and build coalitions. (Transcript of interview retrieved from http://unich.edu/~glbmem/transcripts/us/BOOKLET U E 102806.pdf on March 11, 2007.)

...the moment of intersection is really the moment of building a broader movement... If you can find those places where people may not agree... but where they in fact suffer from state regulation or some "system of oppression," where they share that experience... those are also the spaces for shared mobilization." (p. 131)

By recognizing the interplay of multiple systems of oppression, activists find ways to cut across conventional identity categories in order to build common cause among groups who share the experience of oppression. These sites may be difficult to see at first. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1982) argued that "Race not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class, but it blends and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops. It precludes unity with the same gender group, but often appears to solidify people of opposing economic classes" (p. 235, emphasis added). Such perceptions homogenize groups and reify differences across groups, serving to obscure differences within a group and sites of commonality between groups. By helping us to resist the tendency to view some identities as trumping all others, the concept of coalition has the potential to shift our conventional ways of seeing groups defined by race, gender, and other statuses.

Based on the insights from these activists' work, Cole (2006) argued that the principles of coalition might be fruitfully used to rethink research methods in social science relying on null hypothesis testing to establish differences
between groups. By privileging difference (indeed, failure to find hypothesized differences is generally interpreted as an indication of an unsuccessful, unpublishable study), such an approach runs risks of essentializing the meaning of membership in social categories and simultaneously obscuring the social processes that create the categories. Using black women's lives, particularly their political activism, as a site from which research can be generated and theory advanced, is a central tenet of BWS, a perspective from which academics and activism need not be seen as orthogonal pursuits (Smith 1979/2000).

Linking Scholarship and Activism. The emphasis within BWS on social change and the social justice mission offers both black studies and women's studies the opportunity to return to an exploration of the impetus that motivated their origin (Chi-Jua 2000). Within black women's history, there is a longstanding practice of theorizing from activism (see, e.g., Giddings 1984), and the tradition of the scholar-activist is still vital in BWS. Haniff worked on a project in Jamaica with young adult men (aged 17 to 21) who have sex with men (MSM), a population with a very high incidence of HIV. This work revealed the reciprocal link between theory and activism. In small groups, Haniff discussed the issue of HIV prevention with them. The intent was to come up with ways to decrease HIV risk behavior and to develop a system of voluntary testing, but the discussion exposed the many obstacles to doing so. Violence and fear were daily features of every facet of their existence. The ways they formed and understood their intimate relationships revealed the effects of both the mental and physical violence with which they lived, but the unchecked and undiscerning construct of gender that they brought to their relationships was troubling.

The young men revealed that they had many partners and often did not wear condoms because of the nature of their partnerships. Often the younger partner in these relationships, they felt that their role was to take on the role of submissive—a collection of traits that are stereotyped as feminine—in relation to the dominant partner. They expected that their partners could hit them to establish control, punish them by taking away pleasures, demand that they do housework, make them stay at home, and generally "keep them in their place." The young men felt they had, and were expected to have, no agency over their own bodies. When pressed, they said they knew they should not be treated this way. But, they said, that is how love is.

To be clear, these young men neither wanted to look like women nor to biologically be women. Rather, they wanted to be a subjugated "she" (as they referred to each other) as a sign of their devotion and availability to be completely owned and possessed. But this becomes more complicated because they were raised as males, and in Jamaican society this gave them entitlements denied to women. These men were not bound by the conventional prescriptions for women of chastity and monogamy. Although passive in their primary relationships, these young men were still willing to have sexual flings outside these relationships, and thus they became caught up in relationships that put them at risk for more violence. It was not because they were having sex with men that they felt entitled to have more than one partner, but because they were men. In their view it was the inherent dominance the culture bestowed on men that allowed them the right to have multiple partners, even though in the conduct of these relationships they might play a submissive role.

The group of young men speaking honestly and openly about their lives was a kind of living theory about the intractable nature of male dominance and the performance of gender. Of great significance was the fact that they increased their vulnerability to violence—both from inside the gay community and outside of it—when they performed femininity. This demonstrated how deeply embedded sexism is in the very foundation of the Jamaican culture, and how sexism is linked to homophobia. Haniff began to think that one intervention for this group might be a kind of feminist consciousness raising that problematized for them whether certain aspects of femininity were synonymous with the acceptance of violence. Whether they would find this attractive is another issue. Bringing feminism to young men as a tool represents another application of the coalitional model of intersectionality. It is also an example of the way BWS scholarship can provide an academic grounding that can be brought to bear on work for social justice for marginalized groups. What seems to be "only" applied, or activist work, can produce theory; doing so prevents theory from ever getting too far away from the lived experience of the people whose lives it attempts to explain.

Conclusions

We have offered an analysis characterizing black studies and women's studies as problematic homes for BWS. In closing, we would like to raise the question of whether home is what BWS ought to be seeking. Home is both an enticing and a troubling metaphor, promising safety, comfort, and nurturance, but simultaneously naturalizing conventional family relationships and obscuring power and women's labor (McDowell, 2002). For the same reasons that neither black studies nor women's studies can provide a "home really fitted to our needs" (Christian 1989, p. 22), it is critically important that BWS
remain actively engaged in dialogue with these fields. Neither black studies nor women's studies can live up to their stated missions of creating scholarship that improves the lives of their constituents without meaningfully engaging the critique that BWS brings to bear. Anna Julia Cooper's words, over one hundred years old, are still relevant: "Only the Black woman can say that when and where I enter...the whole race [and by extension, the gender as a whole] enters with me" (quoted in Giddings 1985). The political and intellectual tensions between BWS and these two host fields ensure that neither may feel like a safe and comfortable home. Yet these tensions are a dynamic nexus that may be fertile for the cultivation of change, a nexus that BWS scholars may also find familiar. We urge scholars and students in BWS to embrace this potential and to simultaneously work to build networks with scholars and activists transcending any institutional location.

This argument begs two questions. First, if BWS is so integral to these other interdisciplinary fields, what is BWS? Does it make sense to speak of it as a distinctive field of study? And second, if BWS does not have an institutional presence, where will BWS scholars turn for the collegial relationships that sustain academic life, both intellectually and personally?

Because any definition is prescriptive, we hesitate to define BWS except in the most general terms. BWS is concerned with the scholarly study of the lives, conditions, and cultural products of women of African descent across the Diaspora, in both historical and contemporary periods, in the service of bettering the lives of black women. We feel strongly that those engaged in this project must commit themselves to honoring and representing the full spectrum of diverse experiences existing within the category of "black women." Although BWS is vitally engaged with women's studies and black studies, neither of these fields makes these two propositions central to its mission. For this reason, we argue that BWS is at once distinct from these host fields and a necessary corrective to oversights within them.

As for the second question, if we give up the idea of finding a home for BWS, how do we facilitate our work and nurture ourselves in an academic climate that can be indifferent, if not outright hostile, to black, to women, and to the BWS project (e.g., Painter 2000 and Rooks 2000)? We have argued that separate institutes of BWS are not a desirable model on intellectual grounds. Unfortunately, neither is it a practical option within most institutions. Both women's studies and black studies still have only a marginal status in many colleges and universities, typically underfunded and understaffed. On most campuses, scholars engaged in BWS are unlikely to represent any kind of critical mass if for no other reason than that black faculty members are a small minority in American institutions of higher learning. To sustain ourselves as BWS, we must work to create our networks across campuses. New journals (such as this one), special issues of existing journals, and conferences are all exciting possibilities, but each requires substantial investments from institutions and from faculty members who are often already overburdened. The Internet provides a low-cost way of networking that is widely available to people working in university contexts; moreover, this medium has the potential to connect BWS scholars across the Diaspora. BWS scholars might fruitfully exploit greater use of electronic publishing and listservs to create community across campuses. Greater presence of BWS on the Internet also will make scholarship in the field more accessible to people outside of academia, and perhaps, more accountable to these communities. Finally, in the tradition of coalitional models, forging meaningful connections with others engaged in women of color scholarship will expand our local intellectual communities and further the project of intersectionality. In these ways, we can build a "home" that transcends the limitations of any campus, department, or program.

Over the past 30 years BWS has managed to grow in size, visibility, and vibrancy in the interstices of two young interdisciplinarian fields. The vitality of BWS today is a testament to the power of the ideas that BWS represents and the courage, creativity, and hard work of the scholars who have produced it. In the final analysis, our goal has not been to offer a prescription for where in the university BWS should attempt to set down its roots. Rather, we hope that by identifying the challenges posed by both black studies and women's studies as homes for BWS, as well as the benefits that a more active and engaged alliance with BWS could offer these interdisciplinary fields, that we can encourage more open and productive conversations across these institutional divides.

Endnotes

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2. Gay-Sheftail (1992) dates the birth of the field to the 1970 publication of Toni Cade (Bambara)'s edited volume The Black Woman; others cite Gunda Lerner's Black Women In White America as the foundational text.
3. Whether black studies and women’s studies ought to be considered disciplines is outside the scope of this article. (See Bowser 2000; Collins 1990). While acknowledging their fundamentally interdisciplinary character, we argue that black studies and women’s studies are now sufficiently institutionalized that they often function within universities in ways that are analogous to disciplines, and thus will refer to them that way here.

4. See also Dawson (2001), who identified black feminism as a distinctive ideology within African American political thought.

5. See also Davis (2001), Randay (2000), and White (2000) for fuller critiques of gender essentialism within Afrocentrism.

6. Similarly, see Watcctt (2005) for an analysis of the potential of queer studies to spur a rethinking of the black studies project.

7. Lisa Jaa (2002) argues that black studies has been similarly incorporated into mainstream academia at the expense of its activist mission, but claims this has been the result of patterns of university and government funding that favored the least radical and activist programs.

8. Intersectionality, an analytic approach that considers the effects of multiple categories of social group membership simultaneously, was originally theorized by feminist scholars of color (e.g., Crenshaw 1994).

9. Alkalimat has written extensively on the use of the Internet to further black studies and connect black communities (see, e.g., Alkalimat 2000).

References


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