## STATE OF THE DISCOURSE

## Symposium: The Unique Situation of Black Women

# CENTERING THE EDGE

## Addressing Institutional Racism and Habitual Exclusion in the Academy

### A Response to Kathryn Takara

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Kathryn Takara's "A View from the Academic Edge" is a commendable effort to speak to the unique problems confronted by Black women in academia. Many of the concerns raised by the author are elaborations of arguments made by other Black feminist intellectuals, who highlight the ways in which race and gender intersect to produce experiences that alienate and stigmatize Black women in academic settings. Takara relies heavily on these previous works at times, which may lead some to ask exactly what her original contribution to this body of knowledge is supposed to be. While she defines her primary focus as "the institutional features of the academy which help to explain the particularly bad situation of Black females in the academy," the greatest strength of the essay is its attention to forms of racism and exclusion that are *both* institutional *and* interpersonal. Though the author does not explicitly make this distinction herself, the coexistence and interdependence of *both* institutional racism *and* habitual, interpersonal race/gender-based exclusion is what motivates her to write this piece, and it is the need to address both of these areas that makes the message of "A View from the Academic Edge" valuable.

The author states that while "in-your-face" racism still exists, institutional racism is the greatest evil faced by Black women in the academy, "a conservative institution staffed largely by people with progressive attitudes" (Takara 2006, p. 463). This point echoes Bobo's description of "laissez-faire racism," which characterizes America as a society in which Jim Crow racist attitudes about natural or biological Black inferiority have ebbed, and legislative advances have somewhat leveled the playing field for Blacks. Racial inequality persists, however, because *subtle* discrimination persists, and historically engendered economic disadvantages weigh heavily on Blacks' contemporary life chances. "Laissez-faire racism" discourages further policy changes that account for and challenge these structural disadvantages in both civic and government institutions. Calling attention to *institutional racism*, to use Takara's term, is to affirm that institutional processes and procedures fail to take

historically derived racial inequality into account, and fail to recognize the continued impact of race on our private and professional lives. This inattention to racialized disadvantage reproduces a social hierarchy that is unjust and injurious to Blacks. Further, the racialized experiences of Black women faculty transform the nature of their jobs as academics. Colleges' and universities' refusal to acknowledge the additional demands that Black women face constitutes institutional racism, because Black women are not compensated for the additional labor and psychological challenges which they invariably face.

The tenure process is Takara's best and primary example of institutional racism in action. She notes that three criteria—publication, teaching, and community service—govern tenure decisions, and Black women are victims of institutional racism in all three of these areas. In reviewing publications, many traditional academic disciplines marginalize discussions of race, gender, and identity politics more broadly, and scholars who write on these topics are at a distinct disadvantage when their work is considered during tenure review. Not only do many disciplines, as collective institutional phenomena, devalue work on race and gender, but socialization into a discipline produces individual scholars who protect the canon and actively degrade or ignore scholars and research that do not reflect, react to, or build upon the canon. Even when members of a tenure committee are receptive to the notion that studies of identity politics are vital to established systems of knowledge, it is unlikely that the committee will comprise members who are familiar enough with work on race and gender to be able to make informed decisions about the quality of the work being reviewed.

Institutional racism influences tenure review in the arenas of teaching and community service as well, Takara argues, because Black women faculty, and minority faculty more generally, serve dual roles: as both traditional educators and mediators between underrepresented groups and the university. This produces a double burden for these individuals. First, they work longer hours and perform a more diverse range of tasks, as they mentor and stand up for underprivileged and/or underrepresented students. Second, their position as the face of the underrepresented group in the eyes of university colleagues and students alike produces additional stress derived from "tokenism" that White faculty members simply do not have to cope with. For the author, the failure to acknowledge these additional race-based burdens constitutes institutional racism.

A conservative institutional response to these problems might maintain that, ultimately, Black women faculty members choose their jobs, choose the scholarly interests they pursue, and choose to perform extra roles as mentors and the diplomatic representatives of underprivileged communities. Since these choices are not requirements of the contracts that Black women sign when they enter the academy, the university has no obligation to recognize or offer compensation for this sort of additional mentoring/community work, nor to take these faculty members' preference for unpopular scholarly topics into account.

Such a response is fatally flawed, for it fails to recognize that *scholars who work on identity and social justice as research and social (teaching included) enterprises do so for the benefit of the entire academic community, not just for personal satisfaction, nor because they irrationally resent the disciplinary canon, or because they are unhealthily obsessed with "trivial" identity politics*. If Black women stopped teaching and writing about intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, stopped working with underrepresented students who need social and scholarly support, and stopped speaking out against on-campus injustice motivated by race, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers, universities would be far worse off than they currently are. Disciplines and systems of knowledge would suffer from the lack of challenges posed and the contributions

made by such scholars, and the social community of each university or college would be robbed of the collective benefits that result from a diverse student population with evenly distributed senses of belonging and efficacy.

Takara makes a number of policy suggestions for addressing institutional racism. These suggestions entail revision of the tenure review process so that the additional labor performed by Black women in the academy can be recognized and rewarded; a commitment to fair and equal treatment of faculty members up for review, regardless of their areas of expertise; and continued attention to equal opportunity policies. "A View from the Edge" also suggests, however, that these measures will not solve the problems that Black women face, because institutional or procedural solutions alone will not affect the habitual, interpersonal patterns of exclusion and alienation that bolster institutional racism, thus harming Black women both emotionally and professionally.

Takara does not name or explicitly define habitual interpersonal exclusion, but she does provide examples of its existence and impact, and she clearly regards such exclusion as an element of institutional racism. I would argue, however, that habitual interpersonal exclusion is related to but distinct from institutional racism. This phenomenon may involve either (1) a failure to recognize or acknowledge that power and social networks with concrete professional benefits are organized along racial lines, or (2) a lack of awareness or self-reflexivity about the influence of subconscious race-relevant assumptions that influence the subjectivity intrinsic to the evaluation of scholarly work.

For example, Takara notes that Black women are frequently viewed as tokens, rather than legitimate members of the department, and are excluded from the "informal but powerful sphere where networking and exchange of career-building information are often shared" (Takara 2006, p. 465). One exemplary scenario involves a select group of faculty who go out for drinks, where work and professional strategizing and/or gossip may take place, without inviting Black women. While the author places informal networking and the exclusion of Black women from social circles under the umbrella of institutional racism, it seems to me that such processes and procedures, unlike tenure review, are not fundamental to academia, and are therefore not subject to the rules and regulations of a university.

As Takara suggests, exclusive informal gatherings may indeed have institutional effects. For example, based on such gatherings, colleagues who make tenure decisions may build relationships with those up for review, and, through informal socializing, they may form opinions about the candidate's potential for future production, or his or her ability to mesh with the department, given what they take to be his or her character. The author notes that patterns of social exclusion may not be *racially motivated*, in the classical racist sense, and positive feelings about a non-Black candidate, resulting from informal faculty socializing, may lie primarily below the level of consciousness. If this is the case, then there is little that the institution can do, whether procedurally or legislatively, to prevent their development. So conceptualizing the barriers to Black women's success as *both* habitual/interpersonal *and* institutional has practical implications. Notwithstanding the interdependence of habitual exclusion and institutional racism, a conceptual separation of the two serves to highlight the need to work on multiple fronts and cultivate multiple solutions to the problem.

If procedural fairness and consistent attention to equal opportunity policy constitute the best solutions to institutional racism, what are the steps we should take to combat habitual exclusion? Since Takara does not conceptualize the habitual exclusion as such, she offers no direct answer to this question, but her affirmation of professional networks among Black women and scholarship as a weapon certainly points in the right direction. Citing Marshall, Takara heralds the upkeep of informal professional networking among Black women in the academy as a means for emo-

tional self-preservation, and as an alternative route to the resources they need to excel professionally. We might think of such efforts as a form of "closing ranks" in order for Black women to survive in the academy under the worst of conditions.

But Black women are sometimes also well served when they break from the ranks, by reaching out to those who either consciously or unconsciously alienate them from informal, but professionally relevant, social networks. This does not necessarily mean repeatedly inviting oneself along for drinks with the "good old boys" of the department, or pouring one's heart out to colleagues without provocation. But adopting a wholly oppositional or reclusive social strategy in the face of these problems seems shortsighted, especially if we acknowledge that a nonmalicious (indeed, unconscious) lack of general awareness may be a major factor in reproducing social and professional ills for Black women in the academy.

If participating in informal social activities among colleagues is too unrealistic or awkward, there are alternative strategies as well. Drawing on Hawthorne, Takara suggests that Black women use scholarship as a weapon, as a means to bring their personal experiences to the attention of a wider audience. Ultimately, this is the greatest contribution of Takara's article. We can read "A View from the Academic Edge" as an interpersonal solution to the problem of habitual exclusion, as the author speaks courageously to each reader about the obstacles that Black women face.

The challenge is how to bring this issue to the attention of those who have never been exposed to these truths either in print or in person. Presumably, readers of the *Du Bois Review* are more sensitive to, and interested in, issues of identity politics than is the average academic. But it is possible that there are other progressive academics who would be sympathetic to the cause, but have never considered many of the unique challenges outlined in "A View from the Academic Edge." Black women should not have to go door-to-door through their departments to personally present these ideas to each of their colleagues. Instead, regardless of their area of academic interest, all progressive academics who are aware of these problems must take it upon themselves to interrupt the cycle, by calling attention to patterns of exclusion and alienation at both formal and informal faculty gatherings. This is the goal: to casually raise awareness about the impact of habitual exclusion or unconscious interpersonal racism, by highlighting the fact that this phenomenon is harmful to both individual academics and the academy as a whole.

Pessimists may retort that exporting these ideas to the broader community will have little impact on those who have no personal interest in solidifying the place of Black women in the academy. But this contradicts the author's supposition that, on the whole, academia is staffed by people with progressive attitudes. Cynicism is no excuse for inaction, and the possibility of a slightly uncomfortable, if fleeting, social moment is a risk we all must take in the name of a more just and inclusive academic community. If we have faith in the academy and are committed to its righteous evolution, all progressives must reach out from the edge to our colleagues, even without the guarantee that they will pull us toward the center.

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## REFERENCE

Takara, Kathryn (2006). A View from the Academic Edge: One Black Woman Who is Dancing as Fast as She Can. *Du Bois Review*, 3(2): 463–470.