SEXISM AND RACISM IN ACADEME:
WHY THE STRUGGLE MUST CONTINUE

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SEXISM AND RACISM IN ACADEME: Why the Struggle Must Continue

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Despite a continued reputation, at least in the minds of conservatives, as a bastion of liberalism and progressive values, the Academy in the United States continues to harbor racists and to condone racist practices. Given that the institution in which I was employed had no graduate students in anthropology or sociology at that time, my experiences have implications primarily for newly minted Ph.D.s. I was the only woman and the only African American or even person of color in the department at that time. We had merged from an independent department of anthropology, in which I had been hired, to a joint sociology/anthropology department. I did not, at first, find it a hostile environment. I had gotten along quite well with my colleagues from anthropology—two men who were senior to me in rank and a woman who had been hired much earlier but was not on a tenure track. We soon learned that there were tensions among the sociologists, all of whose full-time faculty members were tenured males. There were several women working as adjuncts, but they generally steered clear of department meetings and I got on well with them. It wasn’t until the year when I was to be considered for tenure that I was faced with overt racism.

Sexism and racism often go hand in hand, as countless women of color have both experienced and acknowledged. Yet I was still stunned when, only a decade or so from the dawn of the 21st century at a time when overt racist and sexist practices were deemed “politically incorrect,” I heard the male chair of our joint sociology/anthropology department declare: “We all know that women and blacks are mentally inferior.” This was in 1987. The audience was, but for me and one other woman, who happened to be an adjunct, all male. I was tenure-track; but didn’t have tenure. There was no other person of color in the room. I was stunned! “Stunned” is the right word here—I was bewildered, stupefied, made senseless as if by a blow. So much so that I believed that I must have misheard him. Politely, I asked him if he would repeat what he had just said. He did so, without a smile or a trace of irony and in a clear voice, so that no one could mistake his intention. That moment has stayed with me, more than two decades later, is a mark of the pain of humiliation I felt at that time. A pain deepened by the sense of isolation I felt when not one of my male colleagues raised an objection. One or two were prepared to see it in the context of an intellectual debate and said so. The only person to immediately and forcefully come to my defense was the other woman at the table and she did so at no small risk to her own continued employment and promotion.
The meeting was adjourned but I had not recovered. I was torn between maintaining my professional composure and becoming the “wild black woman,” which is a lose-lose situation. If you retain your composure and suffer in silence, you may do so at the risk of harming your health and feeling guilty at your lack of resolve. If you react strongly, you are labeled “difficult” thereby reaffirming, in the eyes of those who need no affirmation, yet another age-old stereotype of the black woman. As Russell (1995: 500) notes: “The black woman scholar must appear neither hypersensitive nor paranoid.” I, however, chose to react. My pain turned to fury and I decided to confront the man in his office. My female colleague and the two men from anthropology decided, upon seeing me, that they would accompany me. The confrontation was not loud, but it was intense. My nemesis was deliberately provocative, once more asserting that the “record” was clear as far as blacks and women were concerned the proof was in the statistics. I countered that as a professional sociologist and scholar he should expand his reading in the field. He referred to the history of I.Q. testing in the United States and the enigmatic gap of roughly 15 points in I.Q. test scores between blacks and whites.

Alfred Binet developed the first I.Q. tests for a practical purpose “to develop techniques for identifying those children whose lack of success in normal classrooms suggested the need for some form of special education” (Gould 1996: 179). Binet insisted that intelligence was not an entity unto itself and feared that his test might lead some to reify it and indelibly label certain children negatively. He argued that zealous schoolmasters might use I.Q. as an excuse to rid themselves of children who were unruly, or disinterested or worse still, that a (low) I.Q. label might lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy diverting a child into a predicted path (Gould 1996:181). Binet’s fears have been borne out in the United States and elsewhere in that I.Q. test scores have been used to justify and maintain social ranks and distinctions. Indeed, gaps in I.Q. scores persist between involuntary minorities and those in the dominant group wherever caste-like divisions occur in societies (Ogbu 1992). But I digress. The statement the chair made was directed at me, personally. It was not an academic argument; it was designed to bring me, with two Ivy League degrees (something he did not possess) down a notch or two—a subtle reminder that I did not really belong there. As Jennifer Russell (1995: 499-500) so cogently observed:

The presence of the black woman faculty member is a daily reminder that the (university) as an institution has been adjudicated a practitioner of racial and gender discrimination, an immoral act of rank order. Her presence symbolizes the institution’s contrition. Her presence also evokes an ugly history of subordination from which white males (and females), directly and indirectly, purposely and fortuitously, benefitted. Presented daily with such a burdensome history, many colleagues of the black woman faculty member are awash in guilt and shame. The need for self-preservation causes some to resort to discrete unwitnessed acts of animosity. Others, obviously conflicted, inconsistently grant and deny her their friendship. Most consciously have to remind themselves that she is their equal. Otherwise the tendency is to assume her inferiority,
to believe her appointment was unmerited, and thus was nothing more than a grant of their grace.

My story does not end here. Lines had been drawn and it was clear that the chair would not support my bid for tenure. At first, I was not sure what to do, but in my anger, I felt that I had to complain about just what had happened. Again, my colleagues in anthropology supported me. We went to the dean. Unbeknownst to me, he was an Afrikaner who, I later came to believe, shared the chair’s sentiments. When we reported the undisguised bias, he merely smiled, suggesting but not offering sympathy, but then asked, “Well what would you have me do? He has tenure and he’s the chair.” We answered with one voice that he should be removed as chair, but were assured that the sociologists, who outnumbered us, did not agree. What was clearly to me a racial provocation was being interpreted as a mere internal dispute between faculty of differing disciplines. Moreover, I recognized a timeworn tactic of many of those in power who are subtle racists: Appear to be neutral, listen to the complaint, and do nothing. In other words, accept no responsibility for change. My frustration at this injustice was overwhelming.

When it was time to hand over my tenure application, the chair told me I had to present two copies, knowing that this was a violation of the faculty policy series. I felt utterly isolated but fortunately this was not the case. I happened to have made several powerful friends on the faculty who were not in my department. They went into action. First, they took my case to the provost; then they prepared me for a fight. One senior woman in particular advised me not to behave like a “nice girl” and let it be known, even if subtly, that there would be a lawsuit. Next, because the department was small, I had the right, according to the provost, to choose an outside member for my tenure committee. I asked a senior woman whom I knew to be fair and who knew just what I was up against. As a result, my committee evaluation was unanimously in favor of my promotion. The chair, however, sat on his decision well beyond the allotted time. I was later told that he wrote a favorable letter only after he had received a call from the provost.

The next hurdle I faced was getting the sabbatical traditionally granted following a favorable tenure bid. I had handed in all the required material, but was told by the dean’s office that they had not received it and therefore I was ineligible for sabbatical that year. Fortunately, one of my male colleagues, who had heretofore not spoken up, had a change of heart and did so. He had been on the committee that reviewed sabbaticals and informed me that mine had been both received and approved. Again, the provost had to come to my defense.

Thanks to the intervention of friends in influential positions, that story had a happy ending, but I have heard far too many that have not. At that time there were fewer than five tenured or tenure-track black faculty at that institution in a faculty of near five hundred. The structural racism was apparent and maintained by the usual barriers employed against the hiring of black faculty: Arguments such as “She wouldn’t be happy
“Frankly, we don’t think she’d make tenure;” “It’s hard to find qualified black faculty members because they can get much more money at other institutions;” or even, “Well, we’re all in favor of diversity, but not at the expense of rigor.” Such statements reflect ingrained racist attitudes, although those who hold them rarely consider themselves racists despite the fact that these arguments against hiring black faculty are never applied to whites. For that reason, they must be challenged, preferably not by black faculty alone, but if necessary, so be it.

Another example of racism in academe can be seen in the assault on affirmative action. The affirmative action policy ushered in with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was deemed successful in that it increased campus diversity and led to increased African American enrollment numbers in American colleges and universities, particularly at elite institutions. For example, African American enrollment at Ivy League colleges rose from 2.3% in 1967 to 6.3% in 1976 (Karen 1991). Despite these modest gains, there has been a persistent assault on affirmative action as a policy beginning with Bakke v. California in 1978, which found that the use of quotas to achieve diversity was unconstitutional. Other suits followed including cases against the University of Texas, the University of Washington, the University of Michigan, the University of Georgia, and culminating in the most successful effort to date in rolling back these modest gains, California’s Proposition 209, which amended the California constitution by banning the consideration of race in admissions at state institutions. These assaults when successful have had profoundly deleterious consequences for African Americans, affecting the pool of undergraduates, and graduate students in terminal degree programs, and thereby affecting the potential pool of faculty members as well. A report on admission rates of African Americans on each University of California campus noted:

For nearly every University of California (UC) campus, the admit rate of African Americans has declined dramatically since 1997. African Americans today constitute the lowliest admitted group of students at each UC campus. Although statewide the raw number of African American admits has increased about 30 percent over the period, the number of all admits has increased as well, resulting in a decrease in the proportional representation of African American freshmen on each UC campus. This decline in African American representation is steepest at UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UC San Diego—the three most selective campuses in the system. Ironically, the number of African American students who meet UC’s eligibility requirements has more than doubled over the same period (Johnson, Mosqueda, Ramón & Hunt 2008: 1)

This has been made possible by what the authors of the report have rightfully called “the myth of meritocracy” in that SAT scores (like I.Q. scores) while deemed objective are in actuality clearly impacted by racial and economic disparities (op. cit: 5). The assault on affirmative action confirms that those in power who see their own security only at the expense and exploitation of others will not willingly let go of their power or privilege. So what, additionally, must we do?
We must form networks and support groups that extend beyond our own disciplines and even our own institutions. Such Sister Scholar groups can be sounding boards for works in progress and provide weight and support for those seeking tenure and promotion. They can also expand the cannon as Lynn Bolles (2001) has argued, by citing the work of black scholars and giving credit where credit is due.

We must continue to use the skills and scholarship of our chosen disciplines to combat the faulty reasoning, sloppy scholarship, and overt lies of committed racists and those who are swayed by them. As I have noted, the work challenging the notions of I.Q. being both hereditary and inevitable began with Binet himself and have been ongoing. Each generation of racist scholars has been countered by those with a clearer vision and, quite frankly, a more disciplined and honest approach to scholarship. Such work includes *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence, and the Future of America*, an anthology edited by Steven Fraser, which is an impressive response to Herrnstein’s and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*. The most recent examples of the repudiation of viewing intelligence as heritable, measurable, and therefore inevitable is reflected in the observations of James R. Flynn, George Chambers, and George De Vos who argue that disparities in I.Q. test scores between privileged and deprived groups is the result of an environment of prejudice, low expectations, inferior schools and bad teaching, rather than genes (Goleman 2009; Flynn 2007). In fact, the massive gains in I.Q. scores across the board for the past three generations, the so-called Flynn effect, “suggest that I.Q. tests do not measure intelligence but rather a weak causal link to intelligence. Therefore, between-groups I.Q. differences cannot at present be equated with intelligence differences” (Flynn 1987: 190).

In order to bring about effective change through “diversity” committees that so many African American faculty are asked to become part of, we must, as Grant Ingle (2005: 13-16) has argued, match our good intentions with careful planning and deliberate follow-through as outlined in the following prescriptions:

1. The communications about the initiative, on and off campus, are comparable to those for a capital campaign.
2. The initiative has an explicit goal or set of goals.
3. The initiative has a realistic time frame.
4. A rationale or “business case” has been put forward explaining why this diversity initiative is critical to the long-term educational mission of the campus.
5. The initiative is driven by a recurring cycle of assessment.
6. A written plan or process exists to identify, approve, implement, and evaluate the changes for effectiveness.
7. Campus leadership is devoting the staff and financial resources necessary to implementing recommendations emerging from the change process.
8. The terminology surrounding the diversity effort is unambiguous, so that terms like “diversity” effort is unambiguous.
9. The boundary of the change effort is well defined in terms of who and what parts of the campus are involved.

10. The leaders of the diversity initiative will use external expertise to shape and guide it.

11. The assessment will use multiple methods.

12. The basic assessment methodology of the initiative makes sense.

13. The climate data are useful at the departmental level.

14. The initiative has unambiguous support from campus leaders but is not dependent on any one of them.

Anything short of this is likely to be a waste of your good time at best and provide desired cover for institutional lack of resolve at worst.

We must continue to bear witness, as so many of our forebears have done. We must tell our stories from the perspective of Critical Race Theory, thereby embracing feminism as did Audre Lorde and bell hooks. We must maintain the activist civil rights tradition of Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and the nationalists movements including Malcolm X and countless others as Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado have argued (1995). We must remember as Audrey Smedley (1999: 16-19) reminds us, that although the concept of race has become a worldview, racism itself is a modern concept. It is our duty to combat it with all of our strength.
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