ARTICLES

Naming and Reclaiming
An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Black Girls' and Women's Resistance Strategies

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Abstract This special issue of the *Journal of African American Studies* is an interdisciplinary collection of original research manuscripts, which contextualize Black girls and women's experiences from Black feminist perspectives. Naming and Reclaiming seeks to achieve several goals: (1) discuss and critique intersectionality and the complexities of Black girls and women's identities; (2) adopt a strength-based approach to exploring the assets, resiliency, resistance, and agency of Black girlhood and womanhood; and (3) draw upon interdisciplinary scholarship that reflects historical, sociological, psychological, and legal perspectives within African American Studies. The first section of the special issue consists of three articles that explore the representations of Black girls and women and their internalization and resistance of these representations. The second section relies on social science research to examine ways that Black women cope with daily gendered-racial oppression. We end our special issue with a Black feminist theoretical model designed to reclaim power for Black girls and women. Through this special issue, we decidedly focus on Black women's resistance and agency with the hope of highlighting ways that Black girls and women attempt to successfully navigate a sociopolitical reality that places them at significant disadvantages economically, physically, educationally, and socially.

Keywords Black · Women · Girls · Resiliency · Agency · Interdisciplinary

Over the last half-century, Black feminist scholarship has moved the field of African American studies and women's studies forward in important, dynamic ways. Theoretical

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work by Black women scholars including bell hooks, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lourde, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Alice Walker, among others, have built a foundation for Black feminist foremothers and womanism that encourages intersectional analyses of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. By standing on the shoulders of Black feminist foremothers, this special issue focuses on the historical, social, psychological, and legal survival strategies of Black girls and women in the United States. Below, we first contextualize the special issue by outlining the external forces playing a role in shaping the lives of Black girls and women including an identification of the major sources of inequalities. Then, we describe some of the ways that Black women have showed perseverance and survival through such gross inequities to create positive, affirming spaces. We end with a brief description of the scholarly contributions within this special issue and their connection to Black girls and women resiliency.

State of Black Girls and Women in the United States

Poverty and Employment Trends

Black women are near the bottom rung of the economic ladder. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2011), in 2010 Black women on average made $592/week compared to $684 and $773 for White and Asian women, respectively, and $633 for Black men. With the exception of Hispanic women ($508), Black women earn the lowest weekly income rate for women. As of March 2011, 53.5 % of women were employed compared to 64 % of men. Black women show the highest rate of unemployment (13.8 %) compared to women of other racial and ethnic groups.

Poverty rates are also increasing with the most recent recession. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010a), in 2008 nearly 40 million people lived with incomes below poverty level. Thirteen percent of women lived in poverty, compared to 9 % of men. In 2010, 23 % of Black families were in poverty, compared to approximately 9 % of White families (U.S Department of Commerce and U.S. Census Bureau. February 2012). Non-Hispanic Black women showed one of the highest rates of poverty at 23 %, compared to 9 % for non-Hispanic White women. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Data, over half of Black female-headed households with children under 5 years of age were in poverty (Macartney 2011), and the highest population in poverty is adult women with no spouse present. In 2010 the U.S. child poverty rate was the highest it has been in the past decade at 22 %, and although Black children represent only 14 % of the child population they make up 25 % of children in poverty. Moreover, among Black children, 38 % are in poverty, compared to 17 % of White children. Thus, as these national figures suggest, Black women and their children are overrepresented among the unemployed and the poor.

Physical Health and Illness

Significant health disparities are also evident for Black women. Findings from the Office of Minority Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010b) show important trends. Black women are more likely than White women to be diagnosed

with breast cancer under the age of 40, yet less likely to be diagnosed over the age of 40. The progression of breast cancer among younger women is faster and thus it is not surprising that Black women are more likely to die from breast cancer compared to their White counterparts. New cases of colorectal cancer, pancreatic cancer, and lung cancer are more common in Black than White women, and the death rate from colorectal and pancreatic cancer is higher for Black women than women of other racial groups. Black women are nearly twice as likely as White women to be diagnosed with diabetes and 2.5 times as likely to die from diabetes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010b). Heart disease is one of the leading killers in racial and ethnic minority communities (National Center for Health Statistics 2011). Although Black women are less likely to have heart disease than White women, they have a 29 % increased likelihood of dying from the disease. Over half of Black women 20 years and older are considered obese, and 44 % of Black women 20 years and older have hypertension. Moreover, although Black Americans make up approximately 13 % of the US population, they are represented in 50 % of HIV/AIDS diagnoses, and specifically, Black women have more than 25 times the rate of AIDS as White women. A number of reasons explain the health disparities between Black women and women of other racial groups, including lack of adequate health care, cultural beliefs and mistrust of the American health system, detecting tumors at a later stage, fear of talking about illness and disease, and various forms of individual, structural, and cultural racism.

Educational Disparities and Attainment

The educational achievement of Black girls and women is complicated; on one hand, they have made significant gains compared to Black boys and men, yet gender-racial disparities remain. There are a number of indicators illustrating educational dispar-ities. For example, in the 12th grade, 70 % of Black girls scored below basic level requirements in mathematics. Black students continue to show the lowest levels of reading proficiency compared to White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts (Balfanz et al. 2012). Although national graduation rates have increased to a rate of 75 % overall, Black students show the lowest Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate at 63.5 % (U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics 2011). In 2009, the high school dropout rate for Black girls was twice the rate of White girls, at 8 % compared to 4 %, respectively (U.S. Department of Commerce and U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The gaps remain in advanced degrees; White women earn 62 % of doctoral degrees conferred on women, whereas Black women earn only 8 % (Asso-ciation of American Colleges and Universities 2012). Gaps between faculty in higher education are also evident; in 2007, Black women represented 7 % of full-time female faculty members, compared to White women's representing 78 % (Chronicle of Higher Education and Almanac of Higher Education 2010). According to a 2006 report from the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, only 5 % of full-time faculty were Black. Black women are making strides educationally in other areas, however. Compared to Black men, Black women are earning degrees in higher education at far greater rates; in 2001, 64 % of Black women were enrolled in comparison to 37 % of Black men. African American women received 70 % of all master's degrees and 64 % of all doctoral degrees awarded to African Americans. Thus, although Black women have surpassed Black men in many ways, there is still a gap compared to White women.

Strength, Agency, and Resiliency of Black Girls and Women

Given the gender-racial disparities among Black girls and women's economic, health, and education in the United States, it is important to identify ways that Black girls and women are continuing to strive and persevere despite this adversity. African American Studies scholars have made significant advancements knowledge pertaining to Black women's realities. There is increasing scholarship on Black American women in the discipline of African American Studies; however the literature largely focuses on adults. When research does focus on youth, there has been more of a focus on Black boys, as scholars and activists work to eradicate educational disparities and disproportionate sentencing for Black boys. As African American Studies scholars, we need to identify helpful approaches to addressing the state of Black girls and women, and acknowledge ways that Black women are showing agency, strength and resiliency despite vast disparities.

There is a long tradition within the Black American community of attending to the development of Black girls and women. Building on this tradition, we see Black women creating organizations and spaces to identify the strength and collective beauty of Black girls and women. One recent example is disc jockey (DJ) and philanthropist Beverly Bond's national recognition of Black woman and girlhood through her nonprofit youth empowerment organization Black Girls Rock! In 2010, Bonds partnered with Black Entertainment Television (BET) to host an annual awards show that recognizes the talents and accomplishments of Black girls and women globally (BET 2011). This is one notable example of ways that the strength and progress of Black girls and women are being recognized.

Purpose and Rationale for Special Issue

The articles in this special issue contextualize Black girls' and women's experiences from Black feminist perspectives. The focus of these interdisciplinary analyses is on strength and resiliency. Within this issue, we've combined the works of several Black women scholars with various feminist professional identities. *Naming and Reclaiming* seeks to achieve several goals. First, the articles that comprise this special issue include a discussion and critique of intersectionality and the complexities of Black girls and women's identities. Second, this special issue adopts a strength-based approach to exploring the assets, resiliency, resistance, and agency of Black girlhood and womanhood. We purposefully adopt a strength based perspective to highlight the power Black girls and women exude while challenging historical deficit approaches to the scholarship of African Americans. Finally, the special issue is interdisciplinary and reflects historical, sociological, psychological, and legal perspectives within African American Studies. Each of the manuscripts included in this special issue offer important conceptual and empirical analyses that highlight the ways that Black women and girls challenge, transform, self-define, and/or self-empower. Below, we provide a brief summary of the manuscripts included in this special issue.

The first section of the special issue consists of three articles that explore the representations of Black girls and women and their internalization and resistance of these representations. In the lead article, Adair provides a historical analysis of the Black vaudeville performer Florence Mills and ways that she resists narrow expectations of race and gender through her artistry. Through her analysis, she challenges

dominant constructions of race and gender and identifies ways that Mills expanded economic and cultural possibilities for African American women entertainers. Taking a popular culture analysis of representations of race and gender, Lindsey (2012, this issue) compares and contrasts dehumanizing images of Black girls in popular media with recent empowering representations of Black girls. She provides a deep textual analysis of two music videos: *I Love My Hair* which aired on Sesame Street and Willow Smith's *Whip My Hair*. Through this analysis, she debunks stereotypes of Black girls and identifies healthful and powerful possibilities in social and mass media for Black girls. The section ends with an examination of sexual scripts of Black women sexuality. In this study, French (2012, this issue) reports findings from two focus groups designed to explore the ways that Black girls negotiate these scripts as they navigate sexual coercion and sexual autonomy. She finds ways that Black girls challenge sexual stereotypes and try to discover their own sexual agency.

The second section relies on social science research to examine ways that Black women cope with daily racial and gendered oppression. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Huntt (2012, this issue) explore ways that Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions, defined as the "subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (p. #). Through this research, they identify ways that Black women engaged in resistance, collective, and self-protective coping strategies against daily gendered-racial oppression. Adding to the literature on Black women's mechanisms for coping, Mendenhall, Bowman, and Zhang (2012, this issue) offer a contextual analysis of intersecting realities and role-strain. In their study, Mendenhall and colleagues explore ways that Black women persevere in the presence of gendered-racial oppression by exploring the resilience of Black working mothers. Their results showed that strong religious beliefs and family connectedness served as protective factors for greater mental health and well-being among Black working mothers.

We end our special issue with a Black feminist theoretical model designed to reclaim power for Black girls and women. Pratt-Clarke's (2012, this issue) theory of Transdisciplinary Applied Social Justice offers a model that emphasizes transformation and praxis to examine the intersectional experiences between race, gender, and social class among African American girls and women.

Through this special issue, we decidedly focus on Black women's resistance and agency with the hope of highlighting the ways that Black girls and women attempt to successfully navigate a sociopolitical reality that places them at significant disadvantages economically, physically, educationally, and socially. It is our hope that, through this special issue we begin to identify helpful approaches in theory, inquiry, and practice pertaining to Black girls and women for future Black Studies scholarship.

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