

Colloquy

CENTERING BLACK WOMEN: A Black Feminist Critique of Mainstream Anthropology from the Margins of an HBCU

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A memory: It is the spring of 1999, and I enter Beverly Guy-Sheftall's "Feminist Theory" class at Spelman College for the first time. I'm a domestic exchange student for the semester at this Historically Black College for women, and this is the first women's studies class that I've had the opportunity to take. In Guy-Sheftall's class, I was introduced to a feminism that explicitly and unapologetically centered Black women. We read *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (Guy-Sheftall 1995) from cover to cover, as well as other texts mostly by Black women and other women of color. I learned about the history of Black women who had advanced feminist thought from the time of Mariah Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Claudia Jones. Given that this was my introduction to feminist theory, the often repeated assertion that feminism was for "white women" never occurred to me.

Prior to taking this class, I had been exposed to feminism by reading people like bell hooks (1982, 1989), Paula Giddings (1984), Audre Lorde (1983, 1984), and June Jordan (1981, 1992, 1998). Chances are that if I had taken my first feminist theory or women's studies class at New York University—a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) where I was enrolled an undergraduate student—it may

not have centered Black women and women of color in the same way. Although HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) are often seen as marginal institutions with fewer resources and higher teaching loads for faculty, one advantage of an HBCU for women, in particular, is that one can center Black women in a range of courses not explicitly about Black women. This is the case not just for women's studies classes, but for other disciplines as well. I argue that an HBCU for women offers a unique site that gives teachers the freedom to center Black women in anthropology in novel and exciting ways. These colleges and universities offer a space to think about citation praxis as a political act that can be invoked not just in scholarly writing but also in teaching, service, and student mentoring. In this essay, I will give specific examples of the kinds of texts that I teach by Black women authors within and beyond anthropology, and the pedagogical strategies that I engage to challenge students to re(write) anthropology from the margins. I will also elaborate on how the practice of citing Black women can prove effective in service and student mentoring. Ultimately, I argue that HBCUs can serve as a model for other types of institutions in terms of how we approach citational politics and challenge the exclusionary anthropological canon both in the classroom and beyond.

Nearly a decade after my domestic exchange semester at Spelman College, I returned to Spelman as a tenure-track faculty member in the Sociology and Anthropology Department. The department offers two majors: sociology and sociology and anthropology. It does not, however, offer a stand-alone anthropology major. The small size of the department, with only three anthropologists out of seven faculty members, has prevented us from being able to offer an anthropology major. That anthropology is combined with sociology at Spelman also proves indicative of a larger issue—the lack of anthropology programs at HBCUs. [Elgin Klugh and Angela Howell \(2014\)](#) point out that only 40 out of the 102 HBCUs in the country offer any anthropology courses at all. Moreover, with the disbanding of Howard University's program in 2013, only two institutions, Spelman College and Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, offer degrees in anthropology (combined with sociology). And only four institutions offer a minor in anthropology: Coppin State University, Florida A&M University, Morgan State University, and North Carolina A&T University. While the underrepresentation of anthropology programs at HBCUs is a persisting problem, I contend, along with my interlocutors in this Colloquy, that HBCUs and other Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) offer ideal sites to think about the politics of rewriting anthropology from marginalized spaces.

I try to bring the lessons that I learned from Guy-Sheftall's "Feminist Theory" course and from my citational praxis into my own teaching at Spelman College. When I design my course syllabi—whether I am teaching "Introduction to Anthropology," "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality," "Feminist Ethnography," "Sexual Economies," or "Race and Identity in Latin America"—I make sure to center scholarly work by Black women, women of color, and other authors with marginalized identities. So, even in an "Introduction to Anthropology" or "Ethnographic Methods" class, our students engage with work written by Black women authors. They are introduced to essays from [Irma McClaurin's \(2001\)](#) edited volume, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*. They read ethnographies like [Aimee Meredith Cox's \(2015\)](#) *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, [Savannah Shange's \(2019\)](#) *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*, and [Gloria Wekker's \(2006\)](#) *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. They read excerpts from [Zora Neale Hurston's \(1938\)](#) *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, articles on skin bleaching in Ghana by [Jemima Pierre \(2008\)](#), and on African diaspora dance and religions by [Yvonne Daniel \(2005\)](#). Thus, the students who take anthropology courses at Spelman get a very different perspective on the field than they would get at a PWI or later in a PhD program in anthropology. In our classrooms, we challenge the white male-dominated canon of anthropology, and propose a counter-canon in which Black women students can see themselves reflected.

This differs markedly from [Faye V. Harrison's \(1995\)](#) reflection on how her early anthropological training did not introduce her to Black anthropologists like Allison Davis and St. Clair Drake because they were "rendered invisible" within the anthropological canon. When our students participate in summer research programs or go on to pursue graduate degrees at PWIs, they often share with us their dismay at having to engage with an exclusionary, white male-dominated canon. Sometimes they take it for granted that Black women intellectuals are at the center of ethnography, social theory, and methodologies at Spelman, while they may be practically absent in much of their graduate training. As [Klugh and Howell \(2014, 6\)](#) point out, HBCUs are uniquely positioned "to give voice to a number of perspectives that would add texture to the anthropological canon" due to their history, student characteristics, and overall learning environments. Founded in 1881 by two Baptist missionaries from Massachusetts, Spelman College now has a student population of 2,097, with students hailing from forty-three states in the United States and thirteen foreign countries. With tuition at just over \$40,000 per

year, 89 percent of our students receive some form of financial aid, and 48 percent are eligible for Pell Grants.¹

The classroom, especially at an HBCU, is a “radical space of possibility” (hooks 1994, 12) where change, transformation, and growth can occur. It is also a critical site of anthropological knowledge production. As a Black feminist anthropologist, I can teach courses that recognize Black women’s “subjugated knowledges” as valuable sources of insight (McClaurin 2001). In “Introduction to Anthropology,” I have students write an auto-ethnography, a hallmark of Black feminist anthropology that values personal experience as an important source of knowledge. Our students often use auto-ethnography later when it comes time to write their senior theses. Moreover, our students often choose senior thesis topics coming from a deeply personal place, ones inspired by their personal experiences and political investments. For instance, we’ve had students write senior theses on the experiences of Ethiopian refugees, children of incarcerated parents, and children of undocumented African immigrants. These represent just a few of the topics that reflect the richness and complexity of what happens when you center Black women and Black feminist anthropology in teaching anthropology. The notion of scholar-activism and social justice-oriented scholarship is also emphasized at Spelman College, where students are encouraged to make a “choice to change the world.”

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (1984, xvii) contends that “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the body.” She goes on to argue that when feminist theory is produced by “privileged women who live at the center,” it “lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences” (hooks 1984, xviii). We can make a similar argument about anthropological theory when only produced by privileged people at mainstream institutions. As Kimberley D. McKinson (see this Colloquy) reminds us, we must remember that the margins are not just a space of lack or where minority-serving institutions are aspiring to become more like predominantly white institutions. Instead, as Klugh and Howell (2014, 6) argue, “fostering the development of anthropology at HBCUs should be seen as an integral part of a decolonizing agenda.” As I have argued elsewhere (Williams 2021), anthropology must urgently move away from the mainstream canon that excludes the groundbreaking work of Black women anthropologists. A. Lynn Bolles (2013) and Faye V. Harrison (1995) have written extensively about this topic. The special issue of *Transforming Anthropology* titled “Celebrating our Elders” (Beliso de Jesus 2021) as well as the 2021 special issue of *Feminist Anthropology* titled “#CiteBlackWomen” (Davis and

Mulla 2021) both include several important articles on the topic. For example, in “We Are Not Named: Black Women and the Politics of Citation in Anthropology,” Christen A. Smith and Dominique Garrett-Scott (2021, 19) argue that anthropology continues to relegate Black women “to the intellectual margins.” They contend that Black women have “been historically erased from the canon in anthropology despite conducting far-reaching ethnographic work and writing” (Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021, 19). Finally, they argue that “Citing Black women is a method for radically restructuring our field and making our epistemological world anew without the premise of inequality” (Smith and Garrett-Scott 2021, 19).²

Disrupting the anthropological canon is the norm at an institution like Spelman College. No pushback against it occurs because it is just seen as part of what the institution and its faculty do. The fact that the majority of our department faculty are Black feminists also translates into a supportive and creative space to do this kind of work. I would also argue that we must think more about interdisciplinarity in rewriting the anthropological canon. As we know, the anthropological canon includes several white male theorists from other fields as fundamental to anthropology, for example Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, and Karl Marx, to name just a few. We should do the same with non-anthropologist Black women and other women of color scholars as well. In my advanced honors elective, “Sexual Economies,” we read a book by Chi Adanna Mgbako (2016) called *To Live Freely: Sex Worker Activism in Africa*. Although Mgbako is a legal scholar rather than an anthropologist, her research involves documenting the activism of African sex workers across various countries. It is deeply ethnographic and makes a strong contribution to anthropology. In my first-year colloquium, “Defund the Police: Abolition and Black Feminisms,” I taught *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis (2011) and *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color* by Andrea Ritchie (2017). We must take seriously the intellectual production of Black women scholars beyond anthropology, and be attentive to the insights offered by this work. My students not only enjoyed reading and learning from these texts but they also considered them particularly relevant for their concerns with social justice. These texts also allowed them to envision themselves as future scholar-activists who could do similar groundbreaking research toward the improvement of society.

As a Black feminist anthropologist and member of the CiteBlackWomen Collective, I believe in the importance of engaging in the radical practice of citing Black women, not just in scholarly publications and teaching but also in service and student mentoring (Williams 2021). In terms of service, this can take the

form of urging authors to engage with the intellectual production of Black women scholars when reviewing manuscripts, or in bringing critical conversations in citational politics into conversations on the tenure and promotion committee or the faculty council. In terms of student mentoring, the engagement plays out in the texts we recommend to our students for their research, the network of scholars we help them tap into, and even the graduate programs we recommend. In much the same way that [Sara Ahmed \(2017\)](#) argues about the importance of “living a feminist life” in which all one’s actions are aligned with feminist principles, citational praxis is also something that must be lived, embraced, and advocated for in all areas of our professional lives. If we have a seat at the table, we have a duty and responsibility to bring marginalized voices into the room.

Near the end of our 2020 Raising Our Voices virtual roundtable, there were two questions posted that the participants did not have time to respond to. An audience member asked, “Will faculty of color be put in the position of doing additional labor to repair the curriculum?” Also, the moderator asked, “How can we make the margin more central in the life of anthropology?” I will offer some thoughts about those questions here. First, faculty of color should *not* be put in the position of doing additional labor to repair the curriculum. As scholars and academics, we must as part of our responsibilities read and familiarize ourselves with new scholarship. Second, I think that we can make the margin more central in the life of anthropology by ensuring adequate representation of faculty from HBCUs and MSIs on panels, at conferences, in collaborations, and on grants. Well-resourced, Research 1 (R1) institutions can invite HBCU faculty to collaborate on grant-funded projects, and they can create summer research programs for HBCU students to broaden the pipeline of underrepresented students pursuing PhDs in the field. Rewriting anthropology from the margins will entail thinking more about interdisciplinarity and centering the work of Black women, women of color, and other marginalized scholars.

ABSTRACT

Anthropology must urgently move away from the mainstream canon that excludes the groundbreaking work of Black women anthropologists. I argue that a Historically Black College for women offers a unique site in which one can center Black women in anthropology in novel ways. I offer specific examples of texts that I teach by Black women authors within and beyond anthropology, and the pedagogical strategies I use to challenge students to re(write) anthropology from the margins. [citation; feminist anthropology; HBCUs; canon]

NOTE

1. See the Spelman website, <https://www.spelman.edu/about-us/at-a-glance>.
2. See also the #CiteBlackWomen collection organized by Anne-Maria B. Makhulu and Christen A. Smith in *Cultural Anthropology* (2022).

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