Becoming Black Women: Intimate Stories and Intersectional Identities

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that intimate stories are an important resource for the achievement of intersectional identities. Drawing on in-depth interviews with black college students at two predominantly white universities, I examine the stories black college women tell about interracial relationships between black men and white women. I argue that interracial stories serve an array of social purposes that go well beyond black women's intimate lives themselves. Interracial stories draw on public beliefs about gender, sexuality and race to create a collective identity, imbue it with meaning, and socialize black women into common dispositions and practices. The transition to college makes race newly salient to black women; black women must coordinate raced gender identities with other black women across differences in backgrounds and dispositions. By learning and adopting interracial stories, black college women create alliances with other black women, draw boundaries against black men and white women, and craft black womanhood as strong and outspoken. Women's identity work is constrained, however, by the contradictions within and among gender, race, and class meanings, which make it difficult for them to enact identities that are at once strong and respectable, pushing black women to tie interracial stories to sexual restraint. I conclude by examining the implications of interracial stories for understanding black women's identities and the processes of intersectionality more broadly.

Keywords

Gender scholars have developed the concept of "intersectionality" to try to make sense of the ways people experience themselves simultaneously as members of multiple identity categories—not just as women or men, for example, but as black or white, middle class or poor women or men. Intersectional scholarship, however, has primarily been concerned with mapping distinct identity constellations (Shields 2008). This approach unseats "totalizing fictions" (Somers 1994) that assume homogeneity within social categories, but it is static, and does not explicate the social psychological processes by which people experience, negotiate, or enact intersectional identities (Choo and Ferree 2010; Shields 2008). Moreover, intersectional scholarship has not yet examined the ways in which category intersections may themselves create identity dilemmas.

In this article, I examine one process through which people create and manage intersectional identities: storytelling. I focus on one set of stories told by black college women at two predominantly white universities: stories about interracial relationships between black men and white women. In these stories, black college women claim that they are angry because black men "only" have relationships with white women. Other research also documents black women's objection to relationships between black men and white women. Feminist scholars argue that black women's anger about interracial relationships responds to their gender and racial disadvantages in heterosexual markets (Collins 2004; Childs 2005). I take a different vantage. I view their stories about interracial relationships as cultural tools used to negotiate concerns about community, belonging, and authenticity.

RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Most people view race and gender as biological categories, but sociologists understand them as social constructs, created and performed at both the macro and the micro levels. Historically, race, class, and gender categories have been imposed on people as a means of justifying unequal social arrangements (Collins 2004). At the same time, people actively produce and manipulate race, class, and gender meanings through everyday, repetitive interactions (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Identities thus emerge from negotiations between imposed and chosen meanings.

"Controlling images" are repetitive symbols that naturalize ideas about what racialized and gendered groups of people are like. Depicted as matriarchs, mammies, welfare mothers, and jezebels, controlling images of black women portray them as sexually other: either uncontrollably sexual or abnormally asexual and emasculating (Collins 1991; 2004). Controlling images control both by imposing *external* expectations on behavior and by creating *internal* expectations people use to evaluate their own identities. As Collins argues, "African-American women encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas that should provide meaning in our daily lives" (Collins 1991:93). Little is known, however, about how black women use controlling images to make meaning in their everyday lives. Here, I examine how black women use stories to create identities as black women, and how these stories rely on and negotiate controlling images of black women.

STORIES IN THE CREATION OF IDENTITIES

Tricia Rose writes that black women's stories about intimacy "are vital in helping black people rewrite widely held dehumanizing ideas about black people" and in exposing the ways racism, sexism, and classism structure black women's experiences of intimacy

(Rose 2003:9). In this perspective, stories "give voice" to people's real experiences. I take a different view of stories here, building on analyses of stories that treat them as both social products and socially productive (Polletta 2006).

Although people engage in "fictive storytelling"—spinning lies about themselves to manage impressions (Snow and Anderson 1987), most stories we tell are sincere—that is, we believe that the story we are telling is true. We often view sincere stories as revealing of people's "real" identities. But these stories are also performances that work to *create* identities (Somers 2004). We adapt stories to produce different impressions of ourselves for different audiences (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Stories—both about ourselves and about others—align people with groups, create boundaries between groups, and give meaning to group membership. The processes of learning and telling stories help people fit their biographies to those stories. For example, members of Alcoholics Anonymous adopt identities as "alcoholics" by learning and telling the AA story (Cain 1991). Such storytelling, in turn, transforms participants' emotions and experiences, facilitating a collective identity by creating a common set of dispositions and interpretations (Mason-Schrock 1996; Wilkins 2008a). Thus, the stories we tell shape both how we appear to others and how we think about who we are.

The literature on identities has tended to focus on people's agency in telling stories, but storytelling is not unfettered. Stories draw on local contingencies (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) and are constrained by institutional expectations. Institutions require people to fit their stories into an existing framework, disallowing other kinds of stories. Dunn (2000) found that women are only able to gain legal assistance against their stalkers if they are able to present themselves as victims. Premised on helplessness, the victim

story precludes them from telling alternative stories about fighting back. Thus, telling and privileging certain stories limits the range of available interpretations, positions, or experiences. Stories, however, can also be a source of change. New stories produce new institutional and cultural responses, forcing institutions to adapt to stories, rather than the other way around. Although neither rape nor child abuse were new experiences, they became legitimate grounds for remediation and sympathy, and generated institutional responses, after they became acceptable cultural stories (Plummer 1995).

Thus, stories are conservative and transformative, institutionalized and adaptive. They are a means of creating individual, authentic-feeling selves, and a way of connecting to a collectivity. In this way, stories bridge culture and institutional arrangements (Somers 1994). An investigation of stories thus has the potential to reconcile tensions between imposed and chosen identities.

In this article, I focus on the use of stories in everyday life to navigate and give meaning to intersectional identities that are both chosen and imposed, to suture gender, class, and race together, and to make that identity feel real. I argue that interracial stories are a form of storytelling used by participants to not only make sense of and navigate their intimate lives, but to negotiate race, class, and gender identities. Interracial stories create a collective identity, imbue it with meaning, and socialize black women into common dispositions and practices. Intimate stories enact, manage, and make meaningful black women's identities by drawing on, transforming, and colluding with existing cultural ideas about gender and classed race. The stories black college women tell about interracial relationships are not just about intimacy, but are a cultural vehicle through which they imagine and manipulate tensions between individuality and collective notions

of authenticity, and through which they craft, communicate, and enact solutions to the everyday identity dilemmas they encounter in the context of the university.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

This study is part of a larger project aimed at investigating the lives of black-identified students. The study includes 43 in-depth open ended, life history interviews with black or African-American identified undergraduate students. This article focuses on the 25 women. As I discuss more below, white women—the author and a research assistant— conducted the interviews. Participants attended one of two large, predominantly white public universities that I call Midwestern (8) and Western (17). Midwestern's population of black students (5.4%) is more substantial than Western's (1.4%). The schools are in different regions: a Midwestern state in which blacks are the most visible minority group at 11.6% of the population, and an interior West state in which Mexicans are the most visible minority group, with blacks comprising 4% of the population.

I used a range of recruitment strategies to identify students who occupied different university social spaces and diverse social networks. I used initial interviews and informal conversations to map the terrain of black students, and combined multiple snowball samples with targeted recruiting. The sample here contains members of black organizations and their discontents, athletes and non-athletes, engineering and social science majors, Greeks, non-Greeks and members of predominantly white fraternities or sororities. Most participants identified themselves as "middle class," but descriptive details of their families and neighborhoods indicated a broader range of economic backgrounds. Most participants grew up in predominantly white communities and/or attended predominantly white schools prior to university.

I conducted most of the 1 to 3 hour interviews while one research assistant conducted three. The initial research questions were broad: How do black students experience the transition to college?; How do racial identities change in college?; How does gender affect these processes? To assess these questions, interviews covered a set of open-ended topics, including schooling, friendship, and dating both before and after the transition to college, but were largely unstructured conversations, accommodating emerging themes and participants' concerns. We sometimes probed for issues of race, but often did not, as it was already central to how participants organized their accounts. In most interviews, we did not ask specifically about interracial relationships. Instead, participants introduced the topic themselves, bringing up interracial relationships when discussing their interactions with other black students at the university, their dating experiences, experiences with campus organizations, and their ideas about what it means to be a black university man or woman. The women in this study told us stories about interracial relationships to explain their experiences as black college women—both to us and to themselves—, and to create impressions about what it means to be a black woman.

Our intent was not to seek participants' "real" stories. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argue that we should treat the interview not as an opportunity to hear the "truth" of speakers' lives, but as a site in which people actively construct (and deconstruct) stories, and use these stories to create situational selves. Interviews provided an occasion to view how black college women create desirable versions of themselves for us as white women. They thus allowed us to see how participants use particular stories in interaction with a sympathetic white, same-gender audience, to make biographical claims, to link themselves to other groups, and to create symbolic boundaries. To understand "the

functions stories serve in different situations" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:xvi), I used an inductive analytic strategy, attending not just to the content of the stories women tell but when and why they told them. I did not initially divide the data by gender, but instead coded themes across the data set. After gender emerged as a salient analytic category, I analyzed the data on the men and women simultaneously, treating them as constant comparative categories. This article focuses on the interviews with the women, but uses the interviews with the men and participant-observation at formal and informal campus events to contextualize and explicate the women's accounts. These other sources of data allowed me to view women's storytelling outside of the interview context; participant-observation provided me with opportunities to observe women telling interracial stories to other audiences and in collaboration with other black women, while men's interviews yielded their own versions of, and responses to, women's stories.

In thinking of women's talk about interracial relationships as stories, I do not mean that participants always provided an extended account of interracial relationships within the interview setting. Indeed, they rarely did, as the narrative environment was oriented toward other topics. People do not have to tell an entire story to be engaged in storytelling, but can instead use talk to reference stories that exist outside of the interview context, as the women frequently did here (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). In these interviews, women used interracial stories to explain other components of their experiences, not for the sake of telling "the interracial relationship story" itself. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995:xvi) argue, "storytellers do not just tell stories, they do things with them." In the analysis below, I examine the ways black women use interracial

stories as resources used to create and manage collective identities in the context of college.

BECOMING BLACK: RACE AND CLASS IN THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Universities are important spaces for racial redefinition. College exposes students to classes, organizations, and speakers that politicize and historicize their race (and gender) identities, often for the first time (Shiao and Tuan 2008; Winddance Twine 1996). Here, I focus on the peer dynamics that led black women to redefine their racial identities and on the dilemmas entailed in the processes of redefinition. Interracial stories are central to these processes, providing a way to create collective raced gender identities despite significant individual differences.

For most of the women in this study, race was not salient before coming to college. It is not that they did not *know* they were racialized as black, but they thought of themselves as different from other black people, and more like their middle class non-black (usually white) peers. Fourteen women attended predominantly white schools as residents of the affluent white neighborhoods that housed their schools, rather than as "deseg"[regation] students from nearby cities. They participated in extracurricular activities with their non-black peers, such as violin, tennis, and chess club, and had a few close friends, none of whom were black. Black peers saw them as different from them, labeling things like: "The good black girl," "Oreo," "whitewashed," and "the white girl." Even the women who attended more racially diverse schools were often separated (by tracked classes, interests, and middle- class resources) from other black students, and reported few black friends.

Most women in this study expected a smooth transition into college, anticipating that they would continue to have primarily white friends as they had in high school. They were shocked by the racism they encountered in the university. Aisha says, "The level of ignorance [on the part of white students] was way, way higher than I ever expected." Repeated hostile encounters with white students pushed women to think about themselves, newly, as black and to seek out other black students. Janae recalls that high school was "fine," but "Now [at Western] it's like, wow, I'm black. I really know I'm black now and I have to deal with every ignorant person asking me a question." Ashley laughs, "I told my friend if you had told me that all my friends would be black I never would have believed it." Because of the visibility of racism in their daily experiences, many women began to think of themselves as *black* for the first time. Women were concerned, however, that they continue to be seen as *middle class*. Because white students assumed all black students were poor, black women worked to differentiate themselves from "ghetto" stereotypes. Thus, the context of predominantly white universities compelled them to create and manage identities as black, middle class women.

Because the identity expectations associated with black middle class womanhood were, in many ways, new to these women, they often turned to other black women for models of gendered racial authenticity. For many, however, connecting with other black women was neither easy nor straightforward. Creating a collective black middle class womanhood required them to bridge significant differences in residential and regional backgrounds, racial competencies, and class resources. Because of these differences, many were uncomfortable with black student organizations and did not participate in

them (see also Smith and Moore 2000). Thus, rather than having natural alliances with other black students, as outsiders commonly assume, they worked to create a collective sense of black womanhood across internal differences. Although they drew on a range of cultural symbols to coordinate their identities, interracial stories provided an important resource through which black women created connections to each other. By telling interracial stories, black women "proved" that they are *authentic* black women, while simultaneously learning what this identity means.

CLAIMING IDENTITIES THROUGH INTERRACIAL STORIES

Identity creation requires two central tasks. First, people make claims about who belongs (and who doesn't) in the group. Second, groups make claims about what group members are *like*. The black college women achieve these tasks by telling a particular set of stories about interracial relationships. Desta summarizes, "There's a lot of tension among like black men and black women on this campus [because of] the idea that black men only talk to [interested in] white girls." In these stories, black men are only interested in white women because, in Mei's words, "Black guys can get white pussy really easily," and black women are angry about this pattern because black men's preoccupation with "easy" white women leaves black women with no one to date.

While black women's anger about interracial relationships is a key element in this story, many women in this study were *not* angry about interracial relationships before they came to college. In high school, Sasha thought interracial relationships were racially progressive, not upsetting. After she came to the university, she began to hear interracial stories from other black women. From these stories, she learned that she *should* be angry about interracial relationships. As she explains, after spending time with other black

women, and frequently hearing them angrily denounce relationships between black men and white women, she changed her feelings about these relationships. She also became "angry." As Sasha adjusted to campus life, she too started to tell the interracial story, began to pay attention to the black man-white woman couples she saw on campus, and interpreted her heightened observations as proof of the story. Anna, a Midwestern student from the suburbs, also explains: "I never noticed it [interracial relationships] until I came up here . . . I think since I came to [college], like you hear a lot about black women getting upset about black men dating white women." Black women's college experiences—encountering new ways of viewing interracial relationships from peers and in classes, the heightened visibility of black students' intimate choices (Ray and Rosow 2009), and the importance of intimate relationships to women's gender identities (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009)—all may contribute to their reinterpretation of interracial relationships. But it is their everyday interactions with black women peers that reinforce the importance of interracial relationships to the experience of black womanhood. Mina explains:

> Just when you're sitting and talking, you might see somebody pass and you'll be like—somebody might say a comment. "Oh, I didn't know he was talking to her." Or they'll just make the assumption that they have sex, and people will just get carried away. And that's just gossiping.

Interactions with other black women solidify women's reinterpretations of interracial relationships, and teach them to look for and appraise black man-white woman couples; these processes, in turn, fuel their negative feelings about them.

As women begin to tell interracial stories themselves, they claim their place as insiders in the group. Storytelling links them to other black women and shows others that they "get" what it means to be a black (college) woman. As they adopt and tell the stories, they see themselves as like other black women, and different from white women and black men.

NEGOTIATING MEANING THROUGH INTERRACIAL STORIES

By telling interracial stories, black women also create and manage collective ideas about what black women are *like*. Interracial stories draw on, and manipulate, a cultural stereotype of black women as strong, independent, and angry.

Performing Independence

By repeatedly confronting black men about interracial relationships, black women "talk back" to black men, showing them that black women are strong and independent. Even though black women do not all participate in them, these confrontations create the impression that *all* black women are outspoken, angry, and independent. Desta explains that she and Yemisi "would always ask, I guess you could say interrogate, these black dudes on campus. Like ask them: why is it that you only date white girls?" These confrontations, she confesses, do not create mutual understanding between black women and men, but instead reinforce collective ideas about each group: "And then [the men would] be like, man, that's why I don't talk to you black girls, because you are crazy. And that's what we'd be deemed: we'd be deemed crazy . . . basically." Such confrontations allow individual black women to "speak their minds" about an issue that makes them angry; at the same time, they contribute to commonsense ideas about what

"all" black (college) women are like. Black men, in response, describe black women as all having "attitudes." These confrontations are routine, taking place not just in private settings but also in community forums and classrooms.

The idea that all black women are always strong and outspoken is an illusion, however. Not all black women feel comfortable "speaking their minds." Grace confesses, "I'm not comfortable challenging people; I always think I don't have a right to say anything." And even the most outspoken women do not always want to speak out. Brenda laments the personal costs of the idea that black women are always strong: "We'd just always have to be these very strong, non-emotional, almost militant women all the time, all the damn time. And it got tirin', it got frustratin.'" Interracial stories hide these discrepancies between lived experiences and cultural expectations by creating the *impression* that black women are always strong.

Boundary Work

It is not just the act of telling the interracial story that creates the idea that black women are strong, it is also the content of the stories. In interracial stories, black men date white women because they are "easy," both in the sense that they are willing to have sex and in the sense that they are non-confrontational. In these stories, not only are white women weak for being willing to be used by black men, but black men are also weak for going after the "easy" white women who do not "challenge" them. Brenda's reaction to interracial couples is illustrative. She says:

> I have yet to really meet a white woman who has the backbone of a black woman. Again, I'm bein' very general. Or in my experience, I'll say in my experiences. She can front . . . and try to play that role, but not for real. She's a fuckin'

pushover. . . . And I feel like, "Man, you bitch-ass. You can't handle somebody with a motherfuckin' [backbone]." . . . Too, I think that he doesn't have a backbone. He just wants fuckin'. He just wants to ball her. He doesn't want anybody to challenge him.

By expressing disgust (and sometimes pity) for the behavior of white women and black men, black women convey their own distinctive attributes and values as strong, independent people. Thus, both the act of telling interracial stories and the content of the stories themselves link black college women to an idea of black womanhood as strong, outspoken, and independent, sustaining the idea that these characteristics are inherent to black women even when individual black college women do not embody them.

INDEPENDENCE, CLASS, AND IDENTITY CONTRADICTIONS

Black women want to see themselves as strong and independent both because they value these characteristics and because they believe that these qualities are essential to what it means to be a real black woman. But being strong and independent has costs as well, especially for black college women who hope to be recognized as middle class rather than "ghetto." Being independent contradicts the idea that middle class women are supposed to seek romantic relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Race heightens this problem for middle class black women because the problems of the black community are often blamed on black women and their presumed failure to sustain relationships with black men (Collins 2004). Moreover, stereotypes of angry black women often cause other students to perceive that they are *always* angry about everything, as several women, like Janae, noted wryly: "I slowly but surely became the outcast, that black bitch, you know. .

. . And you know it just so happens that because I'm black, I'm the mean black girl."

Thus, while women may value independence, they also know it can be used against them.

Even though their interracial storytelling is one of the reasons people see them as independent, black women cleverly use interracial stories, at the same time, to manage some of these problems. First, by telling interracial stories, black women put the responsibility for their romantic independence back on black men. They imply that they would be happily coupled with black men if black men were not so busy chasing white women. Tiffany contends, "I've talked to a lot of people, and a lot of females that are black here, and it's just like, it's a waste of time to try to approach a black guy here, because they're not really about having an actual relationship." Women thus attribute their independence to black men's behavior, not their own. Second, black women use interracial stories to prove their commitment to romantic love, expressing disgust with the casual sexuality they associate with interracial relationships between black men and white women. Stephanie says: "You can kind of go, you people [interracial relationship] aren't really together. You're just like fucking." Lauren is clear: black men, she says, want "easy girls, and I'm not that. I'm not that at all. I'm totally the opposite." By condemning "sex" relationships, black women distance themselves from casual sexuality and suggest that they are holding out for real love.

Rather than claiming independence predicated on sexual freedom, these stories invest independence with moral and cultural worth by tying it to heterosexual respectability. This strategy manages some of the potential costs of independence but at the expense of sexual agency. Furthermore, it ironically undermines black women's claims to independence by binding women to a romantic strategy predicated on

relationships. Thus, black women use interracial stories in creative ways to manipulate tensions in their identities, but the stories themselves are limited by the different, contradictory concerns they face at the intersection of race, gender, and class expectations.

DISCUSSION: INTIMATE STORIES AND IDENTITY DILEMMAS

Interracial stories take as their subject black women's concern over their intimate possibilities on predominantly white university campuses. In treating interracial relationships as a set of stories, I have bracketed these concerns, focusing instead on the broader social purposes of interracial storytelling. At the same time, the stories themselves *create* those concerns. As we have seen, women report not having been upset about interracial relationships until they came to college and learned to attach new meaning to those relationships. To be sure, black college women face much more severely limited intimate choices than do other college students, and they make their intimate choices in the context of sexual stereotypes that increase the risks attached to all women's sexual behavior. But these are not their only, or even their primary, concerns. In the context of heightened racial identity awareness, women use the assumption of a shared experience to create common ground as black women across an array of real differences. Here, interracial stories are a means through which black women claim membership in a gendered and classed racial group, and define what it means to be a member of that group.

Interracial stories, like other stories about intimacy, do not emerge only out of sexual concerns, but out of a broader array of identity dilemmas. Focusing only on the explicit intimate content of interracial storytelling misapprehends the range of concerns at

stake in intimate storytelling. Black women are concerned not just with their romantic prospects but also with creating meaningful friendships, seeing themselves as *real* black women, defending themselves against racist interactions and "ghetto" stereotypes, and making it through college.

Although intimate stories are not just about sex, the use of stories about intimacy to articulate broader gender and racial concerns limits their transformative potential. First, stories about intimate relationships focus attention on close relationships of power, and not the broader power structures in which those relationships are forged. Interracial stories both emphasize and construct black women's gendered interests vis a vis black men and, to a lesser extent, white women. White men, and their role in shaping hierarchies of power and desirability, are largely absent. Thus, by telling stories that identify intimacy as a key problem for black students, and interracial intimacy as black women's central concern, these stories divert attention from institutional racism, and from white men's position of power in gendered racial hierarchies. This use of intimate stories, focuses, importantly, on the gendered allocation of intra-racial power, but to the exclusion (or minimization) of inter-racial power, especially as it is manifested between white *men* and black women.

Second, by coordinating gendered racial identities around intimate concerns, and by linking these concerns to gendered racial authenticity, intimate stories maintain the centrality of intimacy to gendered racial identities. Interracial stories sustain the idea that heterosexual intimacy is a key mechanism of community, social justice, and racial authenticity. They thus make it difficult to imagine ways to create racial community through other kinds of social ties, or in ways that are inclusive of cross-racial intimacies.

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gender identity dilemmas in the transition to college.

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Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Participants	Social class	Racial identity	University	Year in college
Aisha*	Middle	Black	Western	First
Anna*	Upper middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Ashley*	Upper middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Brandi*	Working	Black	Midwestern	Junior
Brenda*	Working	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Charis	Working	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Desta*	Middle	Black	Western	Senior
Ella	Upper middle	Biracial	Western	Senior
Grace*	Upper middle	Black	Western	Senior
Janae*	Middle	Black	Western	Sophomore
Kayla*	Upper middle	Biracial	Western	Senior
Kendra*	Poor to middle	Black	Western	Junior
Kiara	Middle	Black	Western	Sophomore
Lauren*	Working	Black	Western	Sophomore
Madison*	Working	Biracial	Western	Junior
Mei*	Middle	Black	Western	Junior
Mina*	Middle	Black	Western	Sophomore
Naomi	Middle	Biracial	Western	Recent graduate
Nikki	Middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Renee	Middle	Black	Midwestern	Junior
Samantha*	Elite	Biracial	Western	Senior
Sasha*	Upper middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Stephanie*	Upper middle	Black	Western	Junior

Tiffany*	Working	Black	Western	Sophomore
Yemisi*	Working	Black	Western	Senior

* Quoted in article.

Becoming Black Women