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### I'm Every Woman: Advancing the Intersectional Leadership of Black Women School Leaders as Anti-Racist Praxis

April L. Peters

University of Houston, [apetersh@central.uh.edu](mailto:apetersh@central.uh.edu)

Angel Miles Nash

Chapman University, [milesnash@chapman.edu](mailto:milesnash@chapman.edu)

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## I'm Every Woman: Advancing the Intersectional Leadership of Black Women School Leaders as Anti-Racist Praxis

### Comments

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I'm Every Woman: Advancing the Intersectional Leadership of  
Black Women School Leaders as Anti-Racist Praxis

## Abstract

The rallying, clarion call to #SayHerName has prompted the United States to intentionally include the lives, voices, struggles, and contributions of Black women and countless others of her ilk who have suffered and strived in the midst of anti-Black racism. To advance a leadership framework that is rooted in the historicity of brilliance embodied in Black women's educational leadership, and their proclivity for resisting oppression, we expand on intersectional leadership (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020). We develop this expansion along three dimensions of research centering Black women's leadership: the historical foundation of Black women's leadership in schools and communities, the epistemological basis of Black women's racialized and gendered experiences, and the ontological characterization of Black women's expertise in resisting anti-Black racism in educational settings. We conclude with a four tenet articulation detailing how *intersectional leadership: (a) is explicitly anti-racist; (b) is explicitly anti-sexist; (c) explicitly acknowledges the multiplicative influences of marginalization centering race and gender, and across planes of identity; and (d) explicitly leverages authority to serve and protect historically underserved communities.*

**Keywords:** intersectional leadership, intersectionality, Black women educational leaders

The rallying, clarion call to #SayHerName has prompted the United States to intentionally include the lives, voices, struggles, and contributions of Black women who have suffered and strived in the midst of anti-Black racism and oppression. While the Coronavirus pandemic and the intensified killings and brutality against Black men have created unique space for national conversations about racism and inequities, America must still reckon with the intersectionality of anti-Blackness. The murder of Breonna Taylor and countless other Black women, and the resultant judicial unresponsiveness, illumine the ways Black women's violent experiences of systemic racism are also intersected by sexism.

Black women school leaders have created spaces to challenge white, hegemonic, racist structures while acknowledging that their existence in leadership is an act of resistance (Alston, 2005, Dillard, 2000; McCluskey, 1997). Rooted in Black women's educational leadership, this conceptual paper examines their unique contributions and coalesces themes found in literature to expand the intersectional leadership framework (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020). We develop this expansion along three dimensions of research centering Black women's leadership: the historical foundation of Black women's leadership in education, the epistemological basis of Black women's racialized and gendered experiences, and the ontological characterization of Black women's expertise in resisting anti-Black racism in educational settings.

Privileging a conceptual exploration of educational leadership praxis endeavoring to eradicate codified inequities and embedded anti-Blackness in school settings, we advance the intersectional leadership framework, intended for use in both research and practice-based spaces, by acknowledging its roots and motivations grounded in the work of our foremothers in the field. To ground this paper and the resulting tenets put forth, we first discuss the historicity of Black women's educational leadership, beginning with research that examines the antebellum

experiences of anti-Blackness that laid the foundation for Black women's entry into the profession.

Next, we analyze the theoretical research on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and apply this framework to research on Black women school leaders. Recent scholarship examines Black women educational leaders' experiences of intersectionality (Aaron, 2020; Agosto & Roland, 2018; Collins, 2016; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Agosto and Roland (2018) define intersectionality as a "tool researchers can engage analytically and dispositionally in examinations of interlocking educational injustices" (p. 259). Intersectionality acknowledges that Black women's racialized experiences of anti-Blackness are complicated by gender. This theoretical treatment of race and gender in analyses of Black women's leadership extends a nuanced understanding of anti-Black racism enacted in school settings.

Finally, we advance a framework of intersectional leadership that acknowledges leaders' responsibility to confront anti-Black racism and systemic oppression. Our advancement is offered by way of four tenets that articulate intersectional leadership's distinct characteristics, which can guide researchers and practitioners through the process of understanding and developing leadership practices that intentionally progress the field towards anti-Black racism.

### **The Historical Foundation of Black Women's Leadership in Education**

Black women have long been instrumental participants in educating of Black communities. The history of Black women in education post-slavery is highlighted by engagement in activism, punctuated by violence, and often characterized by community commitment. Black women's collective historical journeys in education are characterized by disenfranchisement and exclusion, risk and achievement. They have traversed paths marked by experiences of physical, social, and psychological violence, identification of opportunity, and a

commitment to activism. This brief discussion examines Black women's experiences in education and educational leadership from the post-Civil War period forward.

The challenges endured when formal legislation made it illegal for enslaved Africans to be taught or to learn to read or write did not end with the abolition of slavery (Anderson, 1988). Despite these challenges, emancipated Blacks had a "self-reliance and deep-seated desire to control and sustain schools for themselves and their children" (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). However, Blacks residing in the North and the South of the United States experienced disenfranchisement from the educational system. Free Blacks infrequently received structured, formal education (Peters, 2019). In the South, Blacks were not teachers or administrators until the first part of the 20th century. Their counterparts in the North were allowed to attend integrated Sabbath and public schools (Collier-Thomas, 1982).

Following the Civil War, Black women had limited opportunities to learn and were largely excluded from the educational profession. Because of the intersection of race and gender for Black women, these experiences were necessarily different from their Black male and white female counterparts. Collier-Thomas (1982) detailed

Historically, Black women have shared with Black men the discrimination and deprivation that characterized their sojourn from slavery to freedom. They share with white women some legal prescriptions that have limited their access to public institutions. However, despite the common problems, their historical experiences in every area of American life have been in very specific ways different from that of Black males and white females (p. 174).

### **Education and Black Women Post-slavery**

Research informs that educating Black women was often violent and dangerous (Kerber, 1983; McCluskey, 1997; Shakeshaft, 1999; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). As a result of this, after the Civil War, Black women operated and/or attended clandestine schools because Blacks were forbidden from attending schools with white children (Jones & Montenegro, 1983). It is these

pursuits that underscore the resilience and persistence of Black women and the danger inherent in pursuit of education. Towards the end of the 1870s, many Black girls and women were targets of hate crimes and many Black schools were destroyed (Null, 1989; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, many Black schools lost funding and were forced to close, and segregation became law (Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

In some instances, abolitionists or Quakers established schools to train Black girls to become teachers. Scholars note several examples of the violence threatened or carried out upon Black women who attempted to educate themselves, and the white teachers and abolitionists who assisted in teaching them (Clayton, 1971; Shakeshaft, 1999; Small & Small, 1944). A well-known example is Quaker educator, Prudence Crandall. Crandall established what is thought to be the first school to educate Black women and girls. Crandall was arrested in Connecticut in 1833, for refusing to close the school she opened to educate Black girls. In addition to regular legal harassment, the Black women students were regularly targeted by the community members. The local shop owners refused to sell them food, manure was dumped in the drinking well, the building (Crandall's residence, which also boarded the Black women students) was set on fire on at least two occasions, windows were regularly broken and eggs were thrown at the building (Clayton, 1971; Shakeshaft, 1999; Small & Small, 1944). In spite of the collective effects of all of these threatening events, the reports of the occurrences largely focus on the consequences on Crandall, rather than the students to whom these assaults were also directed. Further, Ms. Crandall received monthly reparations after her school was closed and she moved away. This perpetuates a double violence against the young women who risked their safety to attend this school, yet received nothing, including the opportunity to complete their education, as the school closed less than two years after opening.

Another Quaker educator, Myrtilla Miner, opened a school on December 3, 1851 in a rented room in the nation's capital (Kerber, 1983; Null, 1989; Shakeshaft, 1999). Despite articulated support from the mayor, Walter Lenox, he did not intervene when an unidentified lawyer harassed her pupils in hopes of closing the school. Although the school was attacked many times, it operated for a decade (Shakeshaft, 1999). Miner established the school in Washington, D.C., because "she believed the nation's capital should have a model school for free Black children" (Kerber, 1983, p. 16).

Professional opportunities were limited for Black men and women alike. This frequently meant competition for the same limited jobs. As a result, Black men predominated teaching and preaching professions until the 1890s (Collier-Thomas, 1982). Educated Black women had a few options for teaching including the possibility to "seek a position in urban public institutions...teach in the developing Black normal schools; set up their own schools; or teach in the rural south" (p. 176). Often, Black women took it upon themselves to establish or serve in schools to train Black girls to become teachers. Many of these women were able to attend college and then decided to dedicate their lives to educating Black people. Among these notable Black women educators are Charlotte Forten Grimke, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Georgianna Simpson, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Janie Porter Barrett, and Lucy Craft Laney. This was an elite, small group of women who: (a) were highly educated and served as teachers and eventually school leaders;(b) were raised in a religious tradition that often facilitated their entry into the profession; (c) shared mutual acquaintanceships with abolitionists; and (d) frequently shared membership in activist organizations, such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) (Griggs et al., 1934; Harley, 1982; McCluskey, 1997). What these women accomplished at this time in American history is particularly noteworthy. As has been

mentioned, “the era in which these women launched their careers was marked by virulent and violent racism against Black people” (McCluskey, 1997, p. 404). For Black women, this racism was also compounded by sexism and the additional violence in the lack of solidarity with white women who excluded Black women from their organizations. Against this backdrop, Black women activists established and participated in organizations whose goals were the uplift of the Black community, such as the NACW, established in 1896. For educated Black women leaders, “their womanist consciousness required no prioritizing of oppression and allowed them to use their schools to link race and gender work...under a single banner of reformist activism” (McCluskey, 1997, p. 405).

Lucy Craft Laney is credited with being the first Black woman to establish a school to educate Black children in Georgia in 1886 (McCluskey, 1997). Enslaved at birth, Ms. Laney was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Her leadership trajectory is one of activism facilitated by her religious beliefs. Laney began her school, which eventually became known as the Haines Institute, with five students. By the second year, the school enrolled 234 students. Eventually the school grew to an enrollment of more than 800 students. Haines Institute received support from a few individual Presbyterian donors (one of whom is the namesake of the school) and the Freedman’s Bureau (Griggs et al, 1934). Laney was strongly influential in the Augusta community, which housed Haines Institute. Notably, Haines Institute had a number of offerings unique to schools that served Black children at that time. For instance, Laney implemented the first nursing program to train Black women in the state of Georgia. Interestingly, Principal Laney also introduced a kindergarten program to meet early education needs as well. Laney’s pioneering success in educating Black students and her service to the community were

guideposts for other Black women educators who trained with Laney and then became leaders and educators of Black children and activists in Black communities.

### **Early Opportunities to Enter the Profession**

During the postbellum period, there were few options for Black women in the South to pursue a career in education and Black women had few opportunities to receive formal training to enter the profession (Collier-Thomas, 1982). Even when Black women were educated and professionally trained, despite their field of expertise, sexism and racism often limited their opportunities within the field of education (Harley, 1982). By 1910, the majority of Black teachers were women (Harley, 1982; Randolph, 2009). Teaching was an appealing profession to Black women for several reasons: (a) As teaching was seen as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities, it was deemed a respectable profession; (b) Teaching was one of few occupations where educated Black women could engage in job duties that matched their professional training; (c) salaries placed Blacks in the middle class; and (d) teaching afforded a means of social capital and prestige within the Black community (Harley, 1982, p. 256).

Beyond the clandestine and individual schools established by sole operators in the rural South, several foundations were established to provide financial support to create schools for Black children (Alston, 2005; Anderson, 1988). Local school boards often controlled the funding distributed to schools, and white schools received more funding than those serving Black students (Krause, 2003). It must be noted that in spite of these funding sources, Black communities contributed the lion's share of the funding (via cash, land, and in kind services) to establish their schools (Anderson, 1988).

In addition to a monetary endowment, the Anna Jeanes Supervising Teachers program provided a means for southern Black women educators to teach and lead in schools serving

Black children in the early decades of the 20th century. The purpose of this program went beyond the schoolhouse walls, and extended into the service of Black communities (Jones, 1937; Kriesman, 2017). Alston (2005) described the Jeanes' Supervisors, "They were college educated, predominately Black females who were sent into southern states, in largely rural areas, to assist in improving educational conditions" (p. 679). The Jeanes Supervisors' role within the school was that of master teacher and leader (Alston, 2005; Kriesman, 2017). Their roles were complex and diffused. "Like modern-day superintendents, the Jeanes Supervisor served as negotiator, crisis handler, resource allocation specialist, disseminator of information, staff developer, and personnel specialist" (Alston, 2005, p. 679). Similar to the prevalence of Black educators, desegregation facilitated the decline of Jeanes Supervisors.

### ***Black Women's Educational Leadership as Activist Praxis***

During the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Black teachers believed that they had a personal responsibility to the educational success of their communities, believing that education was a primary and accessible method of social progress (King, 1993). Much like the Black church, the school was a pillar of the Black community (Fairclough, 2000; Milner & Howard, 2004). Black leadership was not limited to the school building. Randolph (2009) stated, "Leadership always has had to attend to the context in which Black people lived outside of the schoolhouse doors" (p. 20).

Black women educators have long engaged in community engagement and activism as an extension of their professional commitments. In this way, Black women educators have used their positions as a means to engage in professional praxis. It can be argued that Black women leaders have always been purpose-driven in community activism as they have (a) established schools in the early days post-Civil War to teach communities to read and write (Griggs et al,

1934; Gyant, 1996; Harley, 1982; McCluskey, 1997); (b) lead schools and facilitated community uplift as Jeanes Supervisors in the early 1900s (Alston, 2005); (c) fought for professional advancement in education during the Civil Rights Movement (Loder, 2005); and (d) continued to engage in these efforts to improve educational opportunities for Black students and their communities. Over the course of history, efforts to improve quality of life for the Black community, via education, housing, health, and the right to vote, are credited to Black women educators who “organized demonstrations, mass meetings, workshops, and political campaigns centered around these areas” (Gyant, 1996, p. 639).

Even in the context of segregation, teachers led the efforts in improving schools in the South by “institution building” (Fairclough, 2004). In many ways, Black women educators continued their efforts at community engagement and activism, remaining the “backbone of the Black middle class” by engaging in organizations and belonging to professional associations, such as teacher unions (Fairclough, 2004). Teachers used their positions to create extracurricular activities and academic activities to encourage students to be critical thinkers, protest, and be involved in activism, thus making the Civil Rights Movement possible (Baker, 2011). The next section explores the impact of desegregation on Black women in educational leadership.

### **Black Women Educators, Brown, and Beyond**

Despite racism codified in Jim Crow laws, many Black women “became a major force in the segregated education system,” especially in the South towards the last decade of the 19th century since most teachers in Black schools were women (Collier-Thomas, 1982; Fairclough, 2000, 2004). However, the consequences of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the attempts at school desegregation essentially annihilated the population of Black teachers and administrators who served in Black schools (Tillman, 2004). *Brown* decimated Black schools

and fired, demoted, or displaced Black educators (Peters, 2019; Siddle Walker, 2000; Tillman, 2004). This sent Black children into unwelcoming schools where they experienced racial and physical violence with no access to adults who looked like them and cared for them. As a result, “former teachers have often questioned whether the benefits of Brown outweighed its costs” (Fairclough, 2004, p. 44).

In spite of the Brown legislation which outlawed racial segregation in schools, many schools have become resegregated. Further, the deleterious effects of Brown remain obvious. Although the majority of school-aged students are children of color, the majority (80%) of teachers and principals are white (National Center of Education Statistics, 2019). Thus, schools are not only segregated by student overall enrollment or academic program (i.e., gifted, special education, AP/IB), but they are most obviously racially segregated in the teacher and administrator ranks. Research suggests that Black (and all) children benefit greatly from attending schools with Black teachers and administrators (Foster, 2009; Maylor, 2009; Milner & Howard, 2004). There is a body of research that examines the experiences and leadership practices of Black women principals (Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 2019; Miles Nash & Peters, 2020; Peters, 2012; Reed & Evans, 2008; Sernak, 2004). This research amplifies Black women’s approaches to leadership including: an ethic of care, social activism, and spirituality (Alston, 2005; Bass, 2012; Peters, 2012; Reed & Evans, 2008). The research also illuminates the ways in which intersectionality permeates the lived experiences of Black women leaders (Aaron, 2020, Agosto & Roland, 2018; Horsford & Tillman, 2012).

### **Epistemological Perspectives of Black Women in School Leadership**

A body of research investigates the experiences of Black women school leaders through a variety of epistemological lenses (Bass, 2012; Dillard, 1995; Horsford, 2012; Peters, 2012, 2019;

Reed, 2012). Such a perspective is important because “the suppression of the ideas of African American women in research and epistemological knowledge construction remains a force that undermines the economic, political, and social revitalization within a Black woman’s world” (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 341). We explicate these lenses and unpack this research to understand the ways in which Black women school leaders have both experienced racism and engaged in anti-racist leadership praxis. It is important to note this body of research in itself is an act of resistance to the Eurocentric, masculine knowledge validation process that renders Black women and research about Black women invisible and voiceless (Collins, 1989, p. 745). This is noted not only by the epistemological frameworks used to investigate the experiences of Black women leaders (Collins, 1989; Dillard, 1995; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Peters, 2012; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010), but also the methodological frameworks employed in these examinations.

### **Epistemological Approaches**

Research on Black women school leaders (often conducted by Black women scholars) has typically invoked epistemological frames that validate the multiplicative experiences of racism and sexism, illuminated the power and strength of these leaders, and unveiled specific commitments and approaches of their work with marginalized communities. While scholars have invoked several epistemological frameworks for understanding the leadership of Black women principals, we examine three that have been well utilized and have an emphasis on the intersectional experiences of Black women grounded in race AND gender. Intersectionality is an integral thread woven throughout the research on Black women school leaders (Agosto & Rowland, 2018; Miles Nash & Peters, 2020; Peters, 2012). Further, as Dillard (2005) notes, much of the research on Black women school leaders is paradigmatically both feminist and critical in its orientation. Feminist scholars have articulated the concept of standpoint, which

acknowledges that Black women can participate in knowledge production, and rearticulates a Black women's standpoint, or consciousness. This "rearticulated consciousness gives African-American women another tool of resistance to all forms of their subordination" (Collins, 1989, p. 750).

### ***Black Feminist Thought***

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is based on the work of Collins (1989). There are four distinct tenets of BFT: (a) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the importance of dialogue; (c) an ethic of caring; and (d) personal accountability. As Lomotey (2019) succinctly noted, "BFT facilitates a uniquely feminine, African-centered way of looking at the world" (p. 340). BFT is grounded in Black women's experiences, many of which are tethered to their spirituality and activism. Rooted in activism characterized by Black women educator-activists (Loder, 2005; Loder-Jackson, 2012; Loder-Jackson et al, 2016), BFT acknowledges Black women's activism is characterized by both a struggle for group survival--Black women's efforts to challenge oppression; and a struggle for institutional transformation--Black women's large scale efforts to unite with communities and institutions to engage in systemic change.

### ***Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology***

Several studies of Black women educational leaders utilize Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology (AFE) to explicate their experiences (Jean-Marie, 2013; Peters, 2012; Taylor, 2004). BFT and AFE have very similar contours. Both are notably connected to the scholarship of Patricia Hill Collins (1989; 2016); both are rooted in the experiences of Black women. Both share four guiding tenets in common. Collins (1990) noted "values and ideas Africanist scholars identify as characteristically 'Black' often bear remarkable resemblance to similar ideas claimed

by feminist scholars as characteristically ‘female.’ Thus, AFE has the ability to speak to the broad experiences of multiple marginalized groups.

### ***Endarkened Feminist Epistemology***

Like the other frameworks already discussed, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (Dillard, 2000) is employed to explicate the experiences of Black women. Simmons (2007) explained this framework is used to “elucidate how incidents and events with race and gender translate into meaning.” This epistemological perspective is guided by six assumptions (Dillard, 2000). Much like BFT and AFE the assumptions of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology include the ideals of (a) self-definition; (b) research as both an intellectual and spiritual endeavor; (c) the individual as an aspect of community facilitated through dialogue; (d) concrete experiences as criteria of meaning; (e) the interrelationship between knowledge and research is historical; and (f) power relations grounded in many aspects of identity, particularly race and gender for the purposes of this examination, frame articulated experiences in research (Dillard, 2000). This framework has been useful to explore and make meaning of Black women’s experiences (Peters, 2011).

### **Methodological Approaches**

A great deal of the empirical research conducted about Black women school leaders has been qualitative (Lomotey, 2019), notably often utilizing a narrative methodology to capture their “voice” and empower these women as key contributors to the knowledge production process (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Brown, 2014). Further, Collins (1989) foregrounded this stating

the long-term and widely shared resistance among African-American women can only have been sustained by an enduring and shared standpoint among Black women about the meaning of oppression and the actions that Black women can and should take to resist it (p. 746).

Given this foundational underpinning of research on Black women leaders, it is noteworthy that the body of scholarship focused on these subjects offers a methodological canon of qualitative research that informs and empowers, and makes what was rendered invisible, visible. Thus, the epistemological approaches typically used to frame studies of Black women often necessitate a methodological frame that empowers Black women leaders to participate in knowledge production as they tell their stories.

Several qualitative methodological paradigms have been used with these epistemological frames. Each of the tenets/assumptions of BFT, AFE, and Endarkened Feminist Epistemology provides for Black women to share their experiences, engage in dialog and make meaning from these experiences. Many of these studies use common qualitative tools such as observations, interviews, focus groups, and shadowing (Bass, 2009, Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Dillard, 1995; Reed, 2012). As a result, common methods which facilitate this include case studies (Peters, 2012) narrative studies (Moorosi et al., 2018; Peters, 2011; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010), and life notes (Simmons, 2007).

### **Ontological Characterization of Black Women's Expertise in Resistance**

The intersectional leadership framework (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020), like preceding educational leadership templates, is an articulation of coalesced assumptions, evidences, and dispositions aimed at guiding research and practice across diverse contexts in professional sectors. The historicity of Black women's leadership expertise is rooted in their intersectional perspectives and informed by their unique lived experiences (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Collins, 1989). The cross section formed by both actualities has influenced and fashioned Black women's view of reality—their ontological disposition—by manifesting as outward evidence of their inner being. Ontology, defined as the study of “claims and assumptions that are made about

the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other,” (Blaikie, 1993, p. 6), centering Black women’s leadership offers an in-depth demonstration of how they have led with a clear understanding of their role in changing the world that envelopes them. Through a lens substantively focused on the needs of Black students, families, and communities, Black women have delivered on their intentions to use what they know, experience, and prioritize to successfully lead schools.

### **Black Women’s Being, Knowing, and Acting in Leadership**

The enunciation of Black women’s ways of being, knowing, and acting underlines quintessential depictions of their leadership. As their being is predisposed to their internalized conceptualizations of themselves, which are persuaded by inevitable external narratives about their race and gender, they are inclined to resiliently rise above others’ beliefs regarding their existence. At its foundation, Black women’s leadership is shaped by what they know about themselves and the people with whom they work and live. Their knowledge is an amalgam of familial influences, educational training, professional interactions, and individual conclusions reflecting their experiences and exposures. In recognizing the role these elements play in shaping their knowledge, Black women are able to develop practices based on their understandings and sensemaking. Their acting, which is largely dependent upon the assumptions they make about the context in which they are working, determines how they transform and successfully build sustainable infrastructure on behalf of their constituents and followers. Specifically in educational leadership, Black women’s actions mirror their commitments to serve the communities with whom they empathize, or to whom they are dedicated to improving.

### **Ontological Assumptions and Points of Departure**

The ontological assumptions presented by scholarship focused on Black women leaders rely on descriptive narrations of the material, discourse-based, and historicized milieu of educational contexts they serve. These depictions, developed from exemplars of the strength, skill, and brilliance that Black women possess and display, demonstrate how privileging their work can reconstitute research and practice in meaningful ways. While similar aims can be accomplished by focusing on related topics such as feminist approaches to educational policy research (Childers, 2013), race-based comparisons of school leadership practices (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007), and the indigeneity of schooling spaces in Black communities (Tillman, 2004), the multiplicative nature of Black women's leadership is distinctly captured across K-12 (Flores, 2018), higher education (Haynes et al., 2020), and community (Watson, 2020) literature. Particularly, in K-12 spaces, their presence is profound and fundamentally establishes successful pathways for students and communities.

### **Representation of Black Women in Public Education**

Portraits of Black women's leadership in past and current educational contexts offer entrée into understanding the multiplicity of worlds they brilliantly navigate. The depictions are scaffolded by images of their policy enactment through their roles as teachers, principals, and superintendents. In each position, Black women have operated from a disposition of expertise in delivery of instruction, empathy for the Black community's aspiration, and belief in Black children's accomplishment for academic and professional triumph.

### ***Policies and Perspectives***

Before the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown*, segregationist policies strictly dictated Black women educators' capacity to provide students access to resources and thereby obstructed students' pathways to academic and social success. Fueled by their

commitment to prioritize Black students, resist anti-Black educational doctrine, and nurture through an ethic of care, Black women resisted oppressive forces wreaking havoc on Black schools and communities via restricted access to equal academic and social resources. The policies dictating limited material educational means included (a) comparatively paltry budgets for supplies, meager facilities, and school personnel salaries, (Anderson, 1988); (b) forced funneling of students into vocational training in juxtaposition to higher education opportunities (Tillman, 2004); and (c) a sizeable forced departure of Black teachers and administrators in mostly Black schools Post-Brown (Peters, 2019). The levers of control that have prescribed what leaders could offer their students have been informed by the overarching rhetoric perpetuated about Black students' abilities. Black women's understanding of the distinct abilities and resiliencies of the Black community has helped counter this dynamic further exacerbating the effects of detrimental policies. As leaders at the school and district levels, Black women have modeled their abilities to respond to the demands of policy while embodying an empathetic understanding of Black students' contextualized realities of marginalization and hope. The paramountcy of understanding Black women's current representative standing across the educational leadership milieu is evident upon further inspection, revealing both their underrepresentation across the field and the contexts they face at each stage in the leadership pipeline.

### ***Black Women in Teacher Workforce***

The demographic changes in both school leader and district leader positions trail drastically behind the increases in racial and ethnic diversity in the K-12 student population. While recent statistics detail distribution shifts in student demographics, including a decrease in White students from 61% to 48% indicating a relative increase in the number of students of color

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), the proportions of educators and leaders of color remains disproportionately representative of the US population. For example, the percentage of Black teachers decreased from 8% in 2004 to 7% in 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Among the teacher workforce, Black teachers lead in attaining terminal degrees by Black teachers. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reports that Black teachers are more likely to earn doctorates (2%) and education specialist (45%) degrees compared to their counterparts. However, this preparation does not translate to their promotion within the field, as the number of Black leaders remains low. Collectively, the decreasing numbers of Black teachers perpetuates a lack of diverse perspectives that has proven to be detrimental to Black students and students of color with whom Black educators can empathize because of the marginalization of race and ethnicity (Egalite et al., 2015).

### ***Black Women in the School Principalship***

At last reporting of the National Teacher and Principal Survey, Black women made up approximately 12.9% of the public school principalship (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). While this represents the largest proportion of women of color amidst the 54.2% of principals who are women, it is still an indicator of disproportionate representation compared to the 75.1% who are White in the total population of women who serve in the role. Recent investigations into the principal pipeline further describe what causes the narrowing of opportunity for Black women as they progress in the field. Particularly, Black women serving as assistant principals are systematically denied advancement to the principalship as the delay in promoting them was evident in analysis indicating that they are 18% less likely to be given the opportunity to do so in their districts and that there is a 0.6-year average promotion gap attributable to their race (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). This discriminatory reality associated with

race translates to Black women's pursuit and attainment of higher leadership as they aspire to district leadership positions.

### ***Black Women in the Superintendency***

Recent snapshots of the state of district leadership in the United States, put forth in The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study, depict interesting changes in the landscape of the field. Overall, the percentage of women serving in the superintendency slightly increased from 24.1% to 26.68% over the last 10 years (Tienken, in press). Results, tallied from a national survey of respondents, indicate an increase in participation from superintendents of color. An unprecedented reporting of superintendents aggregated by both race and gender for the first time, offers a telling articulation of the work of Black women serving in the role. Notably, Black women superintendents, who are 1.51% of the respondents, lead 8.57% of urban school districts, 2.02% of suburban districts, and 0.76% of rural districts (Grogan & Miles Nash, in press). Among the schools in which 51% or more of students are of color, Black women lead 7.03% (Miles Nash & Grogan, in press). These actualities define how Black women continue to simultaneously cross borders of difference while facing issues of similarity in ways that are unique when compared to their White women and Black male counterparts (Katz, 2012).

### **Black Women's Presence and Work in the Current State of Education**

Black women's commitment to education is continually explored to offer valuable insight into, and direction inspired by, the way they lead. The perpetuated idiosyncratic nature of anti-Blackness, coupled with the recent pangs of discrimination crystalized by state-sanctioned violence and policy-informed health disparities have put forth an unmitigated aggravation in the Black communities that will continue to require Black women's expertise, attention, and care. Their propensity to shepherd schools and communities by employing their

agential embodiment of unapologetic advocacy, can be used to counter the indelible marks left by past and recent racism and inequity.

### ***Facing Anti-Blackness***

Black women educational leaders' recognition of the anti-Blackness that Black children, families, and communities are forced to navigate helps to bring attention to their predicament in spaces in which decisions to systematize justice are made. Through their actions, Black women demonstrate that they do not countenance the rhetoric of inferiority and deficitizing that is readily extended about students. Conversely, they lead in ways that espouse reconstituting language that hinges on providing opportunities and holistic support of 'their' students—for whom they take personal responsibility—through community partnerships and equity-centered leadership practices (Flores, 2018). Despite the gendered racism they weather, Black women leaders thrive by employing coping mechanisms such as relying on spirituality and faith, engaging in social and professional networks, and assuming roles rooted in advocacy (Burton et al., 2019). Further, to counter anti-Black disinformation that casts students in a defeatist light, Black women operationalize leadership by centering students in manners that combat racialized stereotypical depictions of their abilities (Aaron, 2020). Through each of these practices of school, community, and self care, Black women school leaders establish and maintain safe space for students to learn and grow academically and socially. The importance of the sustainability of the web of support that schools provide became ever more apparent during the recent events of the summer 2020, when the Black community bore the brunt of the oppressive forces caused by heightened racialized violence and an unprecedented health crisis.

### ***The Unconventional Case of Anti-Blackness during Summer 2020***

While examinations of Black women's educational leadership demonstrate the multitude of identities they privilege through their understanding of students' dispositions, and their commitments to provide equitable access to education, there was little that could have prepared leaders for the onslaught of turmoil, tragedy, and trauma that persisted during summer 2020. In a matter of three months, the nation, and the world writ large, endured a viral pandemic that infected 9.2 million people in the United States and 46 million people worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). The total devastation accounted for more than 230,000 deaths and 1.19 million deaths in the US and the world, to date, respectively (World Health Organization, 2020). In the United States, the monumental impact this had on education, both in K-12 and higher education spaces, continues, now eight months after its genesis, in unrivaled ways. However, these circumstances are not completely unexampled, as they slightly mimic the inequality that Black students have faced in unequal schools and communities for decades.

### **Students' Current Situations Influenced by COVID-19 and Community Violence**

The untempered effects of health disparities on the Black community were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) asserts that Black communities have been more impacted by COVID-19 because of long-standing sociocultural inequities that are pre-existing in their communities. Specifically, the social determinants of health disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minority, expressly Black and Latinx communities, include poverty; discrimination; healthcare access and utilization; educational, income, and wealth gaps; and housing (CDC, 2020). In particular, families in these groups are more likely to live in multigenerational households, proven to be more dangerous as a result of the highly contagious nature of the virus. Further, individuals in these groups have a higher likelihood of working in service industries, heightening their

exposure to interacting with a larger number of infected people in the public. In addition to the increased risk of exposure, families in which the adults have to be present for work are less likely to be able to support students at-home learning schedules and activities. Accordingly, students in those situations are at a higher risk of falling behind or exiting school completely. Coupled with the reality that lower-resourced schools are less likely to be able to offer alternative learning settings for students, leaders have faced extremely different challenges establishing procedures that can undergird or ensure students' learning. This new set of difficult tasks has proven to be challenging, however, Black women educational leaders have found ways to rise to the occasion on behalf of their students and communities.

### **Discussion**

Rooted in acknowledgement of extant frameworks, and informed by the former and current treatment of Black women's leadership through epistemological and ontological lenses, we further the intersectional leadership framework with the following tenets, thereby contributing to the existing canon.

*Intersectional leadership is explicitly anti-racist, countering the historicity of oppression that subjugates marginalized communities.* Intersectionality acknowledges the multiplicative aspects of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Leaders who engage their work from an intersectional framework must explicitly and proactively engage in anti-racism. Schools exist in a context of structural racism. Many policies (e.g., student assignment/tracking, discipline, special education placements) are implemented with implicit and explicit bias. This paradigm of schools is both current and historical (Milner & Howard, 2004; Peters, 2019; Tillman, 2004). Underrepresented students have historically been excluded from equitable academic opportunities. The research on Black women school leaders provides a template for

intersectional leaders. This research demonstrates not only Black women's awareness of disparate opportunities for Black students (and other students of color), but a commitment to creating opportunities at any cost (Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005). Intersectional leaders accomplish this by invoking anti-racist practices, policies, and strategies.

*Intersectional leadership is explicitly anti-sexist, disrupting hetero-normative male-centric hegemonic practices, protections, and privileges.* Intersectional leaders are keenly aware of the inherent sexism nested in organizational structures, policies, and practices. Research illuminates the experiences of Black women educational leaders historically and present day grounded in sexism (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2014). Those identifying as women have historically experienced violence at worst and disparate opportunities at best in the school context (Loder-Jackson, 2012). Not unlike anti-racism, intersectional leaders must disrupt cultural and structural practices that marginalize women. They do so by invoking anti-sexist practices, consistently identifying sexism and proactively creating and monitoring the culture, and creating opportunities for underrepresented communities to ensure a healthy space for all (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020).

*Intersectional leadership explicitly acknowledges the multiplicative influences of marginalization centering race and gender, and across planes of identity, emboldening historically underserved individuals and communities to walk in the full truth of their distinctive existences.* Intersectional leaders realize that any identity marginalization is oppressive. Historically, Black women leaders exemplify commitment to this tenet of intersectional leadership by their Afrocentric feminist standpoint. That is, Black women "experience a world that is different than those who are not Black and female" (Collins, 1989, p. 747). They occupy multiple marginalized identity planes simultaneously. This experience facilitates a level of

understanding by which they may embolden others who may have experienced marginalization (Brown, 2014; Loder, 2005). Intersectional leaders commit to enacting this tenet by invoking anti-discriminatory practices, policies, and strategies that facilitate spaces for students to thrive while honoring and celebrating individuals and communities across planes of identity.

*Intersectional leadership explicitly leverages authority to serve and protect historically underserved communities, fortifying communities through the authentication of the leader's responsibility to fearlessly confront injustice.* For intersectional leaders, embodying this tenet requires a delicate balance between invoking both power and empathy. Intersectional leaders understand the multiplicative experiences of identity and the effect this has on constituents. Intersectional leaders are compelled to meet the needs of their constituents through acts of service and protection. Historically, Black women leaders exemplified this both through their commitment to an ethic of care (Bass, 2009; 2012) and through their bold activism on behalf of their students and the community (Aaron, 2020). Intersectional leaders evidence commitment to this tenet by invoking legitimate, referent, and expert power and authority to engage in acts of resistance and boldness in support of the communities they serve.

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