Now you see me, now you don't: my political fight against the invisibility/erasure of Black women in intersectionality research

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Introduction

As I write this essay, about the meaning of politics, I find myself captivated by the 2012 Olympic Games. My viewing of these games, to the chagrin of my family, is not divorced from my theoretical understanding of the intersection of race, class, and gender. The 2012 women’s gymnastics team seems to have captivated the American public. Twitter was ablaze with stories of gold medal winner Gabriel (Gabby) Douglas. For a brief moment, she out-trended Michael Phelps (renowned swimmer who now holds the record for winning the most Olympic medals). Facebook was also filled with a plethora of stories and images of the team and of Gabby in particular. One picture caught my imagination.

On their Facebook page, Girls on the Run International posted a picture of the women’s team. The status update read,

We love this image of the USA Gymnastics Women’s team holding hands after they won the gold in the Women’s Team final yesterday in London. This image reminds us of how so many Girls on the Run cross the finish line holding hands with their teammates. The women of the gymnastics team are an example to us all, not just because they won the gold, but because of the friendship and teamwork they have shown the world. They are truly inspiring!1

Girls on the Run characterizes itself as an inclusive, multi-cultural program designed to foster a "world where every girl knows and activates her limitless potential and is free to boldly pursue her dreams." The image used to celebrate the friendships fostered between girls seems to belie, consciously or unconsciously, their commitment to multiculturalism. The women’s team, not including alternates, comprised of five young women. In the foreground of the picture, brightly lit, are four girls with tightly clasped hands celebrating their victory. Missing is Gabby. In the background, off to the side, with her back to the camera stands Gabby. Her smile, often described as electric and engaging, is now invisible to the viewing public. Her very African features are removed from sight. In this picture “depicting” the team we see Gabby but yet we do not see Gabby. In a picture that depicts friendships, Gabby is excluded from the clasp. What does this suggest about inter-racial friendships – as Gabby is the one African-American young woman on the team? What narrative is conveyed in separating Gabby from whiteness? In “Selling Hot Pussy,” bell hooks (1997) offers an analysis of the representation of Black models in "high fashion" magazines. hooks (128) argues that

The bodies of black women appearing in these magazines are not there to document the beauty of black skin, of black bodies, but rather to call attention to other concerns. They are represented so readers will notice that the magazine is racially inclusive even though their features are often distorted, their bodies contorted into strange and bizarre postures that make the images appear monstrous or grotesque.

Although this is a critique of the cultural representation of Black women, it is applicable to the there/not there representation of Gabby. The Black models and Gabby are not allowed to be fully and wholistically represented, like hooks suggest they are there to support other interests and not because they are, in themselves, worthwhile. hooks’s analysis also seems to capture a recent trend in intersectionality research. Simply put, Black women are disappearing as research subjects within our “leading” journals (see Alexander-Floyd 2012) and within intersectionality research. As a result of the often omission of Black women in research we have to ask: What narrative is conveyed in not including Black women as research subjects? Finally, we have to ask what are the implications for our understanding of politics? Including Black women in our studies of politics, by centering their social, political, and cultural understandings, can broaden and (re)shape notions of how we study and ultimately understand politics.

I argue that this seen/not seen inclusion of Black women as research subjects, in intersectionality publications, is the result of the politics of research. Research is a political act and intersectional research is no exception. Researchers make decisions, which have political consequences, when they decide who can speak, whom they speak to, what they can speak about, what questions are asked, how we observe behaviors, and also how we measure such behaviors. The theories employed and the manners in which they are deployed and the methodological approaches utilized, like a picture, tell a story. These texts “as elements of social events have causal effects – i.e. they bring about changes … in our knowledge … our beliefs and our attitudes, values and so forth.” (Fairclough 2003, 8) Social science has the potential to transform society even as we attempt to describe and analyze said society.

In this essay, using an auto-ethnographic case study, I share my personal account of how I encountered Black feminist ideas and politics and how I am employing them in the politics of the silencing and omission of Black women in political science research in general and intersectionality research more specifically. I explore how my research serves as a political act designed not only to fight for social justice at an institutional level, but also how I practice it individually. At the core of this essay is the belief that the use of narratives, from a Black feminist standpoint, can
be particularly useful in challenging the representation of Black women in research which tends to silence or mute them. Such narratives are useful not only for transforming knowledge production, but also for providing a deeper understanding of the complexities faced by Black women and women of color.

The conceptual springboard for this paper posits that Black womanhood is socially produced, via discursive practices; thereby, producing a particular form of Black female subjectivity (Hill Collins 1991; hooks 1991; Lorde 1984). The discursive practices, which rely on scripts, myths, images, and stereotypes, have significant political implications for how Black women are treated – politically, socially, and economically. Additionally, these discursive practices influence how Black women see themselves and how they organize their politics. The use of narratives can help us explore this process in a more nuanced manner in comparison to a more positivist approach.

In the presentation of my narrative, I move between various modes: descriptive, discursive, and reflexive. I start with a presentation of my understanding of Black feminist politics, which engages intersectionality. The essay then transitions into the narrative thematic area where I interrogate my positioning as a researcher and how it influences my politics in areas such as mentoring and writing. In the conclusion, I consider how the use of narratives, specifically those originating from Black women, can serve as one means of resisting a particular research agenda that renders Black women silenced, invisible, or omitted. I offer specific implications for how this praxis, grounded in Black feminist thought, could serve to transform politics and the study of politics. I think of this simply as the politics of doing, which according to Naples (1991, 479) includes “any struggle to gain control over definitions of ‘self’ and ‘community;’ to augment personal and communal empowerment; to create alternative institutions and organizational processes; and to increase the power and resources of their community.”

Black woman and intersectionality: the politics of research

As a concept intersectionality has gained increased popularity among some feminists and other scholars. This is occurring at the same time that Black women seem to be disappearing from political science scholarly works. Alexander-Floyd (forthcoming), in her analysis, comparing “the production of research [full length journal articles] on Black women across four fields, political science, sociology, history, and economics,” shows that political science tends to lag behind other fields. According to her, within the time period 1986–2003, in political science there were 34 articles. This is compared to 283 in sociology, 231 in history, and 64 in economics. Comparatively, for the time period 2004–08, there were 13 full-length articles in political science and 73, 71, and 13 in sociology, history, and economics, respectively.

The “early” works of Black feminists, specifically the works originating in the late 1980s/early 1990s, is sometimes cited – but not necessarily critically engaged by feminist scholars – and this is a form of distortion. Additionally, Black women are rarely treated as research subjects, particularly in intersectionality research. In my recent explorations of Black women as subjects in research-length articles that employ intersectionality, I discovered that Black women are rarely, if at all, the sole subjects of such research projects (Jordan-Zachery, forthcoming). Articles were selected from four journals, two of which, according to Garand and Giles (2003) are among the top-ranking journals. These journals are: The American Political Science Review and the Journal of Politics. The other two journals focus on women and/or gender. The Journal of Women, Politics & Policy (formerly Women & Politics) and Politics & Gender complete the journals used in this analysis. This analysis focused on articles published between 1996 and 2010. My analysis was limited to only research-length articles with
a US-based emphasis. I focus on journal-length articles as it allows me to identify trends and because “publications in leading journals are an important marker of professional status and a key conduit for the diffusion of ideas.” (Munck and Snyder 2007, 339) Additionally, the number of articles appearing in these journals serves as an indicator of the extent to which such studies are accepted by the scholarly community. My focus is limited to the US simply because Crenshaw’s conceptualization of intersectionality was informed by US-based Black feminism.

The data suggest that: research on intersectionality tended to treat Black women in a monolithic manner; only a certain group of Black women served as research subjects (primarily elected officials); research, in a limited manner, tended to focus on structural and political intersectionality while ignoring representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1995), and Black women were often researched in a comparative manner (particularly in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups of women). Comparative studies can be informative; however, they can also be limiting (see hooks 1991). Such studies can result in reinscribing differences and the further marginalization of Black women as they can result in “a God trick … that mode of seeing that pretends to offer a vision that is from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully.” (Haraway 1988, 584) Although Black women are used in some of these studies, they are employed to call attention to concerns other than the concern of the “structural sources of inequality” (Guidroz and Berger 2009, 70); such as the case of the use of Black models as described by hooks. Such studies can mask differentials in power relations between and within groups. This is not to suggest that all dimensions of comparative studies are inherently problematic for Black women.

Our analyses are also limited in terms of exploring how Black women create unique and specific narratives outside the formal institutions of politics. Consequently, some questions tend to be ignored, such as: how are Black women who are not elected to office engaging and grappling with issues of intersectionality? How are they defining and responding to a multitude of issues that influence their daily lives? And, how are they defining themselves? In her critique of this movement, Alexander-Floyd (2012, 2) says, “barely a decade into the new millennium, a new wave of raced-gendered occultic commodification is afoot, one focusing not on black female subjectivity per se, but on the concept of intersectionality.” In essence, Black women in political science research, and those with a focus on intersectionality, are treated in a similar manner as Gabby Douglas. While we are sometimes recognized vis-à-vis our contributions to intersectionality as a theory and concept, our scholarship and political work are blurred and, if incorporated, it is done in a manner that hints at a particular form of racial inclusiveness within a rather confined critical space. As a result of what we study and how we study Black women and even who is allowed to study Black women, the complexities of Black women’s politics remain underexplored. Excluded is the specialized knowledges produced by diverse Black women.

At the feet of my mother: learning Black feminist praxis

It is from my mother that I learn my politics as a Black feminist. My mother taught me that real change requires real life action. As a young girl, I watched my mother apply, in her daily life, what we in academia term Black feminist praxis (Hill Collins 1991). Does she consider herself a Black feminist? I recently posed this question to her. She looked at me and replied, “I don’t get caught up in labels; I just concern myself with doing what needs to be done, but I am particularly concerned with how women are treated.” I asked her, “Do you consider yourself political? Do you engage in politics?” “We are all political. Our mere presence can be political, because we can disrupt how people think and have influence in spaces where we might not even be present. But we should not
settle for simply being there.” My mother’s conceptualization of politics might not embody what is traditionally considered as politics; but it embodies the broader understanding of politics as constructed by critical Black feminist scholars and some Black women outside of academe. She reflects the politics of doing since so much of her efforts are designed to (re)define “self” and “community.” My mother’s politics reflects key tenets of Black feminism, as articulated by Hill Collins for example.

My mother, in some ways, is a political enigma that is not always captured in the neat categories we employ in our research efforts. She embodies the politics of Booker T. Washington. One of her favorite quotes is “Let down your bucket where you are.” But is she a conservative – this might depend on the issue. She embodies various forms of Black nationalism. Often she would enter the office and declare “Good morning my beautiful Black people.” But is she a Black nationalist? – maybe, again it depends on the issue. My mother believes in using any tool that would allow her to support and encourage the advancement of those whom society tends to discard and render invisible and silent. She often resists hierarchies and will subvert norms if it means helping someone to live a fuller life. Her politics results from the intersection of the legacy of colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism and racism. She exemplifies intersectionality as an ideography (Alexander-Floyd 2012) in the sense that her politics embodies an ideological quest to name and describe the complexity of Black women’s lives and the varied elements of identity and oppression they experience and the myriad ways in which they express agency. It is in this space – where she resists categories and subverts hierarchies – that my mother operates and, as such, defines her politics. Black women, like my mother, crafted for themselves various safe spaces in which to engage their politics. Springer (2005, 2) describes this as “politics in the cracks.” Robnett (1997), in her discussion of Black women in the civil rights movement, also talks about how Black women conduct their politics in the cracks, in the sense that they find openings and spaces in which to engage in a politics that recognizes the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. In these spaces, for my mother, politics is not only the actions of formal governmental institutions, but the behaviors of other institutions that can serve as a proxy for state power. Politics, for my mother, is also about power. Finally, politics is about empowerment – at the individual and community levels. For my mother, politics is about recognition, (re)distribution, and representation for those who are pushed to the margins of society. Her understanding sees politics as dialectical as it recognizes how individuals are shaped by politics and also how they shape politics (Hill Collins 1991).

For 35 years, my mother was a mental health nurse on the island of Barbados. She was instrumental in developing the community mental health program on the island. As a young girl, I would often accompany my mother as we drove around the island so that she could bring mental health treatment to those who were in need and who, for various reasons, could not make it to the clinic or the hospital. She eventually moved out of community nursing and back into the hospital setting where for a number of years she served as the Sister (head nurse in the American context) of the mental health outpatient clinic. Regardless of her physical location, my mother consistently fought for the humanity of the mentally ill. She was particularly passionate about the treatment of two populations – children and women. In her words, these were the two groups who tended “not to be heard” by those in power. She used her position and her voice to question, to challenge, and to empower women to fight, for themselves and their children, so that they could be heard. This is the birthplace of my politics.

Using narrative as a form of agency
My political agency is in constant flux as the conditions for its possibility are always in flux. Indeed, my practice of Black feminism is grounded within the instability of race, class, gender,
and sexuality norms. It is through a “process of narration [and reflection] that [I] mediate and make sense of inconsistencies, facilitating an imaginative and conscious process of change.” (Kiguwa 2006, 14) My past and current story is told in a relational manner, in the sense that it is told in relation to hegemonic discourses of race, gender, and class. The story considers, sometimes directly and at other times indirectly, the political contexts in which I practice Black feminist praxis within academia. Employing a self-narrative approach allows me to explore how I make meaning in my life and attempt to share, explore and (re)think that meaning in concert with others. It allows me to explore that “outsider/within” dichotomy often discussed by Black feminists. From my perspective as research subject/author, I strive to challenge the crisis of representation of Black women in academia.

In 2009 my book *Black Women, Cultural Images and Social Policy* was published. The story behind getting this book published is worth a book in and of itself. I will spare you some of the details and simply say that it took years before the book was published. There were a number of issues that contributed to the length of time it took me to get the manuscript published. Part of this history involved my resistance to changing the nature of the research, something that several reviewers wanted me to do. The comments I often received from the anonymous reviewers included: “the manuscript would be that much stronger if the author also discussed other women such as white women” or “I recommend that the author also look at the stereotypes that influence the lives of Latinas and other women.” Some suggested that I take a more positivist approach; thereby aligning the research with “traditional political science.” One reviewer said, “Are you suggesting that all white people are racist?” One editor explicitly told me “To be honest, books such as these don’t sell. There isn’t much of a market for it.” A colleague asked “is there enough to write an entire book on Black women?” The underlying and often explicit message was that a singular focus on Black women and public policy (unless framed in traditional approaches) was not a viable topic. And to speak of how those in power rely on stereotypes of Black womanhood to shape public policy is tantamount to calling folk racist and, as such, the research is not valid.

There were moments when I seriously considered not pursuing the project. A conversation with my mother led me to reconsider. She helped me to harness my voice. She reminded me of the number of times others told her no when she sought help from a system that disregarded the mentally ill. In particular she reminded me of the time she went on strike, to the dismay of my father, and was eventually punished by the hospitals’ administrators. She said she would do it again. Interestingly, my mother went on strike to support nurses who belonged to a union that she was not a part of. My mother reminded me of the times when she went toe-to-toe with the doctors over the treatment of patients. She did not tell me whether I should concede or persevere. Instead, she asked “do you want to contribute to the conversation?” She reminded me that there would be no change without action. My book evolved from simply writing a book to earn tenure into a political act.

As I fought my way through the completion of the book, I did not imagine how this personal fight would have ramifications for so many other Black women in academia. I received a number of emails thanking me for the work. One young woman drove from New Hampshire to Rhode Island to meet with me to help her strategize how to write her work that centered the voices of Black women. Another young woman reached out to me, via email, to tell me how my research helped her to name what she had grown up with her entire life, but could not find reflected in academic writings. My written work serves as a form of critical mentoring by showing others the possibility of engaging in such research. Additionally, this work has, indeed, become political as it has allowed others to see that such work can exist in political science. It is political in the sense that it offers a critique and resistance to dominant meanings of politics and policymaking that are prevalent in more traditional political science research.
In my efforts to create change, to insert Black women’s subjectivity into political and policy conversations, I recently started blogging. The blog, titled “Sapphire Unbound: A Black Womanist Scholar Speaks her Mind,” serves as my platform to resist institutional practices around publishing, modes of writing, dominant understandings of knowledge production, and other imposed structures. More importantly, it allows me to share my thoughts with others and to invite readers to critically think of a number of issues affecting the daily lives of Black women. My blog, like my research, is politics because it is designed, in part, to advance emancipatory knowledge and to challenge the distribution of power by inserting the voice of Black women into a series of debated social and policy issues. My blogging, like my more formal research, questions the dominant presentation of Black female subjectivity.

I am fully aware that blogging will not be recognized in my attempts to move from associate to full professor. Like my mother, I do it to defy the constraints placed on me in academia. During the short span of time, the blog has attracted readers from Latvia, Australia, Kenya, Dominican Republic and Brazil among other places. Like the formal academic product, my blogging has allowed me interactions with others that I would not normally have. For example, as I write this, I have been virtually mentoring a young South African woman (we connected on Twitter after she read my blog). She told me that she sought me out because she could not see herself in some publications. This is what my mother taught me as we drove around Barbados. We have to meet people where they are, using the necessary and applicable tools to empower them. Like my mother, I am driving around, except now I am driving around in virtual space, sharing the bits and pieces of knowledge that I have collected along the way – this is a form of emancipatory knowledge.

Conclusion
So what does my personal story have to do with our understanding of politics? The act of telling stories is in, and of, itself political. Stories can be used to maintain “existing structures of domination” (hooks 1991), but they can also be used to emancipate (Clough 2002) the oppressed and challenge multiple systems that result in marginalization. The use of Black women’s narratives can be instrumental in responding to the silencing and omission of Black women in political science research in general and intersectional research more specifically, and they can expand our understanding of politics and how it is experienced and performed by multiple groups. bell hooks (1991, 151–152) in her critique of “traditional” research states,

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the “Other,” to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. It is not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak. Often this speech about “Other” is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were speaking, if there were silence, if we were there. This “we” is that “us” in the margins, that “we” who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space.

We enter “that space” by challenging the politics of research and by suggesting alternative methods/methodologies that allow Black women to tell their political stories. The use of life narratives is but one option for opening up space for Black women in political science. Life stories allow us to better analyze and interpret the ways in which Black women construct and narrate their lives in the face of multiple oppressive structures. Stories are important in our understanding of knowledge production and our understanding of truth as stories embody multiple and situated versions of truths (Burman 2003). Consequently, stories/narratives of Black women’s politics can render visible the various and complex dimensions of representation and interpretation, thereby
enhancing our understanding of democratic practices, broadly defined. The remaining question is will the politics of research accept such an approach?

Notes
3. Auto-ethnography relies on the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data. It emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher’s behaviors, thoughts, and experiences in relation to others in society – it connects “the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739).
4. Structural intersectionality centers the operation of systems and structures in society that result in the marginalization of individuals – in terms of their social needs and legal status. Political intersectionality reflects the different (and sometimes conflicting) political agendas of the various groups to which an individual may belong or to which they “define” their identity. Representational intersectionality addresses the depiction, through text, language, images, media, of groups and individuals in society. It also captures how these groups work to create their own narratives that shape and inform multiple aspects of society.

References
From politics to politicization: defending the indefensible?

Colin Hay

It is a considerable pleasure to be invited to comment on such a valuable and timely set of reflections on the concept of politics itself. Each reminds us in a different way of our responsibility, as political analysts and politicizers of social processes, to our subject matter and to political subjects – the agents of the practices we seek to describe and explain.

I am struck by the similarities between each commentary published here and my own clumsy attempts to set out an understanding of politics – couched more in terms of politicization and depoliticization than in terms of politics per se – in Why We Hate Politics (Hay 2007). That book builds from a distinction between the political and the non-political – and between politics and the process of politicization – that I suspect would be accepted by each author here. The political, I suggest, is the realm of contingency and deliberation; the non-political, the realm of fate and (perceived) necessity. Accordingly, to politicize something – to render it political – is to bring it in to the realm of contingency and to create the possibility of subjecting it to human purpose and intention. Politicization is about reclaiming social processes and the always uneven outcomes they create from fate; it is about taking responsibility for our collective choices. Such a conception, I feel, captures something of the rationale of this important new journal – the attempt to show how groups constitute for themselves politically their identities and how they proceed, having done so, to engage in a challenging and politicization of their marginalization, exclusion and effective erasure. That is certainly the view of politics, groups and identities that I take from this opening symposium. In it, through a series of telling and eloquent interventions, politics is recast as a dynamic, ongoing and contingent struggle, variously: to give to or claim for those otherwise rendered mute and silent a voice and to fight to overturn the invisibility of groups and peoples (Jordan-Zachery); to see the biases, parochialisms, absences and occlusions – the blind spots – in the ostensibly academic and scientific representation of politics (Ackerly); to discern, detail and challenge through politicization the submerged power relations in the classificatory systems and schema in and through which so much of our social and political is conducted but which we invariably take for granted or presume to be neutral (Bernstein); and to see how civil society organizations themselves constitute in practice a changing sense of the politics and politicizing activities in which they engage (McDaniel).

In each of these short papers, the realm of the political is, in effect, contrasted to that of necessity (see also Gamble 2000). In the latter, in the absence of the capacity for human agency, it is fate and nature that fight it out for supremacy. Politicization – the constitution and reconstitution of