

# BRINGING THE MARGINALIZED INTO EPISTEMOLOGY



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the epistemological injustices that Black women face in academia. I review Patricia Hill Collins's work, "Learning from the Outsider Within: Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," which details the unique knowledge standpoint that Black women possess. I build upon the ideas set forth by Collins and other scholars to understand how the traditional knowledge validation process is tainted with political implications and harms Black women. I then offer recommendations rooted in alternative epistemology principles to combat the injustices inherent in academia.



## I. INTRODUCTION

Philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff asserts that epistemology can be political in various ways.<sup>1</sup> The production of knowledge, the identities of researchers, and the way epistemology dictates discourse all are affected by political implications that can leave out or discredit knowledgeable voices. This issue has been particularly true for Black women, as they have consistently faced epistemic injustice and harm. Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist scholar, explores the ways that Black women have been denied epistemic value. The denial of epistemic value for Black women exists, even though Black women have, as Collins describes, an important and unique understanding of the world due to their position in society. This paper aims to understand how the political implications of epistemology are actualized, using the subjugation of Black women as its focus. The first section will review “Learning from the Outsider Within: Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” by Collins, which depicts the unique knowledge attained by Black women.<sup>2</sup> This section will be followed by an analysis that attempts to provide solutions and recommendations for the academy to combat the injustices inherent in the study.

## II. THE OUTSIDER WITHIN

In “The Outsider Within,” Collins details the unique collection of knowledge Black women possess due to their position within society. Starting with the social location of Black women in pre-World War II domestic work, Collins finds that this position allowed Black women to “see White elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from black men and from these groups themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Despite being exploited by their white employers, Black women also gained an untouched insight into the inner workings of their oppressors with their proximity to whiteness. Collins coined the “outsider within” phrase to refer to the fact that as Black women were relegated to a lesser outsider position, these women also gained insight on the insider group that was oppressing them.

The outsider within status that defines the experiences of Black women provides them with a distinctive standpoint on society. Black domestic workers attained a sense of self-affirmation at seeing white power as purely the result of the advantages of racism and not personal

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- 1 Linda Martin Alcoff, “How is Epistemology Political?,” in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 705-18.
  - 2 Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14-S32, 10.1525/sp.1986.33.6.03a00020.
  - 3 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S14.

merit, whether that be intellect, talent, or humanity.<sup>4</sup> However, these workers also understood that they would never be a part of the white families that they worked for. Such a realization equipped Black women to contextualize and produce analyses regarding race, class, and gender as they compared their own lived experiences to the white power they experienced through proximity.

Collins identifies key themes in Black feminist thought that surround the outsider within status of Black women. One theme is the importance of conveying authentic depictions of Black women that challenge the political knowledge validation process which creates stereotypical images instead.<sup>5</sup> Another theme is the interlocking nature of multiple oppressions, namely race, gender, and class. As Black women have “been assigned the inferior half” of several status markers, including the named ones above, the domination over Black women is continual.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Black women often favor more holistic approaches in research and academia to understand the interaction among multiple systems of oppression. In this, Black women adopt intersectionality, a term coined by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, that stresses the idea that different political identities overlap and aggregate the type of oppression or prejudice people experience.<sup>7</sup> Several studies found that the vast majority of Black women refused to privilege gender over race and vice versa. These studies also found connections between inequalities of race, class, and gender in their lives.<sup>8</sup> Prioritizing an intersectional scope as an object of study, Black women seek to develop new theoretical interpretations of such connected interactions between forms of oppression, instead of adding existing theories together.<sup>9</sup>

While there is no monolithic culture for Black women, what exists are various socially constructed cultures that collectively form Black women’s culture. This culture exists with the marginalization that Black women face as their race and gender, together and separately, are never centered within society.<sup>10</sup> With efforts to redefine and explain the importance of Black women’s culture, Black female intellectuals seek to create analytical models to study the interlocking relationship of oppression, consciousness, and activism.

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- 4 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S15.
  - 5 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S16.
  - 6 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S20.
  - 7 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1243, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039>.
  - 8 Catherine E. Harnois, “Race, Gender, and The Black Women’s Standpoint,” *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 1 (2010): 82, 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2009.01157.x.
  - 9 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S20.
  - 10 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1245.



### III. BLACK WOMEN AND THE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE VALIDATION PROCESS

There are critical dimensions that contribute to the knowledge validation process across all disciplines in academia. The first element is thought itself and the idea that systems of knowledge are never complete. Traditionally, systems of knowledge are recognized to be guidelines for what usual thinking entails. Facts are important and serve to validate theories, meaning that theories must also correspond with pre-established facts. Secondly, the community of producers and practitioners also affects the validation process of knowledge. Group insiders generally have similar worldviews or ideologies, which are cultivated with similar educational and professional training. The conditions, like access to education, needed to be able to produce scholarly knowledge claims require political privilege that is not afforded to marginalized communities like Black women. Additionally, Collins points out that to become an insider, one translates “a theory or worldview into one’s own language until, one day, the individual converts to thinking and acting according to that worldview.”<sup>11</sup> Insider scholars must prioritize the advancement and facilitation of existing facts and theories or, if needed, dedicate themselves to resolving existing ambiguities.

While these dimensions have remained fixtures in the traditional knowledge validation process, they have worked to discredit the intellect of marginalized communities like Black women. Many of the insights that Black women possess are at odds with the validation process’s demand for empirical facts, as lived experience and collective wisdom are utilized as sources of knowledge. To become insiders, Black women must assimilate to a standpoint that is not their own but instead the standpoint of the dominant group—white men. In academic spaces, white male subjectivity is the center of analysis, leaving Black women either on the margins or completely ignored. As a result, Black women are forced to accept certain fundamental and self-devaluing assumptions that reflect the way that society understands Black women.

The difficulties that Black women immersed in the insider status face allow them to point out anomalies in research. As outsiders within, Black women are privy to the areas and various power structures at play that enforce their exclusion. Black female scholars typically are the ones to report the omission of facts or observations about Black women relevant to a study. Academia and scholarship largely erase the contributions of Black women to society and research, likely due to their subjugated position and lack of influence in their disciplines.<sup>12</sup>

11 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S26.

12 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” S26.

If the facts and observations about or asserted by Black women are not erased, then they are distorted. This distortion works to serve the existing white male insider standpoint and the facts that this standpoint has already established. Both approaches to facts and observations are harmful to Black women, in academia and at large, in that they devalue and disregard the contributions of Black women.

While their outsider within status allows for the identification of anomalies, Black women do not benefit from their discoveries due to their perceived lack of legitimate professional authority to challenge the errors. Traditional academic insiders are unable to recognize the anomalies they are working in. The inherent flaw in knowledge validation in academia is that it lacks structural intersectionality, as it caters to only a particular identity group (i.e., white men). Black women’s knowledge is frequently invalidated by the traditional validation process, not necessarily out of malice but out of negligence. Crenshaw explains that “intersectional subordination need not to be intentionally produced; in fact it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.”<sup>13</sup> The negligence that academia has for Black women as students, faculty, and intellectuals ends up producing an environment in which anomalies are created and facilitated. Thus, the erasure and harm done unto Black women and their knowledge claims continue to persist.

### IV. ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR EPISTEMOLOGY AND ACADEMIA

To fully utilize the knowledge claims of Black women in academia, I rely on Collins’s alternative epistemology described in her work, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” released in 2000.<sup>14</sup> Instead of forcing Black women to choose to identify with insider status or remain inferior to their white counterparts, I urge academia to embrace elements of alternative epistemology. This new approach to epistemology produces and validates knowledge claims that are consistent with the sources that Black women utilize. The alternative epistemology Collins proposes requires acknowledging and actively incorporating the distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Collins posits that “living life as Black women requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival.”<sup>15</sup> The

13 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1249.

14 Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

15 Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” 257.



difference between knowledge and wisdom is that wisdom is accompanied by lived experiences. Black lived experiences particularly possess a level of credibility because the experiences are passed on. Black feminist and Marxist activist, Angela Davis, explains that “the most powerful way to acknowledge and carry on in a tradition that will move us [Black women] forward is simultaneously to affirm historical continuity and effect some conscious historical ruptures.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the shared experiences form to provide a basis of collective wisdom for Black women.

Collins also calls for the use of narrative description and dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. Dialogue refers to the talk or discussion between subjects as equals, as opposed to the subject and object distinction demanded in positivist methodology upheld by the traditional validation.<sup>17</sup> The dialogue that Collins suggests resists domination in communication, which in turn creates a more welcoming and inviting atmosphere for Black women to share their stories. Just as wisdom is passed down through generations of Black women in the form of lived experiences, they are also told through a narrative form that involves emotions. Here, harmony is emphasized rather than debate to humanize and validate the knower. In emphasizing harmony, Collins's dialogue requires the participation of all individuals to engage in the discussion, placing increased importance on the role of the “hearer,” which in this case would be non-Black women or non-marginalized scholars in general.

Such harmonious debate directly counters that of traditional positivism which is evident in the traditional knowledge validation process and debate. Allowing a personal mode of discussion and interaction to occur counters the political influences that identity and the rules of discourse have on knowledge validation. Instead, marginalized scholars are given the space to develop their knowledge in a manner that is natural to them to prove the concern for their claims. Harmonious debate also permits the hearer's contextual values and positions to be fully actualized in discussion with their colleague or peer. This discussion thus halts the traditional process's means of perpetuating negligence. Additionally, insiders are able to be confronted for their potentially harmful actions and outsiders within are given a safe platform to be seen.

Instead of distancing the researcher and its object in a form of domination, Collins's alternative epistemology brings the two closer together as equal subjects. The discussion that occurs is not meant to be hostile but instead allows Black women to convey their knowledge claims in a form that is natural—narrative telling. The researcher under

this model is also elevated to a more active role in the research process with the discussion, which allows contextual values or potential biases to be made apparent. In their attempt to reach objectivity, traditional positivism fails to realize, as Collins points out, that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process. All of these qualities allow Collins's alternative epistemology to have a higher standard of accountability and, therefore, objectivity.

If academia were to adopt the approach to epistemology that Collins advocates, Black women would be able to effectively employ their outsider within status in their work. Above all, there needs to be an increase in the number of Black women and other marginalized scholars in academia. In translating the elements of Collins's alternative epistemology into directives for academia, I implore academic departments to value the wisdom that arises from non-empirical or quantifiable experiences. Permitting the use of personal collective wisdom as valid sources of knowledge can provide an avenue for marginalized scholars to convey their unique knowledge claims. Additionally, the distance between faculty in the traditional academic hierarchy should be decreased or limited. This can be implemented through mentorships, faculty pairings, or frequent collaborative departmental meetings. Each grouping can allow stronger relationships to be developed across the academic staff, creating a space for insiders and outsiders within to regularly interact with each other harmoniously without domination.

An environment following aspects of alternative epistemology would allow Black women to strike a balance between the strengths offered by both their institutional training as well as personal and/or cultural experiences. The lived experiences of these Black scholars would not have to be compromised or made to fit the facts of the dominant paradigm. Instead, the knowledge and wisdom Black women possess would be considered a valid and legitimate source, offering new ways to understand the world that we live in.

## V. CONCLUSION

The politics of traditional epistemology have harmed Black women by discrediting and invalidating their expressed knowledge claims. This is to the detriment of academia, as Black women hold a unique perspective into understanding the world due to their outsider within status. As oppressed people who have had proximity to the inner workings of white power, Black women are privy to the links between systems of power that are likely not apparent for those operating from the dominant white male standpoint. While this paper has focused on Black women, it is important to note that the findings and analysis drawn apply to other marginalized communities as well. To reconcile the injustices

16 Angela Davis, “Black Women and the Academy,” *Callaloo* 17, no. 2 (1994): 426, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2931740.pdf>.

17 Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology,” 262.



that traditional epistemology enables, alternative epistemologies that reflect and are welcoming of the lived experiences of marginalized groups must be embraced. This paper recommends that spaces in the academy value knowledge claims that are derived out of lived experiences as well as encourage interactions between insiders and outsiders within scholars. This paper also advocates for further research into methods that can combat the epistemic injustice that marginalized scholars face in academia.



Kelly Oduro is a senior at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she is studying political science with a minor in philosophy. Her academic interests lie in political philosophy, identity politics, and feminist philosophy. After graduation, she plans to attend law school. Kelly loves playing instruments and traveling.

