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## Black Faces, White Spaces: Navigating A Women's Center as Queer Black Women Leaders

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## Black Faces, White Spaces: Navigating A Women's Center as Queer Black Women Leaders

Sara L. Blair-Medeiros & Cecily Nelson-Alford

*Many of the Women's centers across the US came to life in response to the continued activism of students who held women identities and their allies. While the establishment of women's centers changed life on college and university campuses for many who hold women identities, the racial and gender demographics of those occupying and utilizing resources and those in leadership has overwhelmingly been cis-gender and white. This does not come as a surprise, as the creation of many of these centers has historically been rooted in white feminist ideology; leaving out Black, Indigenous, Womxn of Color (BIWOC), Trans Womxn, and many others who hold marginalized, intersectional Womxn identities. Through vulnerable and candid conversation, we shed light on the history of the Women's Resources and Research Center at UC Davis (the oldest identity based center on campus turning 50 in winter 2020), the changing nature of the work as it becomes rooted in intersectional feminism, how leadership has changed and now includes two Queer Black Women as the first Black Director and Black Associate Director of the Center, and what it means and has meant for them to be Black faces in a historically white space.*

*Keywords:* Blackness, Women, Black Women, Women's Centers

Dear Reader,

Before we begin, we want to explain that the material you are about to engage with is not rooted in a particular theory, it does not have a research question that the content aims to answer, nor does it comfortably fall into a format that wraps up in a shiny bow. This work is the product of vulnerable and candid conversa-

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*Sara Blair-Medeiros (she/they) serves as the Associate Director of the Women's Resources and Research Center at UC Davis. Her approach to the work is founded in her intersectional life experiences and the philosophy that authentic human relationships are a crucial part of the collective struggle for equity and liberation.*

*Cecily Nelson-Alford (she/her) serves as the Director of the Women's Resources and Research Center at UC Davis. Her experiences as a queer Black womxn and student parent drew her to gender equity work. She believes that how we do the work matters and values tangible tools for creating just working environments.*

tion between us, two Queer Black Women, as we navigate occupying leadership positions in an identity based center that is rooted in a history of centering white women. We offer this to you because speaking our truths is important, powerful, and radical. We honor that the stories we tell are our own and center our experiences. Our voices do not speak for all those who hold the identities we hold and each person has their own lived experience and truth. Lastly, we offer this conversation because Black Lives Matter; All Black Lives Matter.

Now that we have that established, let us start with a little historical context. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention brought upstanding women from across the country together to discuss the state of women in society. This convention sparked a women's movement rooted in achieving equal rights for women under the law; most notably the right to vote. The women's rights marches that followed throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries depict well-dressed, middle class, educated white women, dressed in finery. They are holding signs urging male lawmakers to respect their right to share their voice and participate in the legal creation of a young nation, calling out the hypocrisy of men in positions of power, and demanding women's suffrage. Women such as Ida B. Wells, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony fought hard for Women's right to be a part of the democratic process and prioritized this fight above everything else, including the abolition of slavery (Rampton, 2020). This was first wave-feminism.

Women put themselves on the front lines to fight for the ability to be a part of the democratic process, including the right to access higher education more easily and receive better healthcare. Yet the movement continued to perpetuate racial oppression. Some suffragists, like Susan B. Anthony, were abolitionists, yet prioritized the woman's right to vote above ending the enslavement of Black people. This ideology served to cement the racial hierarchy within a movement that was built on the backs of Black women like Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, and Mary McLeod Bethune (Rampton, 2020).

By the 1960's, white women had the right to vote for a little over 40 years, had been attending colleges and universities, owning property, and were working in a variety of industries. We intentionally say white women because Black women had been at the receiving end of Jim Crow voter suppression, had been kept from attending institutions of higher learning in many states, generally had not been able to own property, and had been barred from working in certain industries. Despite decades of suffrage and new societal standing, upper-middle class white women come together again to challenge societal notions of femininity and womanhood, empowered by the civil rights movement and anti-war movements. While deeply theoretical in nature, physical manifestations of this second wave were visible in protests of the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969;

the throwing away of high heels, lipstick, false eyelashes and girdles (Rampton, 2020). This wave critiqued patriarchy, challenged male-dominated institutions and norms, and confronted hegemonic notions of sexuality demanding access to and enhanced reproductive rights (Rampton, 2020). Although this second wave got lost amidst the many movements taking place during the 1960s, it left us with the establishment of many women's spaces such as the Women's Centers we see on college and university campuses.

Second wave feminism's central focus and essentializing of women barely left room for women of color. Though women of color were more involved in the second wave feminist movements during the 1960s, Black women challenged both first and second wave feminism with critiques rooted in Black Feminist thought. Invisible in both the Black civil rights movement and feminist movements, Black Feminism argued that addressing the experiences of Black women at the intersections of race and gender was crucial to building societal equity and necessary within both movements (Crenshaw, 1989). As Black women directly critiqued second wave feminism and grew Black Feminist thought beyond its early origins with Sojourner Truth, the second wave feminist movement turned outward to focus on a more global feminist agenda. In an effort to be more inclusive, feminism launched an agenda to spread white American feminist thought to the women of the world. While white women engaged in feminism that hoped to "liberate" oppressed women in other countries, leading Black Feminist scholars and activists such as Dr. Angela Davis, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins, brought Black Feminism to the forefront, coined terms such as "white feminist" and pushed ideas like intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), changing the feminist landscape.

The early 2010's saw intersectionality become a driving force in a new wave of feminist thought. Intersectional feminism took the foundational principles of Crenshaw, hooks, and Collins' work and used them to establish a feminist praxis that acknowledged the impact that compounded oppression around a myriad of identities had on the lived experiences of women. Intersectional feminist thought challenges the essentialism of first and second wave feminism, roots the issues in understanding that equity and equality are not the same, and demands inclusion of women who do not identify with the white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, cis-gender, American experience. It demands that we do better as we fight for each other as womxn and that we honor our Black Feminist ancestors upon whose backs our futures have been built.

As queer Black women, our work is rooted deeply in intersectional feminist thought and praxis. We believe that our liberation is tied strongly to the liberation of others which makes the work that we do deeply personal. We did not end up here by chance and we honor that by calling on the Black women that came before us to guide us in the work we do. We offer you this conversation, a sharing of our reflections,

our voices, our truths. Our ancestors made clear to us that speaking our truths is important, it is powerful, it is radical, it is change. We remind you that our voices do not speak for all those who hold the identities we hold, that each person has their own lived experience and voice that can be used to speak their truth. Lastly, we offer this conversation because Black Lives Matter; All Black Lives Matter.

***“Ain’t I a woman and no one thinks I’m too soft for hard labor” - Sojourner Truth (1851)***

**SBM:** So, last time we met we were talking about being in the bodies that we are, identifying the way that we do, and occupying spaces that are historically white. I can give you some sense of what my thought was around the title of this piece, with it being Black faces and white spaces. You and I have talked so much about how we might be mixed, but Blackness in some ways betrays our mixedness, right? We are light skinned but it is very clear that we are not white. I know that you worked at a Women’s Center before this one. We also talked about how we went to large public institutions that had Women’s Centers and the ways we engaged in those spaces as Black mixed people. We both engaged heavily in spaces that did racial justice work. We talked about having to choose between our different identities. Let us start with what we were taught about Women’s Centers and how we occupied these spaces when we were in college. Let us be real, in order to even have a space like the ones that we are in right now you do have to be in a higher educational institution. They do not exist, really, outside of those contexts.

**CNA:** Right. My understanding of the history of Women’s Centers is that they came out of supporting white women who were going to school, had families, and were navigating these roles. Institutions started out as spaces only for white men and then the first women to go to those institutions were white. And that falls in alignment with my personal experience. Historically, the Centers I have interacted with have been predominantly white and center cisgender women. My undergraduate institution had a Women’s Center that was in a basement, and I went there to get a tampon maybe twice; that was the extent of my interaction with that space. I think what you said about the feeling of having to choose resonates with a lot of women of color, especially Black women. For me, being in a Cultural Center, gender and queerness were not things we talked about. We were all Black or People of Color, and at such a white campus, that’s all that seemed to matter. Is that something you resonate with? The feeling that you are expected to minimize parts of yourself depending on who you are around?

**SBM:** I definitely resonate. The understanding that I had about Women’s Centers, was they provided a safe space for cisgender women who wanted to talk about “feminism” which meant making women equal to men and having reasonable access to menstrual supplies or “feminine hygiene products.” Conversations

were around equal pay and rape culture. It did not go much deeper than that. In undergrad, our Women's Center had a library with the classic Vagina Monologues stuff and videos. They were trying in a lot of ways, but I also remember not feeling comfortable or safe in that space because it was comprised of a bunch of cis-white women. It did not feel like a space in which Black Women, and women of color in general, could exist.

***“There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not lead single issue lives.” - Audre Lorde (2016)***

**CNA:** In my experience, and in working with Black women, it takes a long time to get to a space where we recognize how gendered oppression shows up for us because being Black is so salient. My Blackness and growing up poor were foremost in my mind. Also, Women's Centers as we both described them, were centered around a type of sexism that is a white cis-centric experience. That kept me from really connecting because I viewed feminism as being connected to the right to work. Women who look like me have always worked. Women who look like me were the ones who came into white women's homes as nannies and maids so that they could work. A lot of the ways that women are limited in society is centered around a femininity that Black women do not have access to. Being lighter skinned, there are ways that I have benefited, but for the most part, I have never felt like anyone treated me as dainty. So it was really hard to resonate with mainstream feminism.

**SBM:** Yeah. It was not until graduate school that I was introduced to a Women's Center that was talking about Blackness and queerness and the work was happening at the intersections. It was the first time I saw a white woman in a leadership role that built strong collaborative relationships with women of color leaders on campus. She had deep friendships built on spiritual connection, understanding, and reciprocity. She spoke openly about her white privilege and queerness. That was also the first space where I saw a proud Black woman embracing all of herself in an Assistant Director role. I did my first graduate school practicum there because I felt so comfortable and my authentic self was held so beautifully. There was a lot of healing that took place there.

**CNA:** That's really wonderful. I was drawn to Women's Centers through the experience of gendered oppression in Black spaces. I often felt silenced within the Black Student Union as an undergraduate and had Black men speak over me. That helped me see how my Blackness is informed by my womanness. Within Black organizations and movement building, we were still centering the very specific way that Black men experience anti-Blackness. For instance, Black men would complain about being hypervisible on campus. I would try to talk about

how Black women had the opposite experience and we were not seen by anyone. Most of us did not expect to date during college because no one wanted to date Black women, not even Black men. Whereas Black men would more often be hypersexualized. I mean, that is a problem, one is not necessarily better than the other. But why are we talking about one and not the other? I moved toward calling myself feminist after hearing Audre Lorde for the first time, in a recording of her commencement speech at Oberlin College. She started off by saying “I am a Black, lesbian, feminist” and it was the first time I heard someone like me calling themselves a feminist. I was sitting there crying in my class because I just couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

**SBM:** You have touched on a lot of things that I resonate with. I did not really come into my Blackness until graduate school, because I did not have confirmation that I was Black until I was 25. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on what that meant for me. I remember my mom asking me, “does this change the way that you see yourself?” I told her, “no, it doesn’t,” because my mixedness was always at the forefront of my racialized experience. I had Black people telling me, more often than not, “yeah, you’re Black, like, get over yourself, claim that shit, and be okay with it”. It made me start to question why it was so difficult for me to fit into or find a place within the Black community. When I became the Assistant Residence Director for the hall that housed the Black, African-American Diaspora floor, I got to connect with and supervise Resident Advisors, who were part of the Black community and very involved in doing equity work. Many of them were coming from Diasporic immigrant communities and that informed what it meant to be Black for me. It took me supervising them, to really start to see that there were other ways of being Black in this country.

**CNA:** It is interesting that you talked about supervising Black students and that also being a space where you found yourself and a more expansive understanding of Blackness. For me, working at the Women’s Center at UC San Diego and supervising young Black women was pivotal. Even seeing how the Black men were engaging around subjects like misogynoir made me sometimes wish I could be a student with these folks because it felt like, while not perfect, the movement had progressed. I found a lot of who I wanted to be as a Black woman while I was in relationship with these Black students, especially, with many of them being openly queer.

*“I just knew there were stories I wanted to tell.” - Octavia E. Butler (2000)*

**SBM:** The idea of being invisible is something I can resonate with because I was an insider on the outside. When I did get confirmation I was Black, via 23andMe, it did not alter my existence that much. When I got to graduate school I had an opportunity to start differently. I had built relationships with Black women

at the University of Vermont (UVM) that were so empowering. None of them experienced their womanhood in the same way, or their Blackness the same way. The Director of Residential Life, at the time, was in many ways for me like Audre Lorde was for you. She was (is) a mentor to me, and one of the first people I came out to, because she was an out and proud Black woman. Her existence was life altering for me, because she was authentically herself and did not take anybody's shit. Confirming my Blackness before graduate school allowed me to have a good transition into identifying and claiming my Blackness. I feel like I would have been lost in undergrad if I had identified as Black, because I did not have shared understanding with other Black women.

**CNA:** I really resonate with what you are saying. We have a lot of similarities and a lot of differences. I have noticed that, when I talk with Black women, no matter how different our paths, there is this shared understanding. You mentioned that you would have struggled to navigate your Blackness in undergrad. When I think about my time in undergrad truthfully a lot of what we rallied our community around was our shared pain. So that connects to what you shared. A difference in our experiences is I grew up with a Black father who was engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, so I have always been really rooted in my Blackness. While I am mixed, I have always identified as a Black person first. To me, that distinction is really important. College for me was less about coming into my Blackness and more about reconciling the other pieces of me, especially my gender and sexuality, with my Black identity. Raising my daughters has also been another site of learning for me. I am a Black mother, who never had a Black mother, but then there are moments where I recognize that my southern, Black grandmother is in me. Even my ancestors I cannot name are in me. That connects to the challenges in our work in that Black women for centuries have been dehumanized and boiled down to a few archetypes. You can be the Angela Davis type or the mammy type, but there is not much room outside of that. It has been really challenging because, even as we have found more acceptance of ourselves as Black women, the world is not always ready for that. People say they want to see us in leadership roles, but there is still discomfort with being led by us. That or we are pedestalled and everyone looks to us to be perfect and inspire them. They say “YAS Queen”! But still cannot honor our full humanity. The Black women that we often look to in society are pretty much perfect (i.e. Beyonce). And once they are not, they are dismissed. I have felt myself navigating that tug and pull for pretty much my whole life. This intensified when I moved into that Director role. I have been questioned a lot by students and colleagues, including people of color. We have positional privilege within the institution, but we still carry our marginalized identities with us. Navigating that tension is a tightrope that not everyone has to walk. I remember once we had a staff meeting where we were having to reckon with our privilege over our scholar staff. Afterwards, we went to the bookstore to buy supplies for a program and we were followed the entire time. Being a queer Black woman leader has

meant holding all of these things at once. It is walking into rooms and not being noticed or having people assume that you are not the Director. It is having to be twice as good. This is something most Black people experience, but it becomes even more fraught when you add woman and queer to the equation. Folks can't always hold all of you at once. You talked about the out and proud Black woman you looked up to. That is really beautiful that she was able to be so authentic, but I wonder what it took for her to get there and how lonely it might have been at times. It can be a lonely road to be a trailblazer for others. That needs to be balanced with acknowledging your own humanity. It is a complicated dance to have to carefully consider what I say and how I say it and what I wear to make sure I am well-received. It is not a dance that everyone has to do.

**SBM:** Yeah, the things that you block out of your mind when you are over it! I remember that moment in staff-meeting, being silenced by our staff; to top it all off, it was a conversation around anti-Blackness. I've thought about this field and what it means to show up in this body, as a light skinned Black woman. I am challenged by the fact that I am not just a queer Black woman, but I am a queer cis-gender femme woman. Our femme-ness has also erased our queerness, to some extent. Working in a space like ours, if we are not physically showing that we are queer, we have to out ourselves multiple times a day. We have to claim our Blackness, and be Black and out, or else we disappear. Working in a center where your queerness should be celebrated, it is weird to be erased, because it feels like we are either Black or we are queer, not both. My Blackness betrays me because I cannot hide it. But my queerness is also such a huge part of who I am, and to not be seen as that, or to have to out myself every single time is also a challenge for me. Those identities are intertwined and I cannot separate them. I get frustrated with all of that. I also understand my cis-gendered identity and the privilege that comes with that. Trust that I get it and give me the grace and the opportunity to also claim my queerness, and those identities that I have worked really hard to feel connected to. Just because I am using my voice as a Black person to explain to you that this does not feel good, do not look at me sideways and deflect with "you need to check your cis-privilege" or "you need to check your positionality." I understand all those things still exist while I am also saying that was fucked up and as a Black person it does not feel good.

**CNA:** Yes! As queer Black women, we know what it is to be cut down by other people into bite sized pieces. I'm going to transition into sharing some of the ways this grounds us. That feeling of being cut down or rendered invisible drives a lot of how we empower others. Also, while we are both trying to let go of second guessing and perfectionism, it has made us more mindful of our impact and more reflective. In this role, I have been forced to be vulnerable and take some knocks, which hurts, but also it has led to a more authentic approach to leadership. My

hope is that, in being my authentic self, I give others permission to do the same. I have also noticed that, when Black women lead, we tend to be about action. We have served as the backbone of so many movements. This is the legacy of Black women. Black women were asked to save the US during this election cycle. It is problematic to ask that of us, but I am also grateful to be connected to that lineage. My leadership has also really been informed by adrienne maree brown's "Emergent Strategy" (2017). This book introduced me to tangible tools for leadership in a social justice context. Among these are the Social Transformation Project, which offers tools for things like equitable decision making. Another important grounding lesson in leadership for me is in recognizing perspectives outside of my own. I have been second-guessed my entire life, which sucks, but it has made me receptive to feedback and new ways of thinking. I do not mean to say this is universal but I have noticed some of these trends in how Black women lead. These are some of the ways that the legacy of Black women lives on in us, whether or not you had a Black mother or grandmother in your home. I see it in my kids; my eight year old will sometimes sound like somebody's Southern grandmother, and she has never even been to the South. But there is something in us. When the world is against you, you learn how to survive. To borrow from adrienne maree brown, you learn to "take root". In "Emergent Strategy" she shares an analogy of trees connecting their roots to each other to weather the storm and I believe we have done that (2017) between the two of us and with others on campus. I think that is something that a lot of Black women inherently do, because otherwise we would not survive.

**SBM:** I love and agree with you on that! I know exactly what you're talking about, which is underneath it all, we are going to do whatever it takes, and I think that is beautifully embodied by Black women ancestors like Harriet Tubman; there is a reason why she was called the Black Moses. There is a reason that resilience and survival is ingrained in us to make the change happen. And I would also say that we are able to take feedback and apply it. We can take it, and we can figure out the lessons; what do we need to do so that it does not happen again? We do not do it to make other people feel comfortable, but do it because we can see the value in the lessons.

*"I think it is healing behavior, to look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it." - adrienne maree brown (2017)*

**SBM:** It is about seeing where the lessons are for us, for our growth, and really valuing the development of ourselves. There is something about being a perpetual learner that opens our ability to retain and absorb things, to hold onto those things, to figure out the connections, and how to best utilize them in life. I see in both of us a drive to understand ourselves and to own the fact that maybe we have not done that well in the past, and there is always an opportunity to continue the

growth. We have reached this place of self wisdom and understanding that we are not perfect. That allows us to accept, understand, and honor the flaws of the people around us. The way we talk about the challenges comes with compassion. Something I appreciate about the two of us is: whatever our feelings are about a situation at that moment, they never create an inability for us to show up and care about the people that we work with. The work we do can be challenging because we are working with people that are actively creating change with us and are also actively perpetuating some of the shit we are trying to dismantle. We have been called out and have not always been held with care; which is why we are so passionate about creating spaces where folks can feel held in their biggest and best mistakes (brown, 2020). Also, not taking any of that shit personally and finding a way to “let it go” as Elsa so eloquently said.

**CNA:** Yes, the theoretical underpinnings of our work are the Disney movie *Frozen* (laughs). But seriously, yes to everything you said. Black women have often been leaders, but have also really engaged in empowering the people. And so, another underpinning of the work for me as of late has been leaderful practice where you recognize the capacity of everyone within the organization to lead. I try to resist the call of becoming the singular charismatic leader. Think about the way that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr led. It was beautiful, but there was also a lot of erasure of the folks doing the work on the ground. I am thinking also about the Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian organization, and the famous statement they wrote in the 70's. One piece that resonates strongly with me is the following, “We reject queendom and pedestals, we reject walking one step behind. To be human, levelly human is enough” (1986). I connect to this desire to acknowledge the humanity of Black women and to walk in step with each other. To be in power with versus power over. I strive to be somebody who is not threatened by the brilliance around me and does not try to snuff that out. That is something I learned from watching Black women over time. As much as we learn from our history, we have also talked a lot about how we look to the future. Unfortunately, we are sometimes having to become something that we have yet to see, so a lot of my work is rooted in science fiction. In particular the worlds that the author Octavia Butler built. She put Black women at the center and they get to be complex, bad-ass, tender humans. That has given me something to look to as I navigate the world with these complicated identities I have. I do not know too many Women's Center Directors or Associate Directors who are queer Black women. So we really get to envision what we are in this role. What is a Center under our leadership going to look like? We are laying the track as we go, which is scary, but it is also an immense opportunity. I am grateful to have works like Octavia Butler's and adrienne maree brown to ground me.

**SBM:** I agree with you wholeheartedly. Thank you for doing this with me, because it was different from what we have done in the past. I have appreciated the spaces

where we have co-created sessions and proposals together. It has been nice to talk with you about these things that are so much at the core of who we are and how we show up in the work that we do. Thank you.

**CNA:** Thank you for always pushing me and acting as a femtor. I am grateful to have been in conversation with you about this and to get to continue co-creating our space. I hope that this conversation will have an impact on others and anyone who reads this can see their role in building a radical future for all of us.

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