Negotiating the Insider/Outsider Status: Black Feminist Ethnography and Legislative Studies

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Abstract: This essay bridges the gaps in the literature within legislative studies by illustrating the usefulness of feminist ethnography as a methodological intervention into studying legislative behavior. Black feminist epistemology is a useful tool for making new knowledge claims within an existing body of knowledge. I use anecdotes and examples from my fieldwork in the Maryland state legislature to expose how race and gender impact both the process and the outcome of data collection. I demonstrate how my experience as an African American woman researcher whose work centers on Black women Maryland state legislators, which I situate within Black feminist epistemology, shaped my access to subjects and data interpretation. The points of information that legislators shared with me, my access to them, the assumptions they made about me, gaps in conversation, and the context in which they shared their policy positions, were all mediated by my own identity. By placing my experiences as a Black woman at the center of analysis, this study offers fresh insight on the prevailing paradigms and epistemologies in legislative studies.

> My window on the constituency life of Black members of Congress has been intermittent and tiny.... I am a white researcher immersed, briefly, in the affairs of black communities. I am, of course, a stranger in any community beyond my own. But the strangeness of race is an extra hurdle in achieving rapport and in trying to figure out what is going on....Very early, I recognized that African American scholars are best equipped to do the job.
> — Richard Fenno, *Going Home: Black Representatives and Their Constituents*

Few legislative studies scholars employ feminist ethnography as a method for exploring legislative behavior.[1] Most studies rely on quantitative data, such as roll call votes, bill sponsorship, and legislative hearings, but rarely are qualitative methods, such as elite interviews, used to explore why elected representatives vote a certain way or how they negotiate with various constituencies. The premier ethnographic studies of legislative behavior, Richard Fenno's *Homestyle* (1978) and *Going Home* (2003), follow the careers of members of Congress both in Washington, DC and in their home districts. Primarily concerned with how the ways in which an elected representative views his or her constituency affect his or her political behavior, Fenno uses ethnography to draw conclusions about how politicians develop strategies to best represent the needs of their constituents while simultaneously achieving their own goals within Congress.

Fenno's ethnographic work does not, however, place significant emphasis on the role of his race and gender identity, or that of his interviewees, in either the research process or the outcome. Fenno (1978, 2003) practices self-reflexivity and acknowledges that his identity influenced what Black and women members of Congress shared with him. However, as he notes in the epigraph to this essay, taken from his 2003 study with Black members of Congress, his study may have produced different results if an African American researcher conducted this research. This recognition draws into question the validity of the claims made throughout the study. Lacking an epistemological and methodological framework to situate

the existing power/knowledge relationships between the researcher, the member of Congress, legislative staff, and constituents, Fenno's study does not readily acknowledge the role that his identity as a White male researcher played in the data collection process. Recognizing that Fenno's study would have produced different results given a different researcher alerts scholars to the perceived objectivity of the research. However, it is important to note that race is a social construction and that both race and gender, neither of which is an objectively or biologically fixed aspect of identity, have real-world consequences for the study of politics. Trained as both a political scientist and a feminist scholar who studies legislative behavior, I argue here that the field of legislative studies can benefit from feminist methodologies.

In contrast to the ethnographic approach taken in Fenno's groundbreaking studies, feminist ethnographers have used standpoint analysis to position themselves within cultural groups or communities. Women's diverse social locations have "contributed significantly to reconceptualization of sociological categories—especially 'politics,' 'work,' and 'family'—typically used to analyze social life" (Naples 1998, 3). As such, feminist ethnographers have employed Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges" to highlight the partiality and shifting nature of standpoints. Feminist standpoint theorists argue that knowledge is socially situated, that marginalized groups are positioned to ask questions, and are aware of and have a clearer view of what is going on around them than non-marginalized groups, and that research on power relations should originate with the lives of the marginalized (Collins 1990; Haraway 1991; Harding 1991; Hartsock 2004; Smith 1974). Informed by standpoint theories, feminist ethnographers construct self-reflexive strategies for field research to make the often implicit processes of research explicit. The process of reflexivity, characterized by introspection and the willingness to learn about oneself, one's research purpose, and one's relationships with the social world, exposes the varied strategies that are confronted at the beginning of the research process (Naples and Sachs 2000).

This essay bridges the gaps in the literature within legislative studies by illustrating the usefulness of feminist ethnography as a methodological intervention into studying legislative behavior. More specifically, I posit that Black feminist epistemology is a useful tool for making new knowledge claims within an existing body of knowledge. A Black feminist epistemology, which is grounded in Black women's experiences and cognitive styles, contends that the multiply marginalized draw from personal experience as insiders who are oppressed within their social order. Black women's distance from power enables them to critique the system. I use anecdotes and examples from my fieldwork in the Maryland state legislature to expose how race and gender impact both the process and the outcome of data collection.[2] I demonstrate how my experience as an African American woman researcher whose work centers on Black women Maryland state legislators, which I situate within Black feminist epistemology, shaped my access to subjects and data interpretation.[3] The points of information that legislators shared with me, my access to them, the assumptions they made about me, gaps in conversation, and the context in which they shared their policy positions, were all mediated by my own identity. By placing my experiences as a Black woman at the center of analysis, this study offers fresh insight on the prevailing paradigms and epistemologies in legislative studies. I turn now to an overview of Black feminist scholarship to illustrate how knowledge is partial and how one's individual experiences and identities facilitate knowledge production.

The Outsider Within

Black feminist academics are positioned to use their social location to distinctively analyze race, class, and gender in various social settings. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) contends, through her concept of "outsider within," that Black women have an epistemic privilege of functioning within the academy both as credentialed

insiders and as outsiders who are decentered in the academic context as women and Blacks.[4] Black women who enter organizations under White men's control, such as the academy, are not afforded the full rights and privileges in hierarchical and cultural structures controlled by this insider group. As outsiders within academia, Black women scholars confront Eurocentric masculinist political and epistemological constraints. Those whose work engages in Black feminist epistemology face the challenge of having their knowledge claims validated or invalidated by a system predicated upon a Eurocentric masculinist framework.[5] As agents of knowledge, Black women draw from their lived experiences, placed within a particular set of material, historical, and epistemological conditions, to anchor specific knowledge claims.[6]

My experience during a presentation of my research provides an example of what it means to be an outsider within. A White female student asked, "How accurate are your findings? Don't you think legislators, particularly White men, would have told you different things if you were a White person?" I informed the student that she was correct. My identity impacts what legislators said and their willingness to interview with me. She pressed me to acknowledge that my project would have had a completely different outcome if I were White. The ultimate implication was that my findings were not generalizable and, as a result, do not live up to the gold standard of good social science research. Before I could respond to this, a Black female student retorted that White researchers who conduct fieldwork on minority groups are not questioned for the objectivity of their identity. Her White female colleague was forced to acknowledge the double standard of academic legitimacy, authority, and validity. I then intervened to add that my research seeks to uncover the partiality of all truths by taking seriously the experiences and claims of African American women. Furthermore, I expressed to the students that the multi-marginalized see the social world with a clarity that others with more privileged identities are unable to command (Matsuda 1992; Wing 1990–1991). My role as a social scientist is to uncover and reveal the numerous truths based on identity, positionality, and experience.

My interaction with the students illustrates that Black women scholars confront challenges as outsiders within—as marginalized academics whose standpoint uniquely equips them to uncover some aspects of reality and truth that are concealed, unnoticed, and masked by conventional methodological and epistemological frameworks (Collins 1986)—and that they are reminded of their marginality in academic settings. The student's questioning of the validity of my research outcomes because I am an African American woman reinforces my claim that legislative studies can benefit from my particular epistemological standpoint, which underscores the way all perspectives are partial and mediated by individual experiences and identities.[7] Black women's voices express both racialized and gendered perspectives, capturing a reality from "the outside in and from the inside out" (hooks 1984). As such, my study on Black women state legislators and the role of identity in political decision making is enriched by the marginality of my outsider-within status (Brown 2010). Informed by a Black feminist standpoint, my ethnographic research on the Maryland state legislature reveals a more nuanced, dynamic, and unique understanding of legislators' behavior than is available through standard methodology.[8] The following section details and describes three ways in which my identity as a Black woman was integral to my research process.

Sister-to-Sister

As an African American woman interviewing African American women state legislators, I avoided the position of researcher-as-stranger (Clifford 1986). I was familiar with cultural norms and meanings that are common to Black women. Black feminists assert that African American women have a shared historical reality based on the dual subordination of both race and gender. This subordination enables a clearer

understanding of the relationships among systems of oppression (Collins 1990). The marginalization of Black women, as members of a specific group characterized by their gender and race, creates a shared experience. Black feminists argue that there is a complex dual relationship in both Black culture and the dominant culture that Black women have to negotiate in their daily interactions (hooks 1984). Thus, as a Black woman researching Black women, I was considered a racial and gendered insider. In the following discussion, I pay special attention to four significant and often interwoven insider characteristics: culture competence, morphology, interactionality, and performance.

Black women state legislators were comfortable making culturally based statements during our conversations.[9] As such, we engaged in what Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett refer to as "sister-to-sister talk," defined by them as "Afrocentric slang to describe congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between Black women" (2003, 205). Participating in sister-to-sister talk requires a form of cultural competence and mandates that I adopt approaches that "both reflect and respect the values, expectations, and preferences" (Pinderhughes 1989, 163) of the Black women Maryland state legislators. What enables sister-to-sister talk is the shared position of Black women. I was introduced to the Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland (LBCM) during its meeting on March 12, 2009 by a freshman African American woman delegate. The chair of the caucus, a Black woman, then instructed caucus members to "help the baby and give her an interview" because I was one of their own looking to further research on "us." The LBCM chair served as my liaison to Black legislators. As a result of her urging, a few members of the Black Caucus personally introduced themselves and said that they would be more than happy to interview with me. The endorsement of my research project by the chair of the LBCM was directly related to my identity as an African American doing research on African Americans. Being seen as one of their own encouraged the LBCM members to readily support my project. Several instructed their staffers to set up appointments with me for that afternoon. This introduction ultimately yielded twelve interviews with African American legislators who initially failed to respond to my letter requesting an interview. My identity as an African American influenced the legislators' willingness to meet with me. Compared with Fenno's experience, as captured in the epigraph above, my insider racial identity allowed me to build a rapport with the members of the LBCM.

Even with the use of sister-to-sister talk, my experiences within the Maryland state legislature indicate the complexity of the insider/outsider status. As a "native researcher," I was cautious not to exaggerate this familiarity, as one cannot assume a homogenous culture (Moffat 1992). In the United States, where race-based group membership is salient for one's sociopolitical identity, insider status is still constituted by other factors that may make race an aspect of secondary consequence: "Thus, the meaning and impact of racial difference are complicated by age, class, accent, education, national origins, region, as well as sexuality" (Winddance Twine 2000, 9). As intersectionality scholars argue, conceptualization of Black women's identities requires more than the realization that race, gender, and other categories coincide (Jordan-Zachary 2007; Hancock 2003; Simien 2006; Smooth 2001). Identity is also fluid, though at times it becomes fixed. Salient identities are primed based on the context and situation of a particular phenomenon. As a result, simply sharing the same race and gender as the Black women state legislators did not guarantee that I would be able to gather more data from them (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003). Instead of *more* data, *different* data was mined and accessed because of my shared or overlapping identity with the legislators.

I was aware of the differences and nuances based on generational, parochial, economical, and motherhood status between the Black women legislators and myself. Furthermore, as a member of non-political elite,

I was cognizant of my outsider status as an ordinary citizen. Lastly, as a resident of New Jersey, I was not seen as an insider, a Maryland resident acutely familiar with the intricacies of Maryland state politics. These differences made it clear that one can be an outsider even when conducting fieldwork in one's own racial/ gender in-group. As a result, "identifying with 'them' does not necessarily mean you are like them, or that they are like one another, or that they all trust or identify with you, or that they want to be studied by you" (Moffatt 1992, 207). Namely, my relative insider status as an African American woman could only take me so far.

An example of the benefits of my insider status is the LBCM chair's ability to recruit participants for my study among the legislators who had previously declined my request to interview. After the Black Caucus meeting, the chair asked if I secured interviews with everyone I wished to speak with. I informed her that Delegate A, a Black woman legislator, repeatedly refused my invitation to talk with her and that my study required interviews with all twenty of Maryland's Black women legislators. The chair informed me that she would work on Delegate A to make sure she understood how important it was to my study for me to speak with her. Later that afternoon, the chair's staffer instructed me to wait for Delegate A outside of her committee meeting. After the committee meeting, the LBCM chair and Delegate A met with me to announce that she would indeed grant me an interview. Delegate A apologized for her initial refusal by explaining that she had bad experiences with other reporters and researchers who misinterpreted her words. She further explained that LBCM chair said I would not misconstrue her statements because, as a Black woman doing research on Black women, I would understand her. This statement cued a cultural context that not only presupposed my understanding of the legislator's intent but was also steeped in African American women's vernacular. During our conversation, several sister-to-sister terms were used, such as "girl," "girlfriend," "sistah," and "homegirl," to indicate that we shared a special bond as Black women. Thus, because Delegate A saw me as a "girlfriend" due to my race and gender, she agreed to grant me the interview.

While obtaining access to legislators was initially difficult, once they agreed to meet with me, the conversations with the majority of Black women legislators followed naturally. However, my conversation with Delegate S, a young and newly elected Black woman, was much more constrained. She agreed to meet with me after I contacted her office with a description of my research project in April 2011. She was extremely guarded during our first interactions in the summer of 2011. She provided short responses to my questions or gave one-word answers.[10] However, Delegate S's demeanor and candor immediately changed when I asked her about her decision to wear her natural hair in micro-braids. This young, dark-skinned, and reserved delegate opened up after I expressed interest in learning about her hair. At this point in the interview, our sister-to-sister talk began. The very personal decision of how to style one's hair is embedded in racialized and gendered norms that place Black women and their hair in a unique position. African American women state legislators face hurdles because of the unique texture and appearance of Black hair (Shelby Rosette and Dumas 2007).

Delegate S was most at ease discussing the challenges of wearing natural hair on the campaign trail. We met in the conference room of Delegate S's law office in July 2009. She wore her hair in micro-braids, which she fastened to one side of her face. Delegate S explained that her hair has played a major part in how constituents view her. She struggled with the decision of how to wear her hair in photos featured in her campaign materials, because she learned that voters preferred her with straight hair. As a result, Delegate S does not wear her natural hair out during her legislative duties in Annapolis or while meeting with constituents. This young delegate seemed comfortable in discussing how her approach to hair has matured as she experienced new milestones in her life. Because Delegate S and I are relatively close in

age, and because I shared with her that I am struggling with my own decision to continue to chemically straighten my hair, the conversation was very easy and informal.

After building a rapport based on the challenges of transitioning chemically straightened hair back to its natural state, Delegate S and I bonded by sharing hair-trauma stories. Delegate S was initially the most standoffish and reluctant participant among my interviewees; however, she ultimately proved to be easier than many other legislators to converse with. After our discussion about hair, Delegate S became much more open and frank. Our sister-to-sister talk helped her become more receptive towards both me and my project.

What may be gained from invoking a standpoint defined by race and gender is an interpretative complexity grounded in the racialized and gendered group experiences of Black women. Delegate A viewed me as an insider because my project was endorsed by another Black woman whom she respected, and Delegate S viewed me as an insider because we shared similar hair textures and trials around the transitioning process. Both interviewing experiences centered on my cultural performance as a Black woman. Beyond my morphological and phenomenological characteristics of being a Black woman, my speech and non-verbal communication reflected the "elements and themes of Black women's culture and traditions" (Madison 1993, 213).[11] Because identity is a process we perform (Butler 1988), the interstices of my interactions with the Black women state legislators mirrored a style of raced and gendered performance that elicited specific reactions, reinforcing my group membership.[12] As a result, Delegates A and S trusted me to accurately represent their opinions and views on legislative decision making within my study because they perceived that we shared a common culture.

As an Insider: How Race and Gender Influence Other Identities

Brackette Williams (1996) illustrates that one's racial identity is perceived differently depending on the individual's fluctuating relationship to members of her community. In her study with elderly Black rural residents of Alabama, this African American woman researcher demonstrated the shifting nature of one's insider/outsider status by showcasing how community members framed, defined, and placed differing values on her identity based on the particular social spaces in which she encountered them. In turn, she was forced to negotiate her identity and justify her work. I, too, experienced the realization that one's fixed features, such as race and gender, require that special attention be paid to one's own social location by renegotiating how identity was defined in the field. This section expands on the interwoven insider characteristics to illustrate how other identities—in addition to race and gender—influence how a researcher's insider status is construed.

Take, for example, my experience with older Black women legislators around marriage equality legislation. The issue of same-sex marriage pivots around an array of societal, religious, and cultural norms that spark contentious debates within Black communities. Same-sex marriage is a racialized issue for African Americans. While same-sex marriage has been queered within the dominant discourse, Blackness also occupies a queered space. Both are constructions of identity that deviate from the expected normalcy of hetero-Whiteness. Moreover, regulation of sexual difference is part and parcel of general regulation of Black culture. The institution of slavery and its aftermath have queered African Americans by constructing them as deviants. As a result, "Blackness" and "queerness" complement each other by signifying race and sexuality in overlapping as well as disparate ways (Johnson 2003, 93). During my field research in 2009, other culturally relevant cues were offered by older Black women legislators when I asked about House Bill 1055 and Senate Bill 565, the Religious Freedom and Protection of Civil Marriage Bill, which would

establish marriage between same-sex partners.[13] Race affects the likelihood that one will support same-sex marriage.[14] There is a trajectory of Black religious intolerance toward homosexuality that influences the perception of same-sex unions by African Americans. Because Blacks face sexual stereotypes tied to their race, such as the emasculation of Black manhood and the devaluation of Black womanhood, it is conceivable that African Americans would have mixed attitudes on same-sex marriage. Therefore, it is not surprising that several older African American women legislators were not supporters of the Religious Freedom and Protection of Civil Marriage Bill. However, through tying same-sex marriage legislation to recollections of de jure prohibition of interracial marriage and to conversations around civil rights, on one hand, and to Black religiosity on the other, African Americans are likely to link queer struggles for marriage equality to their own struggle for full inclusion in the American polity (Brown 2010).

When I asked her to detail the steps she would include in the legislative decision-making process regarding HB 1055, Delegate C, an older Black woman, held up her Bible. Delegate C did not provide a commentary on the role of the Black church in her legislative decision making, nor did she elaborate her views as a Christian who opposes same-sex marriage on religious grounds.[15] I read this gesture as a culturally significant cue because, as a fellow Black woman, Delegate C assumed that I was familiar with biblical scripture and the Black church's position on same-sex marriage. Other African American legislators shared with me that they do not support same-sex marriage for religious reasons. These legislators all responded to my question with culturally relevant tropes. Identifying as either Baptists, Methodists, or Pentecostals—the three major African American Christian denominations—these legislators stated that the Bible views homosexuality as a sin, and that because of their religious beliefs they could not support the proposed legislation. For example, Delegate D, another older Black woman, who also opposed same-sex marriage, said:

> The marriage piece is troubling. It has to do with my upbringing; my father was a Baptist minister... I have my Bible here that talks about the marriage between a man and woman from a moral and religious standpoint that would create some problems for me.

By failing to fully expand on their discussion around opposing the Religious Freedom and Protection of Civil Marriage Bill, these older Black women legislators assumed that I was a part of a Black church or that I shared the common knowledge of the church's position on this matter. The Black women legislators did not quote specific verses from their Bible to condemn same-sex marriage, nor did they offer any other religious evidence to oppose same-sex unions. Instead, the legislators assumed that I was familiar with these passages of the Bible to such an extent where they did not have to offer proof of Old Testament's condemnation of homosexuality. No further details or explanations were given, since these legislators saw me as a religious insider due to my race. In fact, no one allowed that I might not be a Christian. Indeed, throughout the interview I gave off cues that signalled my recognition of what they were trying to communicate. By smiling and nodding, my performance of identity indicated that I understand their non-verbal cues. As such, the legislators were reading my cues just as much I was reading theirs.

The older Black women legislators would most likely share their opposition to same-sex marriage with other researchers. Many of these lawmakers have publicly expressed their opinions on HB 1055 and SB 565 to news media and in meetings with their constituents. However, the older Black women delegates gave me different types of information based on my racial insider status. Although the bill explicitly stated that religious institutions do not have to solemnize a marriage they oppose, this group of legislators made a culturally and racially based assessment of the bill, which allowed them to include their religious beliefs. These assumptions, as expressed in their silences, unspoken indicators, and responses, allowed me to make an explicit connection between their views on the legislation and the influence of Black religiosity. As a

result, the type of data that I gathered is much more nuanced than the evidence of a simple yes-or-no vote. Because of my insider status, I was able to access specific, culturally based reasoning behind their position on this issue.

In addition to considering my race and gender identity, legislators and their staffers made assumptions about my socioeconomic background. These assumptions also proved to offer me an inroad in gaining access to legislators. While I shared the same racial identity, and often the same gender identity, as many of the legislative staff to Black representatives, I found that varying aspects of my being were prioritized by certain staffers. Take, for example, two interactions I had with staff members for Senators G and H.

In gaining access to the legislators, I would often speak with staff members to inquire about being put on the legislators' schedule. The staff members are gatekeepers of these schedules, and I understood that it was important to make a good impression on the staff if I hoped to speak with certain legislators. The staff members made certain assumptions about me based on particular aspects of my identity. One such assumption inferred my class background from my identity as a PhD student: some staff members believed that I belonged to the middle class because I was pursuing a higher degree. For example, a staffer in Senator G's office mentioned that I had an obligation to give back to the less fortunate because I had been blessed with the opportunity to go to school. This staffer commented on her work with inner-city Baltimore youth who do not have Black role models. She said that I should serve as a mentor for young Black girls who did not think college was accessible. During this conversation, the staffer said that I had "no idea what it was like to grow up in poverty and not have a future," having inferred from my professional status and educational background that I grew up in a middle-class family.

My interaction with this staffer indicates that she connected my racial identity to an understanding of the social, economic, or political future of other Blacks. Without asking much about my background, she assumed that I believed I had a responsibility to connect with impoverished Black youth because of our shared racial background. Furthermore, her comments about my class status were clearly tied to the likelihood that upon graduation I would become a college professor. When Black women achieve entry into high-status professions, their work is viewed by African American communities as a source of economic gain and preservation of the family (Roos 2009). African American professional middle-class women are expected to "lift as we climb" (Giddings 1984; Scott 1990; Ruffins 1994). As a major force helping to shape the Black community life, African American women have historically kept their families afloat while challenging disparaging stereotypes of themselves, providing for the children and the elderly, working outside the home, taking care of their home, children, and husbands, as well as being active participants in their church, civic organizations, and sororities. These feats led W. E. B. Du Bois (1920) to remark that of all American women African American women were the most remarkable.

Black feminist scholars have questioned the degree to which Black women can have it all—the professional career and family—while living up to the strong Black woman archetype (Harris Perry 2011; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Wallace 1979). Hip-hop-era Black feminist scholars [16] Chambers (2003) and Morgan (1999) ask African American women to reassess Black feminist standpoint theory in order to understand whether Black women's marginality is due to an uninvestigated view of gender, class, and race consciousness. Are Black women trying to live up to the "strong Black woman" stereotype at the expense of their mental and physical well-being? Are Black women forcing or shaming other Black women to carry this mantle? The staffer's assumptions tied my race, gender, and both my current and future class status (as she perceived them) to her analysis of my positionality in her request for my involvement in her community organization. For her, my educational opportunities were related to my class status, which is uniquely coupled with the role played by African American women in uplifting our communities.

Varying perceptions of my identity among Black women staffers shaped the data I gathered. While one particular staffer viewed me as a middle-class, educated, and soon-to-be-professional Black woman, other staffers assumed that I was a "poor student." Perhaps because I would eat my lunch (a peanut-butter sandwich and a bottle of water) in the statehouse, while waiting to talk with legislators, the staffers—and at times the legislators—who witnessed my paltry meal assumed that I was economically disadvantaged. For example, when my interview with Senator H was pushed back due to her busy committee schedule, the senator instructed her staff to "feed the child." It was the Senator H's birthday and a staffer prepared a large home-cooked lunch for the celebration. The meal consisted of smoked turkey, macaroni and cheese, greens, and banana pudding. The staffer who was instructed to "feed me" said, "I know you must be hungry. I saw you eating that dry sandwich. I remember what it was like to be in college—you always need a good home-cooked meal." The staffer then asked me about the last time I had a "good meal" and said that she knows college students struggle.

My appearance and graduate-student status opened the door for legislators and staffers to invite me to meals during which they then began to feel comfortable with me and engage in informal conversations. The narrative of being a "poor college student" and my appearance as a petite woman opened up additional spaces where legislators and their staff could connect with me. Numerous comments were made about my small size: "What are you, a size 1?"; or, "I know you don't eat—your pants are falling off you"; and my favorite, "Baby, you look like you need a meal—you're an itty bitty thing." As a member of Generation Y or the Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2004), my age was a focal point for some staffers and legislators. While the words "child" and "baby" are terms of familiarity used by African American elders to denote an informal connection to youth, their use also signaled that older Black women were willing to serve as my "other-mothers," an informal fictive kin network of supporters that take on the responsibilities and roles of kin (Collins 1990; Marshall 1991; Naylor 1988). African American "other-mothers" use their time and resources to tend to the needs of the children, whether they are related or not. In this way, I was looked after by "other-mothers" in the legislature as if I were their own kinfolk. By providing lunch and other meals during my fieldwork, my "other-mothers" went beyond simply providing nourishment; they also helped to provide access to their fellow legislators and explained specific details of the Maryland state legislature that I otherwise would not have access to.

Because of my status as a PhD student, my size, and my age, both staffers and legislators granted me rare personal access in which we engaged in informal conversations about themselves, their families, and their experience in the legislature. Around meals, the legislators and staffers let their guard down as they became more personal and less professional. Political correctness was out the door, as many shared funny stories about their political experiences. The minority legislators and staffers primarily extended invitations to join them in activities such as meals or Delegation Nights because of my outward appearance and my researcher status. However, our conversations progressed into more informal and personal dialogue because of other shared experiences, views, and characteristics. This initial access was granted, I believe, due to my insider status, which in turn was based on my morphology and performance of Black culture.

Also illustrating how my race and gender enhanced the interwoven insider characteristics of cultural competence, morphology, interactionality, and performance are examples of how affiliation with a Black cultural institution enhanced my data collection. Because I am a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, I had an instant connection with some legislators and staff. For example, one staffer was my sorority sister, which I discovered by noticing our sorority crest displayed on her desk. Upon completion of the interview, the staffer/soror asked me how it went. I confided in her that I was a bit disappointed in the interview,

because her legislator gave me canned political answers that were extremely vague. The staffer/soror told me that the legislator acted this way because she was "trying to sound professional," since she was a freshman. She then told her legislator, in front of me, that I was her soror and to "keep it real" with me because I was "good people." The legislator than told me to come back for a "real" interview after voting session, which I did.

My cultural connection to the Black community vis-à-vis my sorority affiliation significantly improved the candor in which the legislators and staffers engaged with me. Most notably, as a sorority insider I was granted access to legislators with whom I originally had not been able to interview. While the relaxed and lighthearted conversations, which were at first about our sorority specifically and belonging to a historically Black cultural institution more generally, helped to ease the formality of the elite interviews with the legislators, they also created easiness with the staffers. The legislators and staffers began to take interest in me as much as in my research project. They began to offer ways to help me after learning that I was a Delta. This connection would not have been made if I had not been a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization. While these fraternities and sororities were established to provide a brotherhood or sisterhood environment for African American college students, the lifelong connections they create remain extremely useful in both professional and personal environments.

Discussion of Insights

The multiple intersections of my identity allowed me to make several cultural and race-based connections with Maryland legislators and their staffers. In combination with my appearance and role as a researcher, my identity afforded opportunity and access to key people, which enhanced my study. These connections illustrate that identity is salient in determining how the data is collected and what kinds of data are available to researchers. However, because the formal boundaries between the researcher and the researched were crossed during our informal interactions, I am aware that the legislators may have been more relaxed during our formal interviews than they otherwise might have been with another researcher. Because of this, I have chosen to remove their names from their quotes in order to be respectful of the relationships developed during my fieldwork.

My subjective experience as a Black woman, sorority member, and graduate student began to be a source of anxiety as I have queried the extent to which these identities impacted my access to legislators as well as the quality of my interviews. While I reject the notion of an objective researcher, I am aware of the criticisms that may arise due to the cultural connections that became apparent in the data collection process. However, because my study is rooted in Black feminist epistemology, this concern is countered by the belief that gender and race ought to influence scholarly conceptions of knowledge production and practices of inquiry and justification. My situated knowledge as a Black woman researcher reflects a nuanced knowing attributable to my gender and race, which illustrates how gendered and racialized identities inflect the perspective of the knower. These insider characteristics enabled me to at times feel more like a family friend, little sister, or daughter, rather than a researcher, during some informal conversations with the legislators and their staff.

Conclusion

Feminist ethnography was vital for this study because it allowed me to contextualize the experiences of the legislators, as well as better understand how my own identity became part of the data collection process.

However, I pay special attention to the claim that one's racial and gendered identity influences what research subjects share with the researcher. My insider status granted me access to African American legislators that I am sure I would not have gained if I was not a Black woman with several connections to their culturally embedded identities. My identity influenced how legislators interacted with me in addition to what they told me. Moreover, legislators and staffers used their own opinion to inscribe culturally relevant characteristics onto me. Based on what I looked like, they assumed that I must correspond to their idea of what a Black woman graduate student thinks and how she acts. I did not challenge their (mis)conceptions of me. Instead, I willingly allowed them to map their stereotypes onto me in order to gain access to their world.

Legislative studies must include and can benefit from the value that feminist ethnography places on reflexivity in one's fieldwork. The shifting and contextual nature of the researcher's social identity impacts the production of ethnographic knowledge (Nagar and Geiger 2007). The situatedness and positionality of both the researcher's and the subjects' identities are probed in the knowledge-production process. I engaged in self-reflexivity by analyzing my own reactions and experiences as an African American woman under thirty to deepen my understanding of how methodology informs the politics of identity.

Reflexivity in feminist fieldwork implies that the production of ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the relational and contextual nature of the researcher's social identity, as well as by the positionality generated by her race, class, and gender. My identity was not fixed in the field. Instead, it varied based on the legislators' perception of me, which allowed for shifting among network relationships (Takacs 2002). I detailed my experience in negotiating the insider/outsider status because I believe it influenced the legislators' interaction with me. As the White woman student I mentioned at the outset of this discussion pointed out, I must also begin to acknowledge how my own identity impacted my findings and conclusions (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009). Reflexivity, however, does not readily translate into a transparent research process. The notion of transparent reflexivity incorrectly "assumes that the messiness of the research process can be fully understood" (Rose 1997, 314). Yet, because identity is relational, mutually constitutive, and built upon existing social relations, the implications for understanding one's position in any final sense are impossible. As a result, a researcher with another identity who also engages in self-reflexivity might have different access and experiences with the same subjects.

Lessons learned from Black women scholars as outsiders within are still useful in the age of intersectionality. Black women scholars may never feel as if they belong in academia, although they may become influential in a particular field (Collins 1986). Because of the institutionalization of intersectionality, the academy can use Black women's standpoints as a methodological framework without necessarily having to rely on Black women scholars themselves. Due to their outsider status, Black women's cultural belongings—their racial and gendered group identity—are overshadowed by their true value as an individual (Collins 1986). Black women's standpoint as an approach to gathering and viewing societal knowledge is both unique and subjective and cannot be divorced from the specific social location of African American women.

As a discipline, political science favors objectivist truth claims, which prioritize generalizations or causal explanations (Weeden 2010). As a result, ethnography—let alone feminist ethnography—is not frequently used in political science research. Although Richard Fenno's (1978; 2003) work is held in the highest esteem in the American subfield, few Americanists undertake similar projects in 2012. Furthermore, few political scientists engage in self-reflexivity to understand how their research projects are impacted by their insider/outsider status in relation to their subjects.

My study highlights that a reflexive understanding of identity is needed to produce new insights into political phenomena. The effect of the race and gender of the researcher produces different outcomes in the

process of data collection. Scholars must be cognizant of their own identity in preparing for, conducting, and analyzing research. This reflexive account exposes bias and advantages in how researchers understand the experiences, meanings, and politics of those they research. Therefore, all scholars—not just minority researchers—should consider and discuss the effect of their identity on the research they produced. In this way, identity is used as a lens to simultaneously explore power and social relations in a more complex manner than is possible when solely presenting findings on the identity of the researched. Studies that take seriously the complexity of identity must also include a discussion of how context affects the questions asked and answered, the ways in which subjects view the researcher, as well as how privilege and access are built-in markers of identity. This study points to the need for additional and more systematic research to investigate the ways in which a particular scholar's identity impacts what we know about legislative representation.

This discussion alerts scholars to a few necessary considerations in reading and evaluating research interviews. These factors are particularly important for scholars who might be interested in using elite interviews to study the politics of identity. Like those we study, there is only so much control we have over our own identity. Researchers must openly acknowledge that our seemingly objective research is indeed subjective. As such, the issues of researcher identity can affect us all, from the seemingly unmarked White man to the too-often-othered Black woman. Future studies should consider methodologies that discuss the multiplicity of the researcher's identity. Studies using a mixed-mode design—interviews, historical documents, survey data, voting-record data, etc.—and that are reflexive and engaged in identity politics and its manifestations in data collection will help researchers to understand, use, and validate the data they gather.

Notes

1. Feminist ethnography is defined here as a contextual and experiential approach to knowledge that challenges the false dichotomies of positivism. Additionally, feminist ethnography is undergirded by feminist theory, which examines women's lived experiences and social roles as it seeks to overcome gender bias in research. Feminist ethnography allows researchers to display diversity within human subjects and advance claims for social change, as well as acknowledge the role of researcher in the production of knowledge.

2. I chose to study Maryland because of its large number of African American state legislators and the structure of the legislature, which makes it easy to identify how race and gender influence legislative behavior. The 2010 census reports that the state of Maryland is 30% African American. The state's high number of Black residents, mostly concentrated in Baltimore City and County and in Prince George's County, makes it necessary for politicians to represent Black interests and dictates that Black constituents have descriptive representation within the legislature. During the 2009 and 2011 legislative sessions, Maryland had 20 Black women delegates. (In 2009, this number was distributed among 15 delegates and 5 senators and between 14 delegates and 6 senators in the 2011 session.) The Maryland legislature is comprised of part-time representatives who dedicate a ninety-day period annually to lawmaking. Maryland's political culture is regarded as individualistic, akin to that of a business, where individual legislators broker deals and orchestrate political favors (Elazar 1972). While the party structure is highly organized, legislators have the ability to act as individuals, especially regarding policy areas in which some have specialized knowledge (Smooth 2001). The 2009 study included 51 in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended interviews that I conducted with Democratic Maryland state legislators. Because all the African American women legislators were Democrats, to control for partisanship I only interviewed members of this party. This restrained association of partisan ideologies, which are often coupled with a

legislator's race and gender. The General Assembly includes 47 senators and 141 delegates elected from 47 districts. The multi-member districts are comprised of four representatives—one senator and three delegates. Maryland's short legislative session requires a structure that facilitates lawmaking at a relatively quick pace. Delegates are only given 90 days to act on over 2,300 pieces of legislation, including the state budget. As such, Maryland has a highly organized committee structure, in which leaders in both chambers are responsible for assigning other members to committees.

3. Throughout the essay I use the terms "Black" and "African American" interchangeably. I capitalize "Black" because "Blacks, like Asians and Latinos, and other 'minorities' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun" (Crenshaw 1988, 1332n2).

4. Postmodern and postcolonial scholars have critiqued Collins's concept of the outsider within as a false binary that does not account for the continuum of oppression and privilege (Bourdieu 1984; Baudrillard 1998). Power is not evenly distributed, nor is it independent from group member's demographic and cultural characteristics.

5. Collins (1986; 1990; 1998) emphasizes that social hierarchies reinforce one another within interlocking systems. Thus, no outsider can entirely occupy that status. Each person holds a relatively privileged position in one or more social hierarchies. Ladson-Billings (2005) offers a much more nuanced view to conclude that no one has an unadulterated outsider-within position.

6. However, I do not mean to privilege Black women scholars' race and gender identity over other marginalized identities. Although it is helpful to explore the lived experiences of marginality, it must be acknowledged that certain identity categories "overrule, capture, differentiate, and transgress others" and that both theoretical and empirical research should "read these categories simultaneously" (Simien 2007, 270).

7. Queer, feminist, and postmodern theorists have brought renewed scholarly attention to the importance of individual agency and voice and to the ways in which social structures both enable and constrain individuals functioning within them.

8. Black feminist standpoint theory demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge, which is mediated by their intersectional understanding of oppression. This causes them to be doubly bound by a legacy of struggle that links the individual Black woman to the collective group of Black women.

9. In-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews were conducted with all twenty of Maryland's Black women legislators. I also conducted interviews with a convenience sample of Anglo men, Black men, Latinos/as, Asian American men, and Asian American women legislators. Because the interview questions provided for open-ended answers, the legislators were able to express themselves and narrate their stories freely. During the interviews, I utilized the so-called "soak and poke" method (Fenno 1978; 2003). This method allowed me to delve deeply into the legislators' responses to provide a thick description of their views on identity and representation. Inclusion of the 2011 feminist life histories helped to substantiate information provided through the 2009 elite interviews. Unlike the elite interviews, the feminist life histories are more in-depth and detailed. This method enabled each woman to share her story as well as provide an in-depth view to who she is.

10. I later learned that Delegate S was so guarded because she was going through the beginning stages of a criminal investigation into her campaign finances. In the fall of 2011, she was charged with misdemeanor theft, misappropriation, and embezzlement.

11. In phenomenological terms, a person's lived experiences reflect her position within age, gender, race, and class hierarchies.

12. bell hooks (1984, 11) also contends that because identity is a performative act, the labels of insider or outsider do not sufficiently account for the fluidity of identity or the multiplicity of oppressions.

13. Maryland became the eighth state to legalize same-sex marriage on March 1, 2012. This legislation narrowly passed the House of Delegates on February 17 (by a 72–67 vote) and the Senate by a vote of 25–22 on February 23, 2012.

14. To be sure, the Black community is not monolithic and not uniformly against marriage equality. However, data indicate that Hispanics and Whites are more supportive of marriage equality than African Americans (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010).

15. Moving beyond the Black church as an institution, this analysis also incorporates Black religiosity in order to understand the symbolic, cultural, and expressive space of Black identities. I resist the conflation of the Black church and a religious identity. This analytical distinction highlights the Black church as both a real and symbolic space and place. Given its status as a cultural institution, most African Americans are familiar with the teachings and traditions of the Black church even if they are not active members or participants in the church.

16. I avoid using the "wave" metaphor for describing time periods, types of activism and scholarship, and political concerns of Black feminism. Kimberly Springer (2005) critiques the "wave" terminology as ignoring the presence of Black women's activism alongside feminist activism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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