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Coping in Isolation

The Experiences of Black Women in White Communities

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This exploratory study used a critical hermeneutic, which combined Black feminist epistemology and Gadamerian hermeneutics, to understand the experiences of Black middle-class women who relocated to the Pacific Northwest, a predominately White community. Fourteen Black women were interviewed about their experiences living in the Pacific Northwest; specifically, their coping strategies were examined. Although many themes emerged, the interpretive layer of analysis required of a critical hermeneutic methodology offered an understanding of the simultaneous influence of both racism and sexism on their experiences. Findings revealed that the women felt socially and culturally isolated and the need for support networks and positive racial socialization messages was significant. Findings also reinforced the effect of class and the danger of homogenizing Black women's experiences. Participants' recommendations for recruitment and retention are included.

Keywords: *Black women; coping; racial socialization; support networks; White environments; recruitment and retention; critical hermeneutics; Black feminism*

Black women make up 6.4% of the U.S. population, representing more than half of the Black (12.2%) population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although Black women account for the majority of the Black population, little is known of the complexities of their lives. Too often, the experiences of Black women are homogenized within the race and the nuisances of gender and class are glossed over or diminished. Oregon, where this research took place, has a total Black population of 1.6%; however, the majority of Blacks (5.7%) reside in the city of Portland and surrounding areas situated in Multnomah County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Washington has a larger Black population with 3.2%; however, again, the majority of Blacks reside in the Tacoma (11.2%) and Seattle (8.4%) areas, both within 1 hour of each other but more than 3 hours from Vancouver (2.5%), which is situated within 20 minutes of Portland (U.S. Census

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Bureau, 2000). Many Oregon counties have no Black population, explaining why some native Whites have never interacted with or even seen an African American.

Although racism is not always blatant and has become more insidious and covert, Blacks experience an uneasiness that has prompted many to leave Oregon (Baker, 2004). Yet, organizations and educational institutions have consistently sought to attract and retain diversity among its workforce, specifically African Americans (Strom, 2004). Reported as recently as October 2004 in *The Business Journal of Portland* (Strom, 2004), "The relative absence of diversity here is perceived as a drawback, even an oddity, by people moving from other states and countries. . . . The lack of local diversity has bottom-line implications for local businesses." Oregon has a history of exclusion and prejudice that dates back to its inception. Until 1926, Oregon was an exclusionary state that forbade Blacks from living in the state. The lasting effect of exclusion has arguably been an impediment to the growth of diversity (Terhune, 2005). How, then, can a Black woman subsist when she finds herself to be one of a few or the only one? The overall goal of this study was to (a) explore and describe the experiences of Black women who relocated to a predominately White environment with a history of racism and prejudice; (b) discover the coping mechanisms they used to cope and thrive in the environment; and (c) explore practical implications for recruitment and retention.

Gadamerian hermeneutics and Black feminist thought informed the interpretive method used in this study. Gadamer (1987) suggests that the background, prejudgments, or biases of the researcher actually facilitate the understanding of another's experiences. Situating the researcher provides insight to the reader and grounds the meanings derived from the research. Black female scholars are situated knowers (Collins, 2000), placing them in a unique position to study the lives and experiences of other Black women. As a Black female scholar, I believe Black feminist epistemology embraces and honors the experiences of Black women as valid and was therefore incorporated in this research. It demonstrates the limitations of traditional epistemologies and allows knowledge to be constructed by those who live along the margins. Therefore, it is the blending of a Black feminist critical paradigm with an interpretive hermeneutic framework that shapes this research.

Review of Literature

A review of the literature found little information that explored the experiences of Black women living in predominately White environments.

However, comparative literature that examined the experiences of Black women as faculty and students in predominately White academic environments was available. This review is therefore supplemented by selected works that describe the experiences of Black women in predominately White academic settings. In addition, authors who examined the experiences of Black women did so by investigating the coping strategies they used to gain an understanding of how Black women negotiated their race, class, and gender in their environment.

Altering Façades

Educational advancement has been a socialization message for Black women throughout history (Higginbotham, 2001). The added pressure of outstanding and excellent performance was also a constant message. Many Black children have heard their parents say they have to perform twice as well as Whites to be considered passing. The pressure Black women place on themselves to achieve at inordinate levels is the manifestation of Black women fighting against the negative message of inferiority (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). However, when Black women entered White academic institutions, either as students or faculty, they were faced with inequitable treatment, marginalization, sexism, and racism. More than other ethnic groups, studies have found that Black women are most likely to be unfairly treated in terms of promotion and tenure, experience disengagement from the academic community, and become targets for discrimination (Combs, 2003). Alienation, isolation, and marginalization have characterized the experiences of Black women in academe and have caused them to develop various coping strategies to protect themselves and navigate the deleterious terrain. Self-efficacy and the ability to succeed (Cobham, 2003), laughter, avoidance (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), and concealing the effects of racism by wearing masks (Hassouneh-Phillips & Beckett, 2003) and veils (Ford, 2003) were listed as a few of the strategies. These coping methods cause shifts in attitude and demeanor, forcing women to bear the burden of performing while hiding the pain of racism. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) explain how Black women shift, compromising themselves and their lives to deal with the many stressors they face. These self-altering façades deny Black women the ability to be their true selves. They shift from one modality to another to be accepted, fit in, or survive, taking its toll on their well-being. Role-flexing (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), biculturalism (Bell, 1990), and code-switching (Cross & Strauss, 1998) are other self-altering façades that Black women produce. Many women have also discussed reliance on their faith as a way to deal with

the isolation and marginalization they experienced (Johnson-Farr, 1998; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Reliance on the Black Community

Reliance on support networks within the Black community (Fry, 2002) and the formation of support networks has proved to be a critical coping strategy for Black women. Daly, Jennings, Beckett, and Leashore (1995) found that African Americans, when confronted with stressful situations, relied on group-derived ego strengths or kin networks (social support networks, family, community). The Black community has historically served as a buffer between the stressors of the mainstream dominant community and the relative comfort and familiarity of home. Shorter-Gooden (2004) has called this leaning on shoulders. In *All Our Kin*, Stack (1974) found that the "kin" network provided support and reinforcement for self-help and strategic survival. Extended kin and kinship networks have worked successfully at buffering against psychological isolation and poverty (Nobles, 1991; Stack, 1974; Tatum, 1987). The collective, communal, and kinship cultural roots of these systems of support are found within the fabric of the African culture (Akbar, 1998) and are arguably inherent in the worldview of Black women (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Kin networks or social support systems help in alleviating feelings of isolation and tokenism, which can be experienced by Blacks situated in White environments. The standard by which to judge and measure everything becomes White and the ability to decipher between racist and normal White behavior becomes limited (Tatum, 1987). Token or solo status, or the effect of being the "only one," can have two contradictory dynamics on individual self-protective strategies (Crocker & Major, 1989). First is a decrease in the viability of in-group comparisons because the only basis of comparison is the dominant group, and second is a constant and sometimes painful reminder of the advantaged position of the dominant group. Holding the solo status can dilute these self-protective strategies, which necessitate the need for at least a small cohort of similarly situated peers to provide support.

Religion and the Black church have also proved to be a source of strength and survival for Black women, particularly in predominately White communities (Tatum, 1987). Historically, through trials of oppression, God, family, and community have been significant contributors to the resiliency of Black women. The church is a "refueling station," a place to see and worship with other Blacks when you are isolated from the community as a whole (Peterson, 1992; Tatum, 1987).

Racial Socialization Messages

Racial socialization messages have accounted for increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and racial pride in Blacks. Higginbotham (2001) posited that Black parents and families serve as the first line of defense for Black children, playing a special role in buffering the effect of racism while simultaneously promoting cultural pride and positive self-concept. How one negotiates his or her race both in relation to self and in relation to others, as well as defines his or her racial identity, is usually dependent on the messaging received with regard to race, racism, stereotypes, media images, and what it means to be Black (Stevenson, 1998). According to Peters (2002), racial socialization is a counteracting process of societal discriminatory, negative, and prejudicial messages to build physically and emotionally healthy Black children and equip them with the necessary tools to deal with racist sentiment. Racial socialization is a proactive and conscious act conveyed through either implicit or explicit methods (Mutisya & Ross, 2005) and designed to teach Black children what it means to be Black in the context of American society; what they can expect when they go out into the world; how to cope within the dominant society; and how to guard against internalizing racist messaging (Greene, 1990a, 1990b). Black women frequently rely on and replay the messages they received in their youth to guard against the toxicity of racism. Tatum (1987) interviewed Black families living in a White community and found several themes related to coping in that environment including the importance of kin networks and socialization messages. It was clear that the parents' reliance on racial socialization messages of their youth and the dissemination of similar messages to their own children was a critical component in their experience and ultimate survival. Racial socialization messages, in effect, allow Blacks to "stand on the shoulders" (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) of their cultural heritage and historical legacy of survival.

Study Design and Methods

The underlying philosophical assumption guiding the methodology was an interpretive critical paradigm, a historical ontology, and subjective Black feminist epistemology. Critical hermeneutics requires an understanding and sensitivity to what it means to live in the situation of the other, requiring challenges to the fallacy of racial superiority and an engagement in social emancipation. As such, it is not the goal of the research to be generalized, as Black women and their experiences cannot be homogenized.

Table 1
Participant Profiles (_N_ = 14)

Age (in years)	Marital Status	Education	Children	Occupation	Years in Oregon
51	divorced	bachelor's	yes	exec. assistant	1
45	divorced	high school	yes	admin. assistant	12
33	married	associate	yes	HR manager	7
53	married	doctorate	yes	educator	16
37	single	bachelor's	no	business owner	5
38	single	doctorate	no	attorney	12
59	divorced	doctorate	yes	educator	10
52	single	doctorate	yes	educator	2
31	married	doctorate	no	attorney	10
37	married	bachelor's	yes	mother	7
33	single	master's	no	educator	4
38	single	bachelor's	no	engineer	16
34	single	master's	no	trainer	1
32	single	bachelor's	no	accountant	11

Participants

Fourteen Black women from Oregon and Southwest Washington were interviewed individually (see Table 1). The participants were offered the opportunity to participate in focus groups, however, 11 of the 14 declined in favor of individual interviews. Inclusion criteria for this purposive snowball sampling were (a) self-identify as a Black woman, (b) be an adult older than 21 years old, and (c) have relocated to Oregon as an adult. The term _Black_ was chosen as a generic descriptor to encompass those women who also identified as Black, African American, and American. Oregon includes those who reside in Oregon state and Southwest Washington. Exclusion criteria included Black women raised in Oregon. Recruitment efforts were directed toward Black women from personal and professional networks, churches, professional associations, and meeting people through the course of everyday life. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. All of the women self-identified as minimally middle class, all but two of the participants were raised in either Black or diverse communities, and four participants left Oregon.

Data Collection

Fourteen semistructured conversational interviews lasting between 1 and 2½ hours each were conducted over 6 months. Participants were invited to

tell their stories about their experiences living in Oregon, why they relocated, the communities in which they were raised, their parental beliefs around race, and their own understanding and beliefs around their race and gender. They were encouraged to be open and specific when possible and to contextualize their responses to the best of their ability. As the interviews were conversational, if participants redirected a question back to the researcher, it was answered. Interviewing within a Black feminist frame requires a dialogue, a give and take of information as the women engage in the creation of new knowledge (Collins, 2000). Interviews were taped and later transcribed. Participants were supplied a copy of the transcribed interviews as a form of member check to ensure accuracy and clarity. A demographic questionnaire was provided to the participants prior to the initial interview.

Analysis

Data analysis in critical hermeneutic studies is made up of a thematic and interpretive analysis using an iterative or cyclical process (Patton, 2002). Analysis of the data occurred both within and across narratives to ensure that both commonalities and differences within the sample were examined. Peer debriefing took place with faculty and colleagues well versed in qualitative research. The validity of this research is grounded in and delineated by the four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology: (a) the lived experience as a criterion of meaning, (b) use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (c) an ethic of caring, and (d) an ethic of personal responsibility (Collins, 2000). It is critical in qualitative inquiry, especially around racialized and feminist discourse, for the researcher to locate self in the research, remaining cognizant of her effect and influence on the research. As such, reflexivity (Pillow, 2003) was used in the analysis and interpretation of data.

Findings and Discussion

In interpretive hermeneutic studies, findings may be presented along with relevant research that aid in understanding the analysis. For that reason, findings and discussion are presented together. The study revealed that the women had a dichotomous experience living in Oregon, enjoying the ecological beauty and standard of living within the environment, on one hand, and feeling culturally and socially isolated and alone, on the other. In addition, social isolation experienced by the participants was related not only to race and gender but also to the participants' inability to connect to the native

Black community based on differences in class and/or education. In response to this isolation, the Black women in this study developed various coping mechanisms to survive and thrive within their environments. The primary tools engaged by these women included (a) creating their own community and network of support and (b) relying on positive racial socialization messages. The experiences of these women, relayed through the telling of their stories, were framed in the phrase *experiences in relation to*. Recommendations on recruitment and retention efforts, articulated by the participants, were also gathered.

Creating Community

Experiences in relation to the Black community.   One challenge discussed was moving into Oregon and not readily seeing or accessing a Black community. In addition, one participant noted, of the existing Blacks in Oregon, "If you're not in their social group or whatever, then you are really not welcomed in I'm finding. The people who have welcomed me into their social circle are all transplants, more so than the locals." "For the most part, [native] Blacks do not talk to you on the street, they just didn't talk," was a common theme, which was unsettling for many.

Oregon has a long history of prejudicial attitudes, racial hostility, and discriminatory practices toward its small and nearly invisible population of Black citizens (Millner, 1978). Racist legislation, the Ku Klux Klan, and Jim Crow segregation have all been used to limit and discourage Blacks from entering and remaining in Oregon. Since 1844, when the first exclusionary laws[1] were introduced, Blacks lived in constant fear of being jailed or expelled from the state. Racial restrictions have been deeply ingrained into the landscape of Oregon, and those Blacks who remained and raised families learned to develop good relations with their White majority, which meant they learned to be seen but not heard or stayed in their place (Murdock, 2003; Pearson, 1997). Oregon has always been and remains at the forefront of antigrowth politics in part because it has always sought to remain as White as possible (Salazar & Hewitt, 2001). The participants' description of the behavior of the natives is reminiscent of the sentiment held by many native Blacks in the 1940s when transplants arrived during World War II. During that time, native Blacks felt that the "new" Blacks were disrupting progress, failing to seek integration and assimilation (McLagan, 1980).

The importance of community among Black women was supported by the participants' development of their own social support networks with other transplants failing to gain access to the local Black community. Support networks enabled the women to cope with the social and cultural isolation they experienced. In addition, participants would return to their hometowns, to their original networks of support, just to connect to a larger and present Black community. Their visits refueled and reenergized them and were described as a necessary diversion. Even after living in Oregon for several years, many women, on reflection, realized that their Black friends were primarily other relocated Black women. In truth, these women developed a new parallel community of Blacks. This was reinforced by events such as *Say Hey* (a networking event established in 2000 that welcomes and introduces new Blacks to the community), where newly relocated Blacks are introduced to other transplants, becoming a point of contact and entrée into the new community. *Say Hey* is primarily made up of middle- to upper-middle-class, highly educated, professional Blacks, which creates another level of isolation based on class.

Experiences in relation to the other.   When asked if the participants experienced discriminatory or racist encounters, the responses varied. Most of the women in the study said they sensed unwelcomeness living in Oregon. A few were able to point to specific instances of racism or discrimination; others spoke about racist experiences they encountered; and finally, a few used the descriptor *ignorance*. The most frequent comment the women heard was, "You're so articulate," which both frustrated and mildly amused many of the participants. Although the participants heard this phrase before, the frequency with which it was made caused the women to perceive the native Whites as naïve or ignorant of the diversity of Black people. There appeared to be a lack of exposure and interactions with educated, intelligent, traveled, motivated Black women. One participant mused, "They seemed fascinated by us." Each woman experienced the stereotypical assumptions made by Whites throughout their day-to-day lives such as being mistaken for a student or housekeeping instead of faculty; being followed or watched while shopping; having money placed on the counter instead of in their hand; questioning their ability to afford an admired item; being offered financial assistance without being asked; being stopped multiple times by the police to verify vehicle ownership; and being passed over for employment after being invited over the phone for an interview (in this case hearing, "You didn't sound Black"). These nagging reminders over time have taken their toll on the women.

> Sometimes it's malicious and most times it's not, but you have to deal with it. . . . Sometimes I can ignore it and other times it just builds up and I take things personally. And so in those instances I have to kind of work through the anger and then eventually let it go, like, remind myself of the good things. And just remember those people are so uncultured they don't know. It's a situation that's going to make you stronger and hopefully help you give a person a learning experience.

In addition to the subtle reminders of racism, the women also spoke of overt instances. One woman spoke of the time that she and a friend were walking down the street in Portland and "these young White guys yelled nigger at us." Another spoke of seeing a cartoon of one of her colleagues depicted as a stick figure with a noose around its neck with a caption that read, "hang [her colleague]." Still another recalled a time when Black children at her husband's school were called niggers. In each of these cases, the perpetrators were not caught and the incidents went without a noticeable investigation. This couple left Oregon commenting, "I just can't live in a place . . . where when something like this happens there is no outrage."

Experiences of rejection were common. "It's very subtle and it makes you wonder if they don't want you here." Questions such as, "Why did you move here?" "Do you like it here?" and "There's not enough diversity for you here, is there?" were commonly asked. Although a question like, "Why did you move here?" on its face appears benign, the data showed that the tenor of the question implied, "You don't belong here."

> White people are moving here, and love to move here, and love Portland, because it's so White. And that quality of life has become a euphemism for being around White folks. They tell me, "Oh, no, that's not the case," but I said, "Oh, yes." You lie; you lie like a dirty dog. They wouldn't be moving to no damn Portland, Oregon, if it were all Black. They claim they want diversity, but they don't do anything to enact that or to effect that change and they moved here for reasons that they are not being honest about, either with themselves or with me. Because claiming that they want it doesn't cost them anything.

Living in the midst of racist sentiment and deleterious feedback can take its toll on the psychological well-being of Black women. It can cause women to be fearful, anxious, unmotivated, depressed, and overeat, as well as cause hypertension and cardiac problems (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). As one participant noted, "Sometimes I can ignore it and other times it just builds up."

Messages of Resiliency

Experiences in relation to self.   In response to the question, "What does it mean to be Black?" each of the participants paused in reflection. Many of the women hesitated because defining Black in relationship to self and to the larger Black community called for different responses. The women agreed that there is no unified definition of what it means to be Black; however, each of the women shared the meaning and significance of what it meant to be Black to them personally.

> Being Black means that you have to live by a different set of rules, but understand that you can succeed, but you just have to understand that the rules are different and that you oftentimes have to work harder and you have to—when other people are telling you you can't, you have to ignore that and you have to keep going, and just understand that when things come to you, or people try to keep you down, that that's just the way it is, and it has nothing to do with you. It's just that people just believe that, they always believe that you're not qualified, or you shouldn't be where you are. You always have to prove yourself, always, always, always. Even among your own people, you have to prove yourself. I mean that's just the way it is.

Another commented, "For me being Black means that you are strong, a survivor, flexible and I think about the regalness of our people. It's a paradox to be Black because you are always living and fighting against how other people are trying to define you and their stereotypes of who you are or what you should be." These messages were a source of comfort and support. However, all of the messages were not uplifting and positive.

> I was raised to hate Blacks. I came from a family where if you marry White you are bettering the race. I'm going to tell you how it was relayed to us, the White man was always right and always better, at least that's what I always felt [they were teaching]. When I was younger my mother took bleach to my elbows and my knees with a scrub brush, that's how much race affected her, it was a sickness. My mother, who is a very light-skinned Black woman, hates Black people.

Another woman expressed her perspective through tears, stating,

> My mother didn't want to be around *certain* Blacks. I grew up in a predominately, you know, in a White community and thought I was supposed to be White, and was very upset with my mother because I was Black. . . . Sometimes

> there's a sense of pride and sometimes there's not. . . . I struggle with who I am
> and where I fit in and being here makes it worse.

With the exception of these two participants, the women in this study were
raised with a sense of pride and acceptance of being Black.

> Racism is an institution in this country. If you dwell on that, you will suc-
> cumb to it. Be the best that you can be. Know that it's out there. Deal with it
> on an individual basis when it happens, but don't let that stop your progress.
> Don't let that stop you from being the best person you can be.

Higginbotham (2001), Greene (1990a, 1990b), and Stevenson (1998) have
found that racial socialization messages are necessary for Black women to
counteract negative stereotypes and develop a positive self-concept, espe-
cially when living in relative isolation in a predominately White environ-
ment. As Collins (1990) noted, "Black women's lives are a series of
negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating their own
internally defined images of self as African American women with their
objectification as the other" (p. 94). Racial socialization messages serve as
reinforcement of a secure racial identity grounded in history, heritage, and
culture, buffering overt and covert racist and negative stereotypes (Boykin
& Toms, 1985; Higginbotham, 2001; Thomas & Speight, 1999). In addition
to the messages received by the parents and families of the women in this
study, the Black community also served as a complicit instructor. The
majority of the women were raised in predominately Black or diverse envi-
ronments either in the South, East Coast, or Midwest. Supporting Daly
et al.'s (1995) findings, the participants noted that in these living environ-
ments were the models and exemplars of successful, progressive, active,
educated, and intelligent African Americans. Their environments rein-
forced, in part, the socialization messages received from their parents and
family throughout their lives. Racial socialization messages determine our
ability to negotiate the environmental context within which we may find
ourselves. For some, the messages are so strong that it feels unnatural and
uncomfortable to be in a predominately White environment; for others, it is
too confusing. Racial socialization messages are a preestablished coping
mechanism that is designed primarily by family and community becoming
activated in different environmental situations.

Experiences in relation to children.   In addition to the influence of
racial socialization messages received, participants talked about raising

children or future children in Oregon. Even those with conflicting social-ization messages expressed, with particular clarity, if and how they would raise their children in Oregon. One participant reacted strongly, stating, "I think we would be negligent parents to raise our kids in this environment. I would never raise a child here because of the underlying racism." Although these comments appear extreme, other participants expressed sentiments that were not far off the mark. Many noted that if they had to raise a child in Oregon, they would also have a place in "Chicago," "Detroit," "Washington, DC," or "the South" so their children could spend their vaca-tions and summers some place other and much more diverse than Oregon. Even though the women received different socialization messages, they were clear on the need to socialize their own children either implicitly through their surroundings or explicitly through actual teaching. Thomas and Speight (1999) and Crocker and Major (1989) have found a link between socialization and self-esteem. The participants in this study, want-ing their children to develop self-esteem and ethnic pride, explained that they would not raise their children in a predominately White environment such as Oregon. In addition, the fear of implicit socialization messages causing internalized oppression and distorted images of beauty were also expressed when the participants discussed raising a Black male child in Oregon. The literature has revealed that implicit socialization messages through stereotypes, media images, and environmental surrounds affect how a Black child develops a sense of pride, positive racial identity and affiliation, and emotional well-being (McAdoo, 2002; Stevenson, 1998; Tatum, 1993). The solo phenomenon described by Pettigrew and Martin (1987) can result in not feeling like one fits in or belongs. The racist experiences of some of the participants' children forced one participant to leave Oregon and another to send her child to live with a relative. Failing to see positive Black role models and being surrounded by negative stereotypical messages could lead to lack of motivation and self-esteem.

Practical Implications for Recruitment and Retention

When asked if they would recruit a Black woman to Oregon, the common response was, "No, I would not recruit someone here." Despite the avail-ability of a variety of recreational activities, in which many of the women participate, such as skiing, walking, hiking, snowboarding, camping, and horseback riding, things usually reserved for the middle- and upper-middle classes, the women said that they would struggle in recommending Oregon as a place for other Black women to live. The women agreed that it would

take a special type of person to live in Oregon. "People that are willing to come here are people who are like, almost pioneer types that are willing to go out and try something new and different."

The participants seemed to agree with the idea of linking relocated Black women with someone in the community who can, in a sense, work as a mentor or connector to a community. "I think it would be helpful to be able to link people with other people, you know like if you could create a mentor program or something. I think it is so difficult to get connected to the community, to actually develop some real friendships, relationships." Those who have moved away said, "It is key to surround and expose people to other Blacks that live here, like the *Say Hey* event." One woman could not move beyond her own experiences and said, "I don't know if I would want to bring anyone over here. I really don't. There are some events but not a lot of activities or events related to Black culture, and it doesn't feel as unified here to me. . . . So no I wouldn't suggest anyone move here; especially if someone were a single Black woman." Concerning this comment, the women unanimously discussed the difficulty of finding and maintaining a relationship if single. Both the married and single noted the difficulty in establishing a relationship. "This is not a place for a Black woman to find a man . . . and at times it can be lonely." Collectively, the women found that Black men appeared to prefer White women and the feeling was very mutual. This was difficult for some of the participants. "It kind of made me feel, like, okay, I'm kind of inferior," or "What's wrong with me?" Another noted, "It's difficult to find and sustain a relationship unless you are willing to move out of the race . . . socially it's hard here." One woman found that "dating here was miserable," and she was "convinced if she stayed here she would be single for the rest of her life." These experiences contributed to the women's inability to recommend Oregon as a place to live.

Despite Oregon's natural beauty and plethora of activities, the historical legacy of Oregon's exclusionary and prejudicial practices has permeated its society and its citizens. If a Black woman were going to move to the state, the participants suggested these foundational tools to facilitate successful recruitment and retention: peer mentoring, a support system, an inclusive organizational and educational climate with a clear delineation of job responsibilities and career trajectory (see, also, Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Cox, 1994). Many of the experiences outlined by the participants extended beyond the walls of the educational or organizational institution. Those who left Oregon were motivated to do so not because of their experiences at work or school but rather because of their lived experiences of

racism, sexism, classism, and prejudice in their day-to-day living in a predominately White environment. This suggests that educational and organizational institutions are going to have to reach outside of their walls and work to create a living environment that supports those things that have historically been successful within their walls (e.g., mentorship, support systems, and a nonracist environment of acceptance, respect, and inclusivity). With a history based on exclusion and prejudice, it may be difficult for Oregon to adopt such changes; however, it will be necessary if they indeed want to build and retain diversity. Ultimately, Oregon "has remained a west coast ecological paradise with a peculiar resistance to change" (McLagan, 1980, p. 172).

Conclusion

One of the key underlying purposes of this study was to advance the research around the experiences of Black women. Living in Oregon's predominately White environment has been an educational experience. The variety of relational realities and confluence of race and class result in internal conflicts that are difficult to reconcile in the most ideal locations and situations. Ultimately, each of the women, to some degree (many relocated with their spouses), had the choice to move to another location and situation; but why should one be forced to choose between self-preservation and a stable, pleasant way of life? The women had a dichotomous experience living in the state, enjoying the ecological beauty and standard of living within the environment, on one hand, and feeling culturally and socially isolated and alone, on the other. The vulnerability of the women in this study stands in stark contrast to the mythical portrayal of the strong Black woman, which eludes the effect of oppressive isms rather than truly uplifting and empowering the Black woman (hooks, 1981). What is significant about these findings is the confirmation that Black women's lives are inextricably linked to racism, sexism, and classism. This becomes more prominent when positioned in a predominately White environment, specifically one with a history of exclusion and prejudice. Moreover, the complicity (real and feigned) of the dominant White population in racist domination and the disaffection of the Black native population affected the well-being of the women who relocated, enmeshing them in a constant battle for normalcy and self-preservation. Although studies on Black women cannot be generalized to fit all Black women, each lesson learned reveals a new piece of the puzzle that sheds light on the complexity of the experiences and challenges of the Black woman.

Note

1. In 1857, the final version that found its way into the constitution stated, "No free Negro or mulatto, not residing in the state at the time of adoption of this constitution, shall come reside or be within the state or hold any real estate, or make any contract, or maintain any suit therein, and the legislative assembly shall provide by penal law for removal by public officer of all such Negroes and mulattos, and for their effectual exclusion from the state, and for the punishment of persons who shall bring them into the state, or employ or harbor them" (Moreland, 1993, p. 6). This remained present in Oregon's constitution until repealed in 1926.

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