December 1990

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Recommended Citation

Link to publisher version (DOI)
https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38P29D

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Role Models: 
Who Needs Them Anyway?

Denise C. Morgan†

When circumstances are made real by another’s testimony, it becomes possible to envision change.

—James Baldwin

It is easy to throw Black people, especially Black academics, into a tizzy by asking us why we think that we have the right to be where we are, doing the things we are doing. It may be a sad testament to our insecurity that we do not laugh at the question. It may be an even sadder testament to the endurance of racism that the question is still asked. But it is asked, from time to time and in different ways.

I believe that the debate over role models is, on one level, a request for people of color to justify our right to teach. On that level, the debate begins with the assumption that people of color are not qualified to teach law, and therefore, the only excuse for our presence in the classroom is that we are acting as role models for law students of color. I do not care to engage that aspect of the role model debate or to fly into that particular tizzy in this brief space. Rather, I want to describe the part that women of color have played in helping me find my voice in legal scholarship, and offer an alternative conception of the function of role models.

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1 The debate over whether law students of color need to have law professors of color serve as role models gained a nationwide audience following Derrick Bell’s announcement that he would take an unpaid leave from Harvard Law School until the school hired a woman of color law professor. See Fox Butterfield, Harvard Law Professor Quits Until Black Woman is Named, NY Times A1 (Apr 24, 1990); Jonathan Yardley, The Case for Merit at Harvard Law School, Wash Post B2 (Apr 30, 1990); and Richard Cohen, The Question of Merit at Harvard Law, Wash Post A23 (May 15, 1990). A group of Harvard law students has rekindled and reframed the debate by suing the law school on the ground that the school’s lack of faculty diversity deprives all students of an adequate legal education. Anthony Flint, Civil Rights Groups Back Suit against Harvard, Boston Globe A23 (Feb 12, 1991).

2 Since I cannot imagine an unqualified teacher being a positive role model for students, that line of argument hardly seems worth engaging.

3 Although my role models have been a diverse group, in this essay I chose to focus on the particular lessons that I have learned from those role models that I have had who have been women of color.
There seems to be considerable confusion about what a role model is and why anyone would want to have one. In academic circles, the term “role model” has primarily served to pigeonhole professors of color—we are expected to be stereotypically ethnic and must be willing and able to relate with special warmth and compassion to all others who share our cultural background. This willingness and ability to function as a role model is a qualification that professors of color must possess in addition to our academic credentials. As a result, the term has taken on somewhat sinister overtones for some professors of color—it is an enormous responsibility to be drafted as a spokesperson for one’s race and gender. I have even heard one professor of color speak of the “dark side of role models,” presumably in an effort to discourage students and other professors from pressuring him to perform the chores of the “Asian role model” or from expecting him to be “more” Asian.

While more compassionate professors would undoubtedly be welcomed by all law students, I believe that this conception of the function of role models is incomplete. Role models are not mere comforters of hapless alienated students. In my experience, law students who desire role models are seldom looking to have their hands held. Much more frequently they seek access to the information and power that law professors both possess and share with those students who are their friends. Nor are role models just symbolic figures indicating to students that someone of their race, gender, or area of interest has run the gauntlet of legal academia and survived. By sharing their knowledge and experience, role models can actively help students to find and develop their own voices. Further, role models need not encourage stereotypes or passively work within existing academic structures. They can empower students by establishing benchmarks of excellence in non-traditional areas and styles of scholarship or by setting new standards in traditional fields. Precisely because the demand for the expansion of the canon of legal scholarship is not a demand for the elimination of standards of merit, it is important for students to have some criteria of success against which they can measure their work irrespective of their area of interest.

Of course, everyone has role models. We all judge our behavior and set our goals based on the actions and accomplishments of people we admire—relatives, teachers, friends, co-workers, athletes, actors, etc.

While I understand his resistance to being pigeonholed, and his fear of taking on the many responsibilities of a role model, I have come to realize that there are worse sins than occasionally neglecting one of the tasks that I must juggle in order to live coherently at the intersection of race, gender and the law.

Although a professor need not share the racial or ethnic background of a student, or be of the same gender to be supportive in this way, students often find it easier to approach professors with whom they share these characteristics. Of course there are many reasons a student might adopt a particular professor to be his or her role model aside from the professor’s race or gender.

The shift that must be made in standards of legal scholarship is similar to the one that is slowly occurring with respect to standards of beauty. In the 1960s the standard of beautiful womanhood was a tall, thin White woman with straight, blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin.
In addition to being supportive and compassionate, my role models have been challengers—teachers who have engaged me and encouraged me to more fully consider my settled notions. My role models have been enablers and empowerers—teachers who made it possible for me to envision change.

I have recently become reacquainted with one of my role models, Professor Gloria Watkins, the only woman of color professor with whom I studied in my many years of schooling. Gloria has written several books about Black women and feminism and is currently teaching in the English department of Oberlin College. She also has taught at Yale where, as a senior in college, I had the good fortune to be in her “Introduction to Afro-American Literature” class.

Gloria’s class was a harrowing experience for me. She challenged me to confront the implications of being a Black woman in the United States (not the rosiest of pictures). But in that way she fulfilled what I believe is the true function of a role model—she helped me to better understand my social, historical and political context, and she helped me to imagine possibilities for change.

At the time, I did not understand why Gloria seemed to think that the study of Black women’s writing would be particularly empowering for her Black female students. I found it most distressing to identify myself with the abused and powerless enslaved women in the slave narratives that we read. It did not seem as though my philosophy professors thought that their White male students had anything different to gain from reading Nietzsche than I did—what special thing did she suppose Zora Neale Hurston had to offer me? When I confronted her with my question, Gloria seemed to have heard it before, but she patiently explained to me that when I entered a classroom or walked down the street, it was a Black woman that people saw. “You may learn something,” she said.

At the time Gloria’s answer did not quite satisfy me—its essentialism troubled me. But, as it turns out, I did learn something. I have learned a tremendous amount about history, about philosophy, about politics, about law, and about myself from reading the works of Black

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That woman is no longer the sole benchmark of beauty. Today the beauty of women with dark skin, or dark eyes, or larger stature is also recognized. However, it is not that we have no standards of beauty, or that beauty is completely relative. It is just that the standard of beauty has shifted. That shift allows beauty that is particular to women of color to be acknowledged; we are no longer beautiful only in so far as we resemble White women. Likewise, in the area of legal scholarship, standards of merit must shift to allow excellence in non-traditional areas and styles of scholarship to be recognized.

8 The books, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (South End, 1981) (“Ain’t I a Woman”), Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (South End, 1984) (“Feminist Theory”), Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (South End, 1989) (“Talking Back”), and Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (South End, 1990) (“Yearning”), were written under the pen name bell hooks. Her fifth book, Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life, was co-authored by Cornel West and is due out later this year.
women. In particular, Black feminist writings have given me much material from which to develop my own Black feminist voice. I have been inspired by Gloria, and by other authors who place women of color at the center of their theorizing, to put women of color at the center of some of my legal ruminations. Their inspiration has given me the audacity to teach a class in Race, Gender and the Law, and has manifested itself in shifts in my approach to jurisprudence. I have learned from reading the work of women of color law professors that I need not attempt to filter my experiences as a Black woman out of my academic work. Instead, I have used my personal experiences to find new per-

9 Black feminism was defined by the Combahee River Collective in 1974:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. Barbara Smith, ed, Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology 272 (Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983) ("Home Girls").

As is clear from the Combahee River Collective’s definition, the term Black feminism is a misnomer. Black feminism refers to an approach to feminism that is driven by a consciousness of the interconnection of oppressions. Therefore, it is possible for a Black woman to espouse feminism and not be a Black feminist, and for women who are not Black to be Black feminists. The term does not mean that one’s ideas of feminism are necessarily bounded by one’s race. However, the area of scholarship has been dominated by women of color.


perspectives on, and to gain insight into, various legal problems. Standing on the shoulders of these women has allowed me to envision a more just legal landscape.

Through my role models I have also come to better understand why Gloria advised me to read the work of Black women. She did not mean to imply that I am bounded by my race and gender. She was not advising that I passively accept the name that others give me, or that I become what they expect of me. Rather, she meant that I should study the writing of Black women in order to learn strategies of empowerment. She intended that I focus on stereotype confrontation—that I learn from observing how other Black women respond to socially constructed images of who they are, and that I consider the extent to which those images actually inform who they are.

It was important for me to recognize that in so far as people have certain stereotypical expectations of Black women, they have those expectations of me. Jean Paul Sartre quite accurately recognized humans as being simultaneously constrained by our present circumstances and free to choose our futures. Stereotype confrontation is inevitable because it is not possible to be a radically free individual, pure personal character and will, unaffected by one's historical, social and political circumstances.

While neither race nor gender have much inherent meaning, both have exceedingly powerful historical, social and political meanings. All Black women, irrespective of our socio-economic background, educational achievement, sexual orientation, or geographical location, have faced some of the same images of who we might be. Men and women have exoticized and eroticized us, professors have seen us as angry when we have been assertive, friends (Black and White) have assumed that we can dance, strangers have supposed that we come from poor, fatherless families, employers have expected us to be the secretary but never the

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12 For example, by focusing on the similarity of the harms that can be caused by racist hate speech and pornography (as well as by homophobic and anti-semitic speech) instead of focusing on the race or gender specificity of the speech, I have tried to develop a unified First Amendment approach to tortious speech. I described this theory in a speech given on October 29, 1990, at Florida State Law School.

13 Human beings are "at once a facticity and a transcendence." Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness 98 (1956) (in original).
lawyer, and no one assumes that we are the professor. We may have rejected these images, or embraced them, we may not have noticed all of them, but we have encountered them. Those encounters factor into our images of self.

Of course, Black women are not the only people to experience stereotype confrontation. Ralph Ellison wrote about the experience in *Invisible Man*, as did J.D. Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The civil rights movement, the women’s liberation movement, and the general celebration of difference in the 1960s seem to have been a large scale effort to confront and destroy certain stereotypes. In addition, each Black woman’s stereotype confrontation experiences and her individual responses to those experiences will be unique. But, sharing our different responses and exchanging our strategies for coping with such experiences is precisely how we can act as role models for one another. We can offer one another lessons in how to play with socially constructed images instead of letting them play with us, lessons in deconstructing those images and revealing the social text behind them, lessons in moving from personal experience to political theory, lessons in finding strength in some of those images, lessons in envisioning change, lessons in self-naming.

Gloria Watkins described her experience of self-naming when she explained her use of the pseudonym bell hooks. bell hooks was the name of Watkins’ maternal grandmother:

>a strong woman . . . able to make her own way in this world, a woman who possessed traits often associated only with men—she would kill for family and honor—she would do whatever was necessary to survive—she would be true to her word.14

Embracing the stereotype of the strong, sharp-tongued Black woman was part of Gloria’s strategy of empowerment.15 Claiming that image as her own enabled her to find a voice.

Naming oneself is a serious process for all people at all times. Role models can be important in this process—they can give others the power to name themselves. So if you someday read radical legal writing by Sister Fan, know that I am speaking through the voice of my maternal grandmother. Like Gloria, I have chosen a name for myself that connects me to a part of my heritage which allows me to feel no fear and to recognize no limitations.

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15 Regina Austin alludes to a similar notion of empowerment through naming in *Sapphire Bound!*. Austin, 1989 Wis L Rev (cited in note 11).