

Guest Corner

The Double Bind of Black Women in the Academy

by Belinda Edmondson

Born and raised in the West Indies, guest columnist Belinda Edmondson, assistant professor of English at the Newark branch of Rutgers University, offers her unique perspective on race and gender in America and the affirmative action debate raging in higher education today.

WHEN I FIRST CAME to the United States as a foreign student, I had very different ideas about race and fairness in intellectual evaluations. Like many West Indians, I disbelieved reports by African Americans on the magnitude of white racism: It existed, but we tended to think of white racism as a problem of individuals, not a system with an inexorable logic of its own. As I progressed in my undergraduate education, I started to understand that white racism would not go away, no matter how well I performed. For instance, among black foreign students, we learned it was best to take large classes where the tests would be anonymous, because if the professor could put a name to your color they would mark you down. By the time I finished my undergraduate education, I was left with an overwhelming, paralyzing impression of America's racial divide.

No surprise, then, that to me the arguments for erasing race-based affirmative action admissions and substituting class-based ones are spurious. While white financially disadvantaged students certainly need

help, this in no way refutes the problem of the totality of white racism, which does not make distinctions between economically privileged blacks and economically disadvantaged ones.



Particularly ironic is the fact that because the debates over affirmative action have almost exclusively centered around race, they have obscured the fact that white women have been the principal beneficiaries of affirmative action. Worse, the recent Supreme Court decision to severely restrict affirmative action will hurt blacks the most, while allowing for a more lenient judicial standard for affirmative action programs aimed at helping women. As a black woman in the academy, then, I must contend with the fact that black women continue to be perceived, in both the black and white communities, as having received unfair promotion through affirmative action.

On the one hand, whites perceive black women to be the single most egregious example of unfair entitlements, a perception symbolized by the omnipresent image of the voracious black welfare queen devouring the country's gross national product. On the other hand, the black community firmly believes that black

women are hired over black men who, according to conspiracy theory logic, intimidate white men in the workplace. Black professional women thus are often perceived as de facto traitors to the race, because they have allowed themselves to become pawns of white men. Anita Hill's most terrible crime for the black community was that she was perceived to be in the service of the white establishment, trying to bring a brother down. *He* belonged there; *she* didn't.

These are all of the histories and myths that attend me when I step in front of a class, speak at a faculty meeting or conference. Despite the rarity of black women in English departments across the country, I realize that to many of those audiences I am perceived to be there at the expense of more qualified white candidates. I think of a *New York Times* article on affirmative action, and its reference to the "vast trove of affirmative action horror stories," no doubt carefully catalogued by some well-meaning white academic in my professional sphere. Eventually, I know, these stories will be told to me and I will be expected to sympathize with their Herculean efforts to hire a black person, and to understand that when they finally did the black person really wasn't, well, good.

If affirmative action seeks to prove that historically disadvantaged minority groups can function at equal intellectual capacity as whites, then its very conception belies America's most ingrained beliefs. Not because

it "discriminates" along race and gender lines, as its critics charge, but precisely because its ultimate ideal is a "color-blind" meritocracy, a place where Americans regardless of race and other "differences" can be judged on their individual merits. Racial inequality is at the very heart of Americanness itself. To be "race blind" is not simply impossible in any practical sense: it is, epistemologically speaking, un-American.

A recent *New York Times Magazine* poll on affirmative action reveals that the majority of (presumably, white) Americans support the "original" definition of affirmative action, which only requires employers to find qualified minority applicants and put them in a pool with everybody else, the final selection being made on that infamous "color-blind" basis. However, in another well-known poll a few years ago which asked respondents who should get the job if the two applicants — one white, one black — were equally qualified, the majority of white respondents believed that the white applicant should get it. In other words, most white people believe that whites are *entitled* to job opportunities before nonwhites. Blacks in particular are perceived to be the most undeserving group of all. What the critics of affirmative action have conveniently forgotten is the origins for the policy itself: white America's complete inability to be objective when confronted with race.

Are there black and other minority people and women who are incompetent and underqualified for their positions? Absolutely. Does this constitute "evidence" of affirmative action's inherent unfairness? Not at all. It actually confirms that it is the fairest remedy to American society's basic unfairness. Why is it that mediocrity is taken for granted when white Americans are in the work-

place, but all black workers must be the brilliant Sidney Poitier of their profession? Black America has always known what white America consistently denies is true: that when

black workers — and black women — make it to the place where affirmative action can actually *help* them, they have made it *despite*, not *because of*, their race. ☐