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African-American women are at the top of their game – or are they? That depends on the criteria with which we evaluate their success. While an increasing number of African-American women are enjoying success in their academic and professional pursuits, it may be coming at a great price. For instance, Cerise L. Glenn opens her chapter, “You Can Have a Man OR a Career: Professional and Personal Identity Negotiation of Aspiring African-American Female Professors,” with a quote from one of her undergraduate professors: “A Black woman with a master’s degree has a stronger chance of being struck by lightning than getting married” (Gilchrist 221). One can only imagine the odds of getting married for a Black woman with a Ph.D. For some women, career success is sufficient, and a fulfilling romantic relationship would simply be a welcome addition to an already content lifestyle. However, for many others, the apparent option of having a successful career in academia or a happy marriage and family comes at great personal cost. What are the factors underlying this conundrum, and how can African-American women professors achieve romantic relationships whose success mirrors that of their careers in the professoriate? Eletra S. Gilchrist’s 2011 collection of essays, Experiences of Single African-American Women Professors: With this Ph.D., I Thee Wed brings these questions to light and initiates a much overdue scholarly dialogue committed to unraveling the mystery surrounding this under-researched phenomenon.

Research devoted exclusively to the experiences of African-American women in academia is limited indeed. However, other scholars have broached the topic. Similar to Gilchrist, Stella Luciana Smith relies on Black Feminist theory and intersectionality to explore the unique experiences of this particular population in her dissertation, African American Females in Senior-Level Executive Roles Navigating Predominately White Institutions: Experiences, Challenges and Strategies for Success (6). Cynthia Gooch’s dissertation, Sisters at the helm...A qualitative inquiry of the impact of mentoring on the career paths of five African-American female urban community college presidents, examines the specific aspect of mentoring in these women’s lives. Experiences related to racism, sexism and the elusive work/life balance are a common factor in all three works. What distinguishes Gilchrist’s book is its emphasis on the impact of the above mentioned experiences on the women’s romantic experiences – or lack thereof, as many of the various studies’ participants relate.

The essays edited by Gilchrist are authored by and examine African-American women professors, and provide a poignant yet scholarly perspective on the topic. Gilchrist has organized the essays into four sections: precursors to African-American women professors’ predisposition toward single status, work/life balance, challenges to dating and finding a mate, and identity negotiation. The authors’ research features a broad spectrum of women who vary according to age, family history, length of tenure, and sexual orientation to name a few. Many of the accounts include a degree of auto-ethnography, providing for rich qualitative data and corresponding analysis of emergent themes.

In the game of love, it appears that African-American women in the professoriate are starting out with less than a full deck. Research conducted by several contributors identifies a variety of reasons that seemingly set African-American women up to remain single. To begin with, Kandace L. Harris cites a 2010 survey by Young indicating that for every 157 Black women in the six-figure income bracket, there are only 100 Black men (Gilchrist 49). Contrasting this statistic with its counterpart for Whites amplifies its alarm: for every 100 White women in this income bracket, there are 450 White men (Young, qtd. In Gilchrist 49). For African-American women who are intent on finding an African-American male partner who is similar to themselves, the numbers simply don’t add up. Participants in Monica L. Dillihunt and Cheryl D. Jenkins’ focus group echoed this sentiment: “I want someone who is ambitious, appreciates
what I bring to the table...[has] world experiences, honest, and educated” (Gilchrist 107). “When you take away the men that are in jail, homosexual, and uneducated, what do you have left?” (Gilchrist 109). Additionally, Jonita Henry notes that because of their exposure to negative views of marriage while growing up, some women raised in single parent households tended to maintain these negative perceptions about marriage (Gilchrist 31). These perceptions may consciously or unconsciously influence the desire of some African-American female academics to marry.

Natalie T.J. Tindall and Markesha S. McWilliams note the multitude of research conducted by scholars such as Acker and Armenti (2004) and Mason, Goulden, and Wolfinger (2006), that acknowledges the significantly more complex achievement of work-life balance for women in the academy than for men (Gilchrist 66). However, very little research has focused specifically on how African-American women navigate this challenge (Gilchrist 67). One such example is Tindall and McWilliams’ application of the strong Black woman myth to African-American women working in the academy (Gilchrist 67). BeauBoeuf-Lafontant describes the myth as characterizing Black women’s strength in the face of their “survival of enslavement and continued socioeconomic marginalization” as deviant in contrast “to normatively, feminine, [W]hite, middle-class women” (31). Tindall and McWilliams suggest that in response to overwhelming demands on their time and personal lives, rather than provide self-care or seek help, African-American women in the academy tend to succumb to the strong Black woman myth and fall into a pattern of ultimately subverting their own needs (Gilchrist 67).

Perhaps the two greatest challenges to dating and finding a mate that researchers identified are the women’s geographical location and the type of institution in which they work (Gilchrist 121, 141). Searching exclusively for an African-American mate only adds to the complexity. One doctoral candidate who participated in Mounira Morris’ study recounts her seemingly non-existent dating and social life while at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in a rural area: “Girl, dating…it ain’t happening…[I]t seems there aren’t many Black men around to even…talk to.” (Gilchrist 122). However, African-American women at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) don’t necessarily strike a gold mine either. Janice Y. Watson and R. Rennae Elliott describe the unique culture at the Christian HBCUS in which they work (Gilchrist 147). The expectation that female faculty – particularly single ones – act as mothers away from home to their students results in a significant encroachment on their limited personal time (Gilchrist 148). Additionally, Christian values mandate adherence to celibacy for singles – not only students, but for faculty and staff as well (Gilchrist 147). While the authors both state that their personal spiritual conviction, rather than an institutional mandate, fuels their commitment to celibacy, they readily admit that their choice limits their dating options (Gilchrist 155-56). For Sheena C. Howard, the challenge of intersectionality involves not only race and gender, but sexuality as well (Gilchrist 160). Despite working at an HBCU, Howard recounts the added complexity for her as a lesbian seeking to date other African-American women: “[I]t was imperative that I did not restrict myself to the confines of the institution...I came to realize that Black lesbians often stayed under the radar, rendering themselves invisible or “passing” as straight” (Gilchrist 162-63). She adds, “...it is risky for me (a Black lesbian) to approach someone I find attractive and ask her on a date...members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community have been violently attacked due to accusations of sexual advances towards heterosexual individuals” (Gilchrist 163).

Due to the intersection of race and gender, African-American women must overcome both racist and sexist myths and stereotypes that society often holds regarding them. Glenn identifies the sources of detrimental preconceived notions regarding these women’s identities as ranging from colleagues in the academy to dating partners, to their own families (Gilchrist 233). Arguably, one of the most damaging is the previously mentioned strong Black woman myth, particularly because African-American women tend to embrace and perpetuate it themselves (BeauBoeuf-Lafontant 31). In doing so, they mistakenly believe they can and must single-handedly manage it all, and consequently deny themselves the self-care, self-love, and balance they so desperately need and deserve (Gilchrist 210). Kimberly J. Chandler relates her own stirring account:
There was no way I could be committed to a psychiatric hospital in order to deal with my ongoing depression and PTSD...I needed to just suck it up, take my medicine, pray and keep it moving...Was I not a superwoman that could handle anything because the combination of my history, examples, and experiences told me I could do so?...When confronted with my humanity in such a way that I could no longer deny it, I was actually freed to relinquish the superhuman strength that resided in my mind and not my body. I was a human... (Gilchrist 207-10)

Despite the rich content of Gilchrist’s collection of essays, opportunities to explore other unanswered questions remain. While Gilchrist’s book distinguishes between the experiences of African-American women at PWIs and those at HBCUs, an idea for further research is to differentiate the experiences of those at teaching as opposed to research universities. Another is to determine the impact of pursuing the doctorate and/or working in the academy on already married African-American women’s relationships. Lastly, conducting similar studies to those already outlined in the book, with larger sample sizes and including participants at universities from all geographical regions of the country, could serve to further validate current findings and produce more representative results.

As African-American women, many of whom are single, continue to pour into the academy in unprecedented numbers, they must continue to negotiate a new and accurate identity for themselves. How can they prepare for the unique set of challenges and complexities that await them with regard to dating and choosing a mate? How will others perceive them, both inside and outside of the academy? How will they negotiate their work/life balance in order to accommodate a dating life, assuming their geographical location lends the possibility for one? The answers to these questions and countless others remain to be discovered for the hundreds of thousands of women for whom these issues represent a daily reality. Gilchrist and the contributors she features readily admit that they don’t have all the answers and that their research only begins to scratch the surface. Nonetheless, they have taken the vital first step in laying the foundation for research and inviting the academic community to engage in this critical dialogue.

REFERENCES