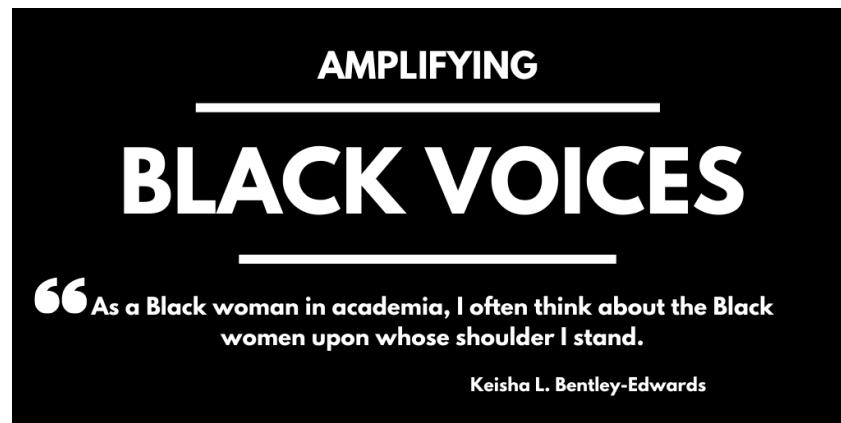


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Amplifying Black Voices: The third Black President of the United States, a story of Black women in academia | For Researchers

_ Author: Guest contributor

9-11 minutes



This series is a platform for black authors to share personal accounts about their life experiences in research and academia, as well as reflect on the Black Lives Matter movement, the current state of affairs and where we go from here.

This week Dr. Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, Assistant Professor at Duke University's School of Medicine, whose interdisciplinary research focuses on how racism, gender and culture influence health and educational outcomes, shares her story.

I remember writing essays for endless writing prompts in elementary school. My responses to them would always perplex teachers. My first memory of this dynamic occurred in elementary school. The prompt: What do you want to be when you grow up? I responded that I would like to be the third Black President of the United States. As she peered over my shoulder, she tried to correct me by stating that I wanted to be the first Black President. To paraphrase my younger self, I said what I said, and my response was as I meant it to be. My logic seemed obvious, but I explained it to her anyway. Vanessa Williams was recently crowned as the first Black Miss America. We just learned that you have to be 36 years old to run for President. Surely in the next twenty-eight years, there should be at least two Black presidents. To further prove my point, Jesse Jackson was currently running for President (don't ask why this wasn't my starting point. I was eight years old). She patted my shoulder and said that she doubted there would be a Black president in her lifetime, and maybe not even in mine. I repeated that I do not want to be the first. She instructed me to think about what was next on my list as she moved on to the next student.

I've thought about that conversation quite a bit throughout the years. I smile thinking about my naïveté for believing that I would not be witnessing the "first" of my race in a variety of achievements well into my thirties and forties, yet here we are. I also think about my keen understanding that being the "first" was also a very unpleasant position. Several months after this assignment, Vanessa Williams was forced to give up her Miss America crown. And to no one's surprise, Jesse Jackson was not the democratic nominee in the 1984 presidential election. The *first* is often placed on a pedestal in hindsight for beating the odds and achieving this status. What is lost in the reverie, is that the first Black person to make an accomplishment, is typically not the first (or even the second or third) to be a contender. Cheryl Brown was the first (known) Black woman to be a Miss America contestant in 1970, yet Vanessa Williams did not win the crown until 1983. Jesse Jackson was, by far, not the only Black person to run for President (my favorite campaign was Shirley Chisolm's run in 1972) before Barack Obama's successful campaign in 2008. Being the first is complicated. For the Black women that become the first, they often remain in the unenviable position of being the *only*, and unfortunately, they are, at times, the last Black woman in their areas for years. Further, the toll on Black women's physical and mental health, of being exalted and resented by their peers, has recently received greater attention.

As a Black woman in academia, I often think about the Black women upon whose shoulder I stand. These women were the first in their institutions to achieve a variety of accomplishments (ex., doctorates, tenure, named professorships, deans, etc...). I also think about those that could have been, should have been, and ultimately, were not the first. For many Black women academics, they hold dual statuses at different institutions.

For most Black women, the doors of scholarly opportunity were not thrust wide open at predominantly White institutions. Like my own experience, their hiring may be based upon university leadership's incentives to diversify faculty or the result of deliberate demands made by students. Intentional recruiting efforts are rarely followed up with intentional retention efforts. When I faced my own challenges as an academic, I was blessed to have people in my life that reminded me of my direction and purpose. The people that offered the sagest advice were Black women, who could see themselves reflected in my sorrows. In these conversations, I consistently heard that they had experienced the same things, often with the same language. As one of these highly regarded Black scholars said, "It's the same [mess], different decade." When you hear narratives repeated about Black women across institutions and disciplines, it is indicative of problems occurring throughout university systems.

As I worked through this time in my life, I wondered why they waited so long to share their stories. I quickly realized that in a small sense, they were shielding me from their pain to keep me from being discouraged from entering the field. Most often, they were also shielding themselves from having to relieve their own heartbreak. I know that I am not the only Black woman that they have gifted with their vulnerability and strength. I also know that I am not the last.

Many people look at Black women who were the first in their department to achieve something like tenure and assume that the systemic problems that caused her to be the first are all external to their institutions. Systemic racism is understood to be societal problems, rather than university problems. When defining systemic racism as something that only occurs in the context of poverty, you ignore the health, wealth, and institutional data that show otherwise. Thus, systemic racism truly means system-wide and can be found in YOUR institution. To unravel the system, we have to identify and understand the misconceptions around Black women in academia.

In the fight to eliminate bias, the focus remains on individual biases, without recognizing that it can only flourish if the system supports them. Within a department, it is not just thinking about the faculty member that says thinly veiled racist comments in meetings, or the silent acquiescence of witness. The focus should be on the system that allows these individuals to remain as department heads, deans, and in other positions of power. Tenure protects our academic freedom through job security. However, it does not guarantee us the right to hold positions of leadership. Universities are joining the nation in reckoning on race. To move this moment from personal reflection to institutional action, the success of Black women in your institution, currently and in the past, serves as its own area of concern that needs to be reckoned.

I will continue to celebrate Black women as they achieve various firsts within academia. However, I look forward to these occurrences becoming as newsworthy as Nia Franklin becoming Miss America in 2019. This was significant, not because she was the ninth Black woman to hold this crown. It was significant because she was among five Black women to share her achievement across institutions in the same year. Even more than that, I look forward to Black women excelling throughout academia being seen as significant, but unsurprising.

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About the author, Dr Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards

Dr. Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards is an Assistant Professor at Duke University's School of Medicine, Division of General Internal Medicine, the Associate Director of Research for the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and a Co-Director of Duke's Clinical and Translational Science Award's Special Populations Core. Dr. Bentley-Edwards' interdisciplinary research focuses on how racism, gender and culture influence health and educational outcomes. Using an underlying theme of seeking remedies to racial/ethnic disparities in these areas, Dr. Bentley-Edwards work includes the development of novel, culturally relevant assessments and approaches that are used to improve research strategies, guide practice and inform policies. Her research has been supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. She earned her undergraduate degree from Howard University, a masters in Developmental Psychology from Teachers College at Columbia University and her doctorate from the Applied Psychology and Human Development department from the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Bentley-Edwards regularly provides expert commentary to media outlets on current events and the role of systemic racism on health, social and educational outcomes. Dr. Bentley-Edwards has also published with Springer, her 2019 article [Out of the Hood, But Not Out of the Woods: The School Engagement and Cohesion of Black Students Based on Exposure to Violence and Victimization](#) is now available to read online and download on the [Springer website](#).