Allies, Advocates, and Accomplices: A Critical Look at the Relationships Between white and Black women in Engineering Education

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Abstract

Historically, Black women have experienced both suppression and erasure at the hands of white women. In order to address the historical harm that undergirds the relationships between Black and white women, more than allyship is necessary. Instead, this article proposes an accomplice position that white women and Black women can take in coalitional work. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collin's Black Feminist Epistemology, the accomplice stance actively engages with power systems and dialogue, honoring lived experiences and committing to an ethic of care and accountability. This provocation provides a sample case for understanding accomplice relationships and suggests heuristic for potential accomplices to use in establishing enduring coalitions between Black and white women.

Introduction

In 1979, Audre Lorde [1] published a letter she'd written to Mary Daly, author of *Gyn/Ecology*. In it, Lorde, a Black queer woman poet and theorist, praised Daly for her work and yet shared the reality facing Lorde as she read it:

> To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of the patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.

In a cogent repudiation of a feminism that erases difference and along with it the experiences of Black women, Lorde challenges Daly to consider difference and bears witness to the ways white women have for centuries failed to understand, empathize with, and take up for Black women's experiences under the patriarchy, experiences which are necessarily raced. At the time of writing the letter, Lorde wrote, "I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy because of destructive guilt and defensiveness..." (p.70). Lorde ends the letter by asking for a response; after four months, Daly offered none. And so Lorde shared her letter.

This article emerges from that very same conflict, a conflict that extends centuries before Daly and Lorde's exchange and extends the half century into the future to where we are now: despite calls for intersectionality and inclusion, the interpersonal collaborations and interactions between white women and Black women often fail, even if white women don't realize it. In a nation where, in the 2020 presidential election, 55% of white women voted for Trump as 91% of Black women voted for Biden[2], Black and white women's differences in viewpoints regarding status, security, and inclusion confirm a divide that extends beyond gender.

A note on Epistemology: In this article, we follow Patricia Hill Collins[3] and a Black Feminist epistemology, grounding our knowledge-making in lived experience, dialogue, an ethic of caring, and personal accountability. It is tempting, of course, to design a large-scale study to

affirm, complicate, or deny the realities of our discussion here. And perhaps we will. Yet to do so would be to embrace an epistemological foundation that fails to serve this project well. We work instead to answer a question: What kinds of foundational knowledge or interactions can support enduring relationships between Black women and white women? Or, what kinds of relationships are needed for Black and white women's relationships to survive intersecting systems of oppression?

Allies --> Advocates --> Accomplices

As might be obvious given our contemporary moment, the issues we're discussing here aren't straightforward or simply a white lady problem (although...). Early calls for allies emerged primarily from LGBTQ spaces, where allyship allowed het-cis community members to stand in allegiance with queer communities. Yet in recent years, the emergence of a whole ally industrial complex, as Indigenous Action 2014[4] articulates, has called into question the role of so-called allies in activism, scholarship, and politics (among other sites of work). The authors write, "Ally has...become an identity, disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support. The term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless." Instead of allies, they call for co-conspirators or accomplices, defined as "one who helps another commit a crime."

It is ironic that being a co-conspirator or an accomplice is connected to definitions of criminal activity. Although equity should be the norm in any organization or society, it is not lost on the authors that an aggressive stance is needed for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to be included in systems that exclude them. This aggression may very well feel overwrought or even scary for those on the sidelines. Anything less than radical disruption is likely to continue to do harm to BIPOCs[5] and, the authors deliberately use the accomplice language with its negative connotation to emphasize the perversion of rights that such be bestowed on all people.

Based upon that definition, it may be easy to conjure up an anarchist dream where BIPOCs are drawing white folks into arsonist plots or destructive riots. This, of course, is not what the authors of the provocation in Indigenous Action mean. Rather, the authors seek to differentiate between an ally, who, despite a stance of partnership with BIPOC, *profits* off of suffering, and an accomplice, who *has something to lose* because of their partnership with BIPOC.

This paper (or provocation) extends from a stated interest in allyship both in and out of Engineering Education scholarship. A number of programs (often grant-funded) seek allyship, particularly male allyship, as a goal [6]–[9]. For example, the Allies for Women in Engineering (AWE) program trains men to become allies of women in order to build a more inclusive and equitable environment for women[7]. And the approach was relatively successful. After the trainings, attendees increased their understanding of microaggressions and how to step in during instances of discrimination. Although they did not define allies in explicit terms, their assessment

suggests that allies move from a position of understanding discrimination to an ability (and comfort with) addressing issues of discrimination.

This frame for allyship aligns with other pursuits of allyship in the field. One endeavor seeks cisgender allies for non-binary and trans students, describing them as "bridgers" into engineering culture[9]. Another articulate allies through a developmental model, too; ally identities are built through interdependent growth in "understand[ing] unearned advantage" (in this article, we call this privilege), the education of the dominant group, and practice and accountability[6]. This study takes an additional step to differentiate between allies and advocates, tying the difference to programmatic levels and participation:

> *Advocates* are active and effective proponents of gender diversity and equity, specifically in terms of increasing the number of female faculty, encouraging the hiring and promotion of female faculty in administrative positions, and ensuring the fair and equitable treatment of women within partner institutions. They are committed to increasing their understanding of gender bias and its impact on the academic careers of women.

> *Allies* are men faculty, who participated in gender equity (Ally) training and sign an agreement stating they are willing to identify themselves as allies for faculty women and gender equity. They are expected to take action primarily within their departments including: speaking up at a meeting, inviting female colleagues to collaborate on research, or serving on a committee in place of their female colleagues to reduce the inequity in service loads. At North Dakota State University, allies serve as a pool from which future Advocates can be selected.

This model informs our discussion in a number of ways; it suggests that: (1) allyship is not the *end* of participation in equity and inclusion efforts; (2) advocacy requires an extended commitment to equity, and (3) allyship and advocacy are important for faculty in addition to the students often discussed in the literature. While there seems to be a dearth of efforts to develop allyship based upon race (as opposed to gender), these foundational assumptions align with our own experiences with allyship across racial lines. As Riley and Pawley have demonstrated, the myths about gender and race reveal the need to articulate an intersectional approach to oppression[10]; yet few white women have (in our experience) been well-prepared to navigate their own positionality and privilege alongside and as an accomplice with Black women. Allies are often well-meaning but ill-equipped for establishing relationships that can endure systems of oppression.

It is this endurance and survival we hope to inspire with this provocation. Allyship describes a relationship that, in our experience, is too distant, not intimate enough; too patriarchal, not

holistic enough; too divorced from power systems; not abolitionist, revolutionary, or committed enough. In *We Want to Do More than Survive,* Bettina Love (2019) writes primarily to other Black educators:

> Educational justice is going to take people power, driven by the spirit and ideas of the folx who have done the work of antiracism before: abolitionists. The fact that dark people are tasked with the work of dismantling these centuries-old oppressions is a continuation of racism.[11]

We agree. Love articulates abolitionist teaching as a way forward for educators who want to upend the existing systems of education that systematically exclude Black girls and boys, and then men and women. Her book weaves stories, scholarship, and current events to suggest and enact what is needed to combat educational racism. Her account prompts us, too, to tack in and out of the typical scholarly boundaries to seek solutions.

Outside of Engineering Education, we find new articulations of the kind of enduring relationships, the kind of sisterhood that might promote the development of "people power" that includes white women. Outside of the academy, Black women are calling out performative allyship[12], [13]. Quianmo describes the due diligence needed to work with white women who claim to be allies. "White feminism as we know it" she begins, "is burning up in flames." She explains that she has seen "a significant increase of outreach from white 'allies' who have previously strung us along in multiple dead-end meetings...They want to be part of our programming, post their job openings to our community or develop content for their company with no budget to compensate us." As such, this emotional and cultural taxation is often charged to BIPOC, leaving them depleted from expectations to teach and operate in systems where they are presumed incompetent[14], [15].

How does this trend translate into the academy? Does it?

We think it does. Increasingly, "doing diversity work" is en vogue, and working with Black women serves the purposes of the academy in new ways. But we find white women (among others) are often ill-equipped to understand the way their ally development must continue through advocacy and into accomplice behavior. Drawing on Patricia Hilll Collins' theory of Black Feminist Epistemology[3], this paper articulates accomplice development in two ways: (1) power relationships and (2) dialogue.

We suggest that allies, advocates and accomplices enter into power systems and dialogue in ways that increase their own risk and vulnerability; allies have little vulnerability and risk where accomplices become vulnerable *with* their multiply marginalized accomplice. One problem that emerges from the ally industrial complex is that allies have much to gain from their allyship, but they have very little at stake. Those with privilege (or unearned advantage) occupy powerful

positions that make allyship a surface behavior that ultimately upholds the power systems *and* their own position of power within that system.

Using a metaphor of being cut, Table 1 presents dynamics between white women and Black women at the levels of allyship, advocacy, and accompliceship. We position white women as allies, advocates, and accomplices given the subordinate positions of Black women in organizational structures and in society. We recommend both a power analysis *and* an active engagement with dialogue (both listening and speaking) in order to move from ally to accomplice. Dialogue, a central tenet of Hill Collins' Black Feminist Theory, serves as an accountability measure and a problem-solving activity for well-meaning allies to assess how and if their dialogic practices are entering into the power systems.

	Power Relationship	**Central Dialogue**	**When a Black Woman gets cut...**
Ally	Ally maintains power over and doesn't engage the power structure meaningfully.	Ally is in dialogue with others in power.	An ally cries.
Advocate	Advocate maintains power over but engages the power structure meaningfully.	Advocate has two separate dialogues: one with those in power and one with those who are oppressed.	An advocate calls 911.
Accomplice	Accomplice shares power and works with the oppressed to engage the power structure meaningfully.	Accomplice listens to and with those who are oppressed and both takes risks in moving dialogue outside of the accomplice relationship.	An accomplice bleeds.

Table 1- Differences between Allies, Advocates, and Accomplices in Terms of Their Power Relationship, Central Dialogue, and What's at Risk

What does it mean for white women and Black women to become accomplices?

Lived Experience and A Living Dialogue

Signing on to be accomplices across racial lines requires an acknowledgement, acceptance, and appreciation for difference often missing in institutions[1]. Our experiences suggest that

differences provide opportunities for building coalitions for justice. Too often however, differences are ignored or become sites of resentment, as those with more positional power (e.g., supervisory roles) and privilege fail to embrace a bond or "sisterhood" that can mobilize across women's races[1].

As I (Kristen, a white woman) write this, I think of the kinds of activities I have had to unlearn but continue to witness. I have seen those with more power:

- Make Black Women's experiences of inequity about them--and particularly cry about their guilt when they are complicit;
- Advocate for BIPOC colleagues in one room, but express doubt or uncertainty about their abilities when the BIPOC colleagues are not present;
- Collaborate with BIPOC, adopt their ideas but not give them credit for their work when in the presence of others or, worse, take their ideas and use them outside of those collaborations;
- Suppress and ignore Black women's lived experiences in support of systems that uphold white supremacy and the patriarchy;
- Manipulate situations and penalize Black women for criticizing either white women or white male colleagues.

These and other behaviors make white women suspicious in the eyes of many BIPOC. The denial of the behaviors make it very difficult to address the harm done by the behaviors.

As I (Monica, a Black woman) write this, I think about how I have had to restructure how I work with white women to be heard and to thrive in professional spaces. This became increasingly apparent when I worked as an administrator in my most recent organization. I was placed in a position of authority yet was reminded often by many of my white subordinates that positionality did not matter to them and that the system would support them over me when our stories were pitted against each other. People in the larger organization struggled with my positionality, often referring to my tone or to stereotypical tropes connected to expressive Black women. What I have noted is that

- The idea of sisterhood doesn't exist automatically between Black women and white women. Our bond is often a surface one. It takes deliberate work on both sides for respect and for understanding of our diverse perspectives to be recognized. Even then, sisterhood is defined differently by Black and white women.
- I cannot assume if a white woman disagrees with me in a professional environment that the system in which we work will be equitable. Gatekeepers favoring white women and/or an absence of BIPOC confirming my experiences prevent the validation of my concerns.
- Many white women make excuses for other white women who behave badly and disrespect Black women in the system. If white women are in positions of power, they may not hold other white women accountable for their actions until Black women are

harmed repeatedly or almost beyond repair. There seems to be hesitancy, almost as if accountability is betrayal. Alignment as women is conditional and performative and defaults to a preference by race. White women give the benefit of the doubt to white women first and "protect" them from Black women, even if the protected white women are at fault.

- Many white women do not empathize with my experience as a Black woman. It feels as if many blame me for what I go through, as if I deserve what is happening to me. There often seems to be difficulty believing the oppression I have faced at the hands of white women. I have to prove what I am experiencing is real even to the point of being harmed. Once I realized there was little to no care for my well-being and survival, I found ways to protect myself legally, psychically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Self-preservation became my top priority. Only when oppression happened to the white women around me did people attempt to address my concerns.

As our experiences illustrate, white women are gatekeepers in the patriarchy and the academy. As such, white women become the benefactors of unseen privilege to hoard or dole out. White women also often embody the patriarchy and the kinds of toxic masculinity that upholds it. This is not a criticism of white women; rather, it is a description of the work that needs to be done and the systems that need to be undone. We must recognize and admit there are problems to address them. This is our attempt to do that.

What does that mean for us as a Black and white woman wanting to develop strategies for building accomplices? For us, it has meant drawing attention to the positionality, privilege and power that have historically impeded ongoing relationships across colorlines. Positionality and privilege, when combined, enable a nuanced understanding of how power works[16], [17]. Positionality denotes the fluidity, intersectionality and flexibility of oppression and identity; privilege describes the unearned advantages that particular groups experience. When taken together, positionality and privilege inscribe power for different individuals and populations, and--as importantly--in any given situation, one's power and agency to act is different. Such differences illumine the struggle that Black women and white women often have to understand one another's experiences in the academy[1].

Positionality, Privilege and Power

In the academy, as in all places, Black women and white women are connected by gender but differ in their exposure to power and their ability to benefit from such power. As Lorde articulates, "white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the

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[1] We want to be clear, too, that this is not an attempt to *essentialize* either Black women or white women; instead, we acknowledge the historic and present positionalities and privileges that consistently differ among those with particular racialized and gendered identities.

pretense of sharing power. This possibility does not exist in the same way for women of Color.[1]"

Unlike Black women, white women are more likely to engage closely with white men early in their lives, to commiserate with (and normalize) white men's good and the bad mannerisms, and to give white men the benefit of the doubt if they perpetuate behaviors and enforce laws and practices that oppress BIPOC. These men are their fathers, husbands, uncles, brothers, and sons. As such, white women grew up living and observing behind the scenes workings of the patriarchy in some form. Regardless of class, they obtained direct and indirect access to many rules that govern U.S. society and maintain oppressive laws and practices.

Even though white women do not have the same power as white men, their awareness of the system grants them benefits Black women often do not experience until they enter professional spaces. With limited resources for women, Black women and white women often vie for common positions and accolades in a system ruled by men. Both use their knowledge of the patriarchy to be seen and heard in systems not built for either group. In this way, the "sisterhood" breaks down once again.

Black women often learn about power professionally in ways that white women do not. In professional organizations and the workplace, Black women are often one of the few and have to learn power rules from those willing to teach them. Such learning takes time and often does not give Black women the grace to make mistakes. As such, many Black women are taught from an early age that they have to be twice as good when they enter a system to get half of what they deserve. This is the outcome of living within intersecting oppressions. When many Black women learn the rules of the professional game, they are not able to sustain their success given oppressive, patriarchal climates, and are not able to overcome workplace toxicity unless they have accomplices in place or find ways to break the rules of professional games to their advantage. Doing this, however, often threatens people in that system and sets Black women up for failure if they do not succeed. If they are successful, they may be labeled aggressive or troublesome.

Many see this game of survival as a zero-sum game, resulting in Black women often becoming casualties in systems that do not change fast enough and do not present opportunities for them to shine and to lead. They are expected to be subservient, to code-switch, and to assimilate.

Sisterhood is a common term presented in this paper given Merriam-Webster's definition of sisterhood[18]- "the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns." These shared aspects differ among white women and Black women. Referring again to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Black women united in social justice efforts to achieve a goal that benefitted all of them. This goal resulted in the election of the first woman and woman of color Vice President in the U.S. Regardless of issues Black women may have had with Kamala Harris's policies, the overwhelming majority of Black women came together in sisterhood, making a decision to support a candidate who represented the best interests of the group, not the individual. In this way, Black women demonstrated the idea of accompliceship.

Maybe systemic unity is more likely to occur among Black women since they are used to being excluded from systems. When the 14th amendment gave Black men the right to vote, Black women were left out. Although the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote was supposed to rectify that, it didn't. Only white women garnered the right to vote. Not Black women. As white women suffragists marched for equality, Black women were in the back of the movement (literally and figuratively) and did not vote until 50 years later, when Lyndon B. Johnson signed Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts. Although there had been a unique opportunity for Black women and white women to unite for voting rights, this unity never happened. There is a collective responsibility to ensure success for Black women, for if one succeeds, all succeed.

Development of Accomplice Identities: An Example Case

In my (Kristen) recent qualitative study of coalition-building in the academy, my coauthors and I collected many, many stories from multiple marginalized scholars working to enact justice in academic contexts[19]. In order to illustrate the need for our developmental approach, we offer a composite sample story that draws on this research and our own experiences.

Context
Jordan is a Black woman in the academy in her fourth year on the tenure track (TT) at a research-intensive university. Although she is the only TT BIPOC faculty member in her department, she enjoys having BIPOC colleagues in non-faculty, administrative and adviser positions in her unit. Jordan has recently received a prestigious award that has drawn national attention to a recent independent research project; she is also actively engaged in a collaboration with a white woman, Anita, in her unit that focuses on a related topic.

One of Jordan's BIPOC colleagues, Lora, is physically located in the chair's office at Southern University; she has semi-regular lunch dates with Jordan. Jordan considers Lora a work confidante.

Jordan's white male department chair has been actively recruiting BIPOC faculty since his arrival two years ago. Two white women associate chairs (Melissa and Taffy) who work in the chair's office are self-proclaimed allies but have many questions about the qualifications of the BIPOC candidates.

In Jordan's 3rd year review, Melissa, suggests Jordan move her Black women's mentoring work (a topic of research) from Teaching to Service on her promotion and tenure portfolio since that work "doesn't really demonstrate any meaningful competence." Lora once overheard Melissa say to Taffy that she was "glad they hired Jordan, but wasn't the chair's diversity initiative causing them to overlook qualified

candidates?" Taffy has just read Kendi's "How to be an Anti-Racist" and wants to be anti-racist.

Anita heard about Melissa's question through the rumor mill. Anita agrees that diversity is important and researches it but she also thinks that merit should drive most hiring.

Situation At Hand
Based upon Jordan's nomination, a prestigious university has invited Jordan to deliver a series of talks. There is a last-minute opportunity for Jordan to share her work with the university President's advisory board also, an opportunity no one else in the department has had. Jordan was out of the office on the day of the request so Melissa walks around the office to ask Anita if she would like to present her work given its time sensitive nature.

After sending an email to Jordan and getting no response, Melissa drops by the chair's office to let him know that Jordan seems to be busy since she hasn't responded to Melissa's email. Melissa suggests that Jordan be replaced with Anita for the advisory board presentation. Melissa said, "Although she is out of the office, I bet Jordan is really busy right now with her classes and new grant project. Why don't we give the President's office Anita's name instead? She works with Jordan and is probably a better representative of the department since she has the highest teaching evaluations of all our junior faculty. She is an excellent presenter, you know...."

Lora, who was sitting in the waiting area and heard the conversation between Melissa and the chair, texted and called Jordan about the exchange, letting Jordan know that she needed to check her email immediately about the advisory board presentation opportunity.

The dynamics in this scenario are complicated, and they represent opportunities for a number of ally, advocate, and accomplice behaviors. This kind of story is common because it (1) isn't explicitly racist, (2) concerns a number of power relationships, and (3) potentially has long-term effects for all the actors involved, particularly Jordan. Depending on your role, share the scenario above as a locator and as an opportunity for growth.

Dialogue as an Accomplice Behavior

When Hill Collins notes that Black Feminists make knowledge using dialogue, her argument is that knowledge is socially constructed. One of the arguments we make is that dialogue--both listening and speaking -- should be considered central to the work of moving from an allyship stance to an advocate and accomplice stance. In Table 1, we suggest that dialogues occur between allies, advocates, and accomplices, and for the purpose of this article we use dialogue as

a proxy for the first step in establishing accomplice behaviors. The above case helps us illustrate this point.

Above, each of the actors has the opportunity to make a dialogic move in order to enter into the power system. Here Melissa occupies a position of power and uses her power to strip Jordan of a potentially lucrative professional experience. Here's what might happen next:

- *Anita receives an email from Melissa asking if she would be interested in delivering a keynote based upon her research collaboration with Jordan.*
- *Anita tells Taffy that she is excited to have this invitation because she needs to connect with upper level administrators and external partners at the university; her family is excited, too, because her grandfather was a former professor in her college and her parents are alums of the university.*
- *Lora immediately texts Jordan to call her to confirm that she heard Melissa transferring a professional opportunity to Anita before Jordan can respond.*

Dialogue becomes an option for these actors, depending on whether they consider themselves allies, advocates or accomplices. For the purposes of this provocation, let's discuss Associate Chair Taffy's options.

- *Non-Ally behavior:* Do nothing. After all, Anita is available to replace Jordan, and the response is time sensitive. What does it hurt for the chair to replace Anita with Jordan? Honestly, Jordan is in her 4th year and has plenty of accolades.
- *Ally behavior:* Suggest to Anita that she talks to Jordan before accepting the opportunity; when Jordan brings up the situation and asks why Associate Chair Melissa would have behaved that way, say, "Oh my. That is the worst--I can't believe she would do that." Down the road, when Jordan reveals that she knew Anita told Taffy about it, yet Taffy had pretended that she knew nothing about what had happened to Jordan, Taffy feels horrible. Taffy cries and promises to do better.
- *Advocate behavior:* In her next meeting with the chair, Taffy describes her discomfort with the way Melissa handled this situation and suggests the department develop guidelines for how to handle these kinds of situations. When Jordan brings up the situation and asks why the associate chair behaved that way, say, "I know! This is completely unacceptable. I've already spoken to the chair about it, and I think we should figure out a way to prevent this kind of thing from happening again."
- *Accomplice behavior:* Taffy directly confronts Melissa immediately in the conversation: "Melissa, did you talk to Jordan about this? I mean, this is really her work anyway." When Melissa demurs, Taffy contacts Jordan to talk about it, and they develop a plan together that prioritizes Jordan's concerns.

We suggest dialogue as a first step to developing enduring accomplice relationships because direct dialogue with BIPOC is perhaps the only way to begin to understand the situational complexities and priorities of colleagues. Where advocates develop institutional savvy in addressing injustices, accomplices invest in a more intimate understanding of the way power systems affect individuals intersectionality and with positional specificity. Accomplices position themselves in order to use their power in subversive supportive ways that respond to the particular rather than the general. They respond to the lived experiences of their Black colleagues, recognizing that whatever accolades or successes are outward facing, their colleagues are also engaged in a long-game of survival.

> What I am describing is a life of exhaustion, a life of doubt, a life of state-sanctioned violence, and a life consumed with the objective of *surviving.* Survival is existing and being educated in an antidark world...It is trying to survive in, and at the same time understand and make sense of, a world and its schools that are reliant on dark disposability and the narratives necessarily to bring about that disposability...As dark people, we are trying to survive the conditions that make the dark body, mind, and spirit breakable and disposable.[11]

The disposability Love refers to shows up in our sample case. Some might read Jordan's experience as unfortunate but understandable: Anita would be silly to give up this kind of opportunity, regardless of how she got the invitation; Melissa is the associate chair and she has a responsibility to distribute opportunities to all junior faculty; Taffy is an associate chair too-- what if Melissa ends up being vindictive and makes the workplace uncomfortable? But when we decide to center the experiences of Jordan, the most marginalized and vulnerable in this situation, it's easy to see how these responses treat her as disposable, replaceable. The work of an accomplice is to treat culturally disposable colleagues and treasures worthy of risk and active intervention in the existing power structure.

As such, Dialogue is just the beginning. Castagno encourages white women and women of color (WOC) to move from dialogue to work since dialogue is often a safe place for white women[20]. The work is where accompliceship lies. In Taffy and Jordan's case, the work begins with establishing a sister relationship *through action*. Taffy might:
- Risk ruining her friendship with Anita by explaining to Janet that the ethical thing to do would be to turn down the invitation and offer Jordan as the speaker;
- Risk being seen as a "team player" by Melissa and her department chair by discussing the situation with a junior faculty meeting outside of the "proper" chain of command;
- Be overlooked for future leadership roles because she is seen as subversive or unfamiliar with the professional responsibilities of a leader.

But dialogue is the foundation of accomplice decision-making because accomplices don't make decisions *for* their colleagues. A commitment to honest dialogue drives the kind of relationship building that can enable enduring relationships.

Because of the positional and privilege differences that often exist between Black and white women, dialogue takes practice and commitment. Effective, relational dialogue has a number of roadblocks:

- Chao notes that since white women are structurally advantaged in the hierarchy of higher education, they should not seek forgiveness and/or approval from WOC regarding their dominance in the system. Allow Black women to just "be," meaning that emotional taxes to affirm white women in these dialogues should not be expected[21].
- It can be difficult for white women to listen to stories from Black women about ways white women intentionally and unintentionally hurt them. We acknowledge that in part this difficulty extends from the way white women's gender has been historically constructed.
- Tone-policing confirms that someone is not an accomplice. Eliminating tone policing enhances the dialogue. Tone policing is often connected to the angry Black woman moniker such that Black women are expected to be stoic even when persecuted. As such, when vocal Black women complain, they are often labeled assertive, disagreeing, or angry[22]. As such, Black women who emote (a sign of emotional intelligence in many cases) are deemed assertive and disagreeable by many white women.

In the sample case, these roadblocks could occur in any number of shifting contexts. If Jordan brings it up with Taffy, she may describe the situation from her perspective and tie it to a number of other historical and microaggressive experiences. One of these experiences might include Taffy and the way she has navigated relationships with other white women. In this kind of dialogue, Taffy might want to be cognizant of the tendency for white women to shift the dialogue from focused on the larger discrimination at hand to their own guilt.

Or, in a faculty meeting, if Melissa congratulates Anita on her forthcoming advisory board talk, Jordan might incredulously ask, "Oh? That talk? How did Anita go about getting that invitation, Melissa?" For Anita, this line of questioning seems unnecessarily hostile, and after the meeting, Anita might say to Taffy, "I mean...honestly, did she need to make such a public deal out of it? Seems a little harsh to just call out Melissa like that. And now it makes it seem like *I asked for the invitation,* but I didn't!!!"

Here, Taffy has a choice: to engage in second-hand tone policing or to honor her mentoring relationship with Jordan and, in so doing, honor the pursuit of equity and justice. Rather than focusing on tone, focus on the issues at hand. Is there truth to the complaint? How are biases coming into the conversation? What does power look like in this situation? What happens after

the exchange? Is someone taking additional steps to ensure that they have the upper hand in the conversation? For example, are there meetings after the meeting to put measures in place to undermine the conversation and to ensure that the outcome will be favorable for the white woman? Look at all perspectives.

Heuristic for an Accomplice's Ethic of Care and Accountability

In order to establish coalitional accomplice relationships that appreciate and celebrate difference, the authors suggest three heuristic activities that can establish trust and build a shared understanding. This heuristic reflects a Black Feminist epistemology, not only because it is built in pursuit of an ethic of care but also because it invests in knowledge-making in action. For Black Feminist theorists, this means that the experiential knowing that occurs *in situ* establishes the basis for relationships. Importantly, we use a heuristic because there is no one-size-fits all approach to activist work or to establishing ally, advocate or accomplice relationships. Yet as Moore, Walton and Jones (forthcoming) note, heuristics are appropriate for activist work because they can be adapted for various contexts.

Engage in Dialogue
As we discuss above, dialogue is fundamental to understanding. Here, our heuristic draws on our experiences to establish focuses on both listening and speaking. Accomplice questions about dialogue include:
- Whose stories have I heard and whose do I honor?
- Have I asked multiply marginalized and underrepresented (MMU) colleagues about their direct experiences? If not, why not?
- Have I had serious discussions with those in power about the ways our policies affect MMU scholars?

Acknowledge Historical Harm and Systems of Oppression
In establishing accomplice relationships, bringing an empathetic and engaged humility about the unknown requires the accomplice to connect the "seen" with the "unseen" and the systematic. By that, we mean that whatever situations a white woman enters into with a Black woman, the Black woman often carries unseen experiences that inform the current situation. As an accomplice, you might approach situations through these questions:
- Am I engaged in independent reading and other forms of learning about the historical harms done to my accomplices?
- What kinds of policies and patterns might be exacerbating my accomplice' experience in this situation? How might I have benefited from those policies and patterns?
- How have I openly and sincerely acknowledged the historical harms my accomplice has experienced?

Golden (2019) argues that a politic of harm reduction is necessary to address the barriers facing BIPOC scholars in STEM. Rather than "do no harm," Golden argues that we must engage with the academy as an institution that has already done harm. The accomplice works from this position as well.

Build Anti-racist Coalitional Practices and Policies
Harm reduction, then, means dismantling policies that inhere not just bias against BIPOC but bias *for* whiteness. Accomplices intervene in discriminatory and microaggressive behaviors, but they also engage critically with the academic system that prioritizes whiteness through coded expectations. Our linguistic practices, definitions of professional, and the ways these imbue our power systems must be questioned. An accomplice might ask:
- How can I bring my accomplice into the power system? What kind of power might I need to give up in order to shift the power system?
- Where do our policies embrace whiteness through linguistic and professional norms? How can I resist those norms and seek to change them?
- What kinds of practices allow for my BIPOC colleagues to feel disposable? Or, where does power pool to preserve systemic oppression, and how might we disentangle and diffuse the pooled power?

In the scholarly world, power pools not only in organizational leadership (like the case we describe above) but also in citations and awards, in the celebration of particular viewpoints. Acknowledging and reducing harm may mean shifting the scholarly practices traditionally understood to be "neutral."

These heuristic questions only work when white women and Black women engage in an ethic of accountability. To be very clear, our accomplice approach does *not* suggest that white women engage in a one-way support of Black women. Instead, we suggest that white women understand from the outset how and why Black women often encounter white women with skepticism. Rather than leave the responsibility on Black women to do the work of enculturating and educating white women into the practice of accomplice and sisterhood, we offer this heuristic as a way of understanding what might be needed to develop enduring trust relationships with Black women.

We suggest three pillars of accountability that white women and Black women ought to share:

1. **Be committed to the work, even outside of the presence of your accomplices.** One caution for accomplices is that the closed door conversations we have matter. Engage with all members of your organization and discipline in the ways you would in the presence of your accomplice.
2. **Proceed and engage coalitionally.** Here, we have oversimplified what the Black woman and white woman relationship looks like. In the case, a whole range of actors are

involved in the situation, and we suggest working with others who have signed on as accomplices. Coalitional work allows for shared load-bearing and allows for all members of the coalition to rest, to take up activism as appropriate, and--most importantly-- provides for decisions to be made from as many perspectives as possible. For all coalition members, this means that deference is part of the game.

3. **Prepare for real talk, for mistakes, and for vulnerability.** Within a coalition, accomplices know that mistakes happen and that direct discussion of missteps is appropriate and effective. Real talk connotes the kinds of conversations that correct missteps and misunderstandings unabashedly and unapologetically. Accomplices should not use their privilege and power to "save face" or to undermine Black women to protect or advance themselves.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Coalition Building

This provocation is an invitation to build coalitions that can make change in both big and small ways. We embrace Chavez' vision of coalitions as "less an existing thing or relationship...and more as a possibility for coming together within or to create a juncture that points toward...change[23]." Our experiences suggest Black women and white women working towards coalitional change need a stronger basis that allyship or even advocacy. Accomplices might not be the perfect word for every reader of this piece--indeed, some folx have preferred the term co-conspirator. Alicia Garza, for example, says that "Co-conspiracy is about what we do in action, not just in language". Our heuristic provides one possible path towards this action.

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