



---

**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Gender and Racial Representation in Obama's *Becoming* 2018 and Tyson's *Just as I Am* 2021: An Intersectional Study**

<sup>1</sup>Maria Munawar and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Durr-e-Nayab\*

1. M. Phil Scholar, Department of English, The Women University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Women University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author:** durrenayab@wum.edu.pk

---

**ABSTRACT**

This research focuses on the themes of gender and racial representation in Michelle Obama's *Becoming* and Cicely Tyson's *Just as I Am* from the intersectional perspective. A qualitative, comparative research design is used in the study to look at how both autobiographies describe the struggles and accomplishments of African American women moving through the structures of society informed by race and gender. The intersectionality theory is the underlying concept whereby more insight on how these two identities interact to impact on individual and public life experiences is obtained. From their stories, one can gain a lot of insights on how African American women claim their identity, agency and resilience against discrimination. In comparison of *Becoming* and *Just as I Am*, this research brings out the similar themes of persistence, self-definition, and social contribution, and at the same time, points out each woman's unique circumstances and individual experiences. The textual evidence provides the analysis with the grounds to reveal how race and gender define their private lives and public roles as bearers of hope and change. This research is a part of a larger understanding of the African American autobiographical literature and shows how intersectionality helps to provide a critical approach to studying identity formation. Ultimately, the research affirms that both Obama and Tyson redefine traditional narratives of success by embracing their complex identities, thus inspiring future generations to recognize the power embedded in their stories.

---

**KEYWORDS** Autobiographies, Discrimination, Empowerment, Gender and Race

**Introduction**

The body of work created by African Americans residing in the United States is referred to as African American literature. This genre is as distinctive as the individuals who create it and reflects their experiences (Ward, 2013). While African American literature traces its origins back to the late 18th century with figures like Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, it gained prominence during the Harlem Renaissance and through the genre of slave narratives. The literature continues to evolve, influenced by significant authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Walter Mosley. Common themes in African American literature include the everyday experiences of African Americans, their cultural heritage, the challenges of racism, the legacy of slavery, and their struggles for equal rights. Numerous African American authors have aimed to offer insights into the diverse experiences of African American individuals, showcasing a spectrum that ranges from joyful and celebratory moments to those that are deeply traumatic. (Dickson-Carr, 2005).

The experiences of African Americans in the United States have undergone significant transformation, which is evident in their literary contributions. Initially, the majority of this literature centered on slavery and was articulated through slave narratives before the American Civil War commenced. At the dawn of the twentieth

century, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington spearheaded discussions on how to address racism, debating whether it should be confronted or tolerated. During the Civil Rights Movement, authors like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks tackled issues such as racial discrimination, African American identity, and Black nationalism in their writings. Presently, African American literature is acknowledged as a crucial segment of American literature. Key works include *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, all of which reflect the history and experiences of African Americans. Raboteau, a professor at Princeton University, asserts that African American studies, including literature, reveal the lasting influence of African Americans on American society (Coon, 2013).

This research has examined the connections between race and gender in African American literature, including works like Obama's *Becoming* and Tyson's *Just as I Am*. Recently, the past decade has witnessed a growing interest in the Black Power era, especially regarding historical perspectives and providing more nuanced interpretations of that time and movement. However, it is also essential to consider autobiographical studies within this research area, as they are significant for addressing issues related to race, gender, and class. Due to a lack of understanding of contemporary African American women, prominent figures such as Obama and Tyson illustrate the intersection of race and gender through their personal narratives. The challenge is the inadequate examination of how these texts enhance the broader conversation aimed at empowering African American women. As Kenneth Mostern noted in *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, "the development of autobiographies as a field of study has depended on the entrance of African American as well as other minority and feminist literatures into academic study"

## **Literature Review**

This chapter investigates the existing body of literature concerning gender, race, and the empowerment of women, particularly focusing on the interpretations of African American women in literary works. It scrutinizes Michelle Obama's *"Becoming"* and Cicely Tyson's *"Just as I Am"* through the framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality concept, illustrating how both authors confront issues of racism and sexism.

Crenshaw and McCall (2013) discuss the emergence of intersectionality as an area of study that is critical. They root it in legal and feminist scholarship and explain how intersectionality developed into an all-purpose tool for the analysis of power structures based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories. The authors stress the significance of the intersectionality not only as a theoretical instrument but also as a methodological and practical one. They call for the development of intersectionality studies by bringing theory, application, and praxis together.

Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) suggest an insider-based approach to the workplace diversity research using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework. They criticise the conventional diversity management research for its use of essentialist and fixed categories such as race, gender, and class. Rather, they call for an intersectional approach to the understanding of the dynamic ways in which power relations and social structures form workplace diversity. The authors offer a complicated approach to the study of diversity that is based on the concepts developed by Bourdieu, namely, field, habitus, and capital, and that entails taking into consideration context-specific meanings and

variability of social identities. Their approach promotes the significance of reflexivity and structural analysis in diversity research and practice.

Puhl et al. (2008) analyze the prevalence of perceived weight discrimination in the United States, juxtaposing it with racial and gender discrimination. Their results show that weight discrimination, particularly against women, is widespread and, in certain demographics, occurs more frequently than racial or gender bias. This research emphasizes that weight bias is a crucial yet often neglected aspect of social inequality that demands attention through increased public awareness and policy-driven initiatives to combat discrimination based on weight, in conjunction with other forms of systemic bias.

Maitse (2001) explores the connections between gender and racism, highlighting that women, especially women of color, face overlapping forms of discrimination. The article illustrates how racism and sexism are intricately embedded in social, political, and economic systems, exacerbating the marginalization of non-white women. Maitse argues that the pursuit of gender equality is fundamentally tied to the struggle against racial injustice, promoting an intersectional approach to address both issues simultaneously. The research advocates for unity and collaborative efforts among movements to break down the systemic obstacles encountered by women of color globally.

Between 1920 and 1930, African American literature was greatly inspired by the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem, New York was home to the cultural and artistic movement, where writers such as Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer were part of it. Langston Hughes, one of the key poets in the movement, made works like *The Weary Blues* (1926) and his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), which reflected the life of Black America. Although he was not African American, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) was still an important literary achievement and affected modernist writing, including that of African American writers.

SteelFisher et al., (2019) investigate the prevalence and contexts of gender discrimination experienced by women in the United States. Based on a nationally representative survey, the study finds that a majority of women report encountering discrimination in various domains, including healthcare, education, employment, and interactions with law enforcement. The authors highlight that experiences of discrimination are even more pronounced among women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities. They call for systemic reforms and policies aimed at reducing gender-based disparities across multiple sectors.

Brown et al., (2017) discuss the #SayHerName movement as a strong example of the intersectional social media activism. The study looks at the manner in which the campaign focused on the police violence against black women and girls in the United States which is usually overlooked. Through the use of a critical race and intersectional lens, the authors show how #SayHerName challenges mainstream stories that center Black men as victims of state violence. They claim that the movement tactically engages in social media to magnify the voices of the marginalized and the need to adopt an intersectional perspective in activism and debates on racial justice in the public.

Carnes et al., (2012) summarize main ideas about gender discrimination, with the emphasis on the development of "bias literacy" in the United States. The article points out the fact that unconscious gender biases continue to guide decision-making in professional and academic environments, even though there are formal policies that

advocate for gender equality. The authors suggest educational interventions aimed at creating awareness on implicit bias, suggesting bias literacy training to be a key tool in eliminating systemic gender discrimination in institutions.

In her 2018 work, Giménez critiques and reevaluates the "race, gender, and class" framework through a Marxist perspective, diverging from standard research techniques. Discussing her "methodology" requires an understanding of her theoretical and analytical framework. She reviewed both Marxist and feminist literature to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Gender, Race, and Class framework. Her independent analysis of the RGC framework provided a deeper insight into social inequalities. She concluded that the RGC framework is essential for understanding various forms of oppression, exploring their origins and possible societal solutions.

Maylor (2009) aims to uncover the significance of Black female researchers through the lenses of feminist theory and critical race theory, which delve into the experiences and challenges these researchers encounter due to racial and gender disparities. The research examined how these experiences are perceived, internalized, and handled in the daily routines of Black researchers. Moreover, the discussion shed light on the invisibility of Black researchers and explored why some White colleagues may have difficulty acknowledging the racist experiences of their Black peers.

In her 2017 work, Saxe applies intersectionality theory to delve into the particular challenges faced by women on the autism spectrum. The article argues that the intersection of gender and autism often leads to unique forms of marginalization that are not adequately addressed in either disability studies or feminist discourse. Saxe underscores that autistic women experience both the stigma of autism and the gendered expectations that society places on them, which creates additional hurdles in education, employment, and social integration. The research advocates for an intersectional framework in both research and advocacy, urging that the specific needs of autistic women be acknowledged and addressed within the contexts of disability and gender equality.

## Material and Methods

This research highlights the Gender and Racial representation through the lens of an intersectional study by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018) and Cicely Tyson's *Just as I Am* (2021). Using a qualitative research design. It applies thematic and comparative analysis to explore how these autobiographies illustrate the challenges and achievements of African American women. This approach is designed to analyze how the intersection of race and gender influences the personal and professional lives of these two significant figures. The researcher meticulously reviewed the texts from multiple viewpoints to obtain an in-depth understanding of the autobiographical narratives.

Qualitative research is defined as "research that generates descriptive data, encompassing the spoken or written words of individuals and observable behaviors" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 7). It focuses on grasping the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to social or human issues, emphasizing the process, context, and interpretation over numerical analysis. This study adopts a qualitative approach, which is ideal for providing a thorough investigation of the subjective experiences of authors, their cultural contexts, and identity development. It seeks to explore and gain deeper insights into the real-life issues presented in both autobiographies.

This study employs purposive sampling as the sampling technique. The two autobiographies, *Becoming* by Michelle Obama and *Just as I Am* by Cicely Tyson, are purposefully selected based on their relevance to the research focus on gender and racial representation.

Comparative analysis is done in order to check similarities and differences of *Becoming* (2018) and *Just as I Am* (2021). Such a comparison will help understand better how the members of different generations of African American women cope with racial and gender problems in different periods of history and social realities.

This research is conducted based on the primary and secondary data collection.

- **Primary Sources:** The major sources of data collection are *Becoming* (2018) written by Michelle Obama and *Just as I Am* (2021) written by Cicely Tyson.
- **Secondary Sources:** The other sources of data collection are Academic books, journal articles, critical essays, discussions on intersectionality theory, African American autobiographies, gender studies, and racial identity. In this research, the thematic analysis and textual analysis have been used to analyze how the racial and gender identities are built and presented in the two autobiographies.

### Research Design

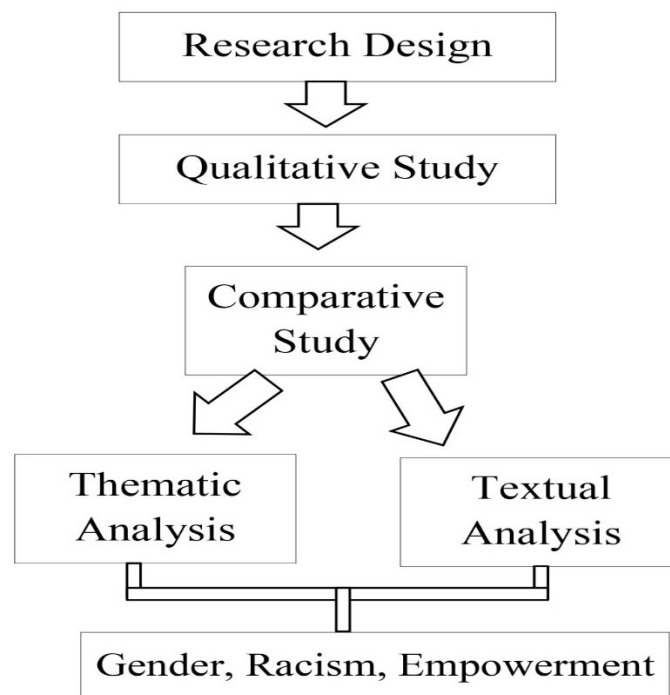


Figure 1 Research Design

Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality to examine the traditional frameworks in law and social movement. Kimberlé Crenshaw claims that intersectionality is when different social identities such as race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality come together and cause different experiences of discrimination. He analyzed three cases in the law that dealt with racial and sex discrimination. *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter, Inc.*, and *Payne* was a case where Travenol. In such cases, the courts denied Black women the right to bring up both race

and gender as reasons for discrimination. According to [Authar], this way of looking at discrimination led to certain conceptual problems. According to intersectionality, it is not enough to look at race and gender separately in order to understand how Black women are affected by discrimination.

Moore (2012) looks at the significance of adopting an intersectional approach while researching the lives of black sexual minority women. She explains that the traditional research fails to take into account the unique and the compounded experiences of people who find themselves at the crossroads of various marginalized identities. According to Moore, race, gender, and sexuality have to be analyzed as a unified concept in order to explore the unique varieties of discrimination and resistance to which these women are subjected to. She demands more critical, intersectionally-informed research methods that focus on Black, sexual minority women in sociological and gender studies.

## Results and Discussion

This chapter based on the detailed analysis of *Becoming* by Michelle Obama and *Just as I Am* by Cicely Tyson. It is focusing on gender and racial representation through an intersectionality theory. This section studies how both works clarify the complexities of identity which is shaped by the experiences of race and gender.

I was a deep chestnut brown .....to jet black. (Tyson, 2021, p.22)

This passage highlights the theme of colorism, which is another form of discrimination based on skin tone. This theme has deep historical roots in slavery. The author portrayed how, in society, individuals with darker skin tone, especially women, are perceived as less attractive or less beautiful due to racial biases. From an intersectional perspective, this passage represents the dual impact of race and gender on an individual's self-awareness and the behavior of society. The term 'slave plantations' specifically links to the historical origins of colorism, where lighter-skinned enslaved individuals, often the result of mixed heritage, were receiving favored treatment over those with black skin. This order continued after slavery, shaping beauty standards and opportunities for African Americans. By emphasizing that her family embraced a wide range of skin tones, from albino to jet black, Tyson confronted the rigid racial classifications imposed by society. Her experience contrasts with the broader societal norm, highlighting how family support prevents the negative psychological effects of colorism.

I'll tell you, I was no good for the rest of that week. ....to be Black in this country. (Tyson, 2021, p.121)

This passage highlights a deep sense of emotional distress and frustration. The author is horrified by the moral and ethical dilemma presented, choosing to remain silent about child abuse out of fear of economic consequences. The author emphasizes the profound emotional impact on the speaker. Additionally, the passage highlights a broader societal issue related to racial injustice. The author highlights that the situation reflects systemic inequalities and historical patterns where Black individuals have had to endure suffering in silence due to socio-economic vulnerabilities. The use of 'what it meant, and still often means' indicates that these struggles persist over time, reinforcing the idea that racial oppression continues to shape their experiences.

The dehumanization did not end there.....with the creation in 1895 of her character Golliwog. (Tyson, 2021, p.190)

This passage highlight the historical dehumanization of Black people, specifically through negative portrayals of Black hair in European narratives. The author asserts that the marginalization of Black people extended beyond physical mistreatment to cultural and aesthetic discrimination. The word dehumanization suggests that Black individuals were not only oppressed but also stripped of their dignity and humanity through racist representations. The description of Black hair reflects the persistent Eurocentric beauty standards that have historically devalued Black features. This perception contributed to the social and professional pressures Black people faced to conform to Western beauty ideals, such as straightening their hair to be deemed acceptable. Tyson references Florence Kate Upton, an American-born English writer, and her 1895 creation of the Golliwog character.

"I'd like to ask you a question." .....the audience's mind turns to sex." (Tyson, 2021, p.209)

In this passage, Tyson exposes the racial and gender biases that marginalized Black women in professional spaces, particularly in the entertainment industry. Tyson's direct question about the absence of Black women in the company reveals the deliberate lack of opportunities for them. The response she receives is not a denial but an open admission of discrimination, showing how institutionalized racism and sexism operate openly. Another statement that audiences associate Black women with sex reflects a long-standing stereotype rooted in colonial and racist ideologies. Black women have historically been objectified and reduced to their physicality rather than being valued for their talent, intellect, or artistry. The response she receives illustrates both racial and gender-based discrimination. Unlike their white counterparts, Black women were not seen as versatile performers but were instead confined to narrow and demeaning stereotypes that limited their professional growth.

Princeton was extremely white and very male.....a habitat that hadn't been built for me. (Obama, 2018, pp.71-72)

This passage examines the early experiences of the author at Princeton University, revealing the profound sense of racial and social isolation she faced. By stating that Princeton was "extremely white and very male," Obama highlights the institution's demographic imbalance, underscoring how racial and gender hierarchies shaped her environment. The statistical details, men outnumbering women nearly two to one and Black students comprising less than 9% of her freshman class, emphasize Princeton's limited diversity. Being compared to poppy seeds in a bowl of rice really illustrates her feeling of being different. Poppy seeds are very different from rice, just as Michelle and the other Black students were different from the white students around them. The metaphor means that you're always seen, yet not truly a part of the group. Obama's words about Princeton as a "strange new terrarium" make it seem even more isolating. Because a terrarium is made for specific inhabitants, she felt that the environment at Princeton wasn't planned with her in mind. It is clear from the visual that she felt out of place and that the problem went beyond just how she felt inside. In addition, the fact that she had never been singled out in school for her race is a sign that it wasn't as important to her until she went to Princeton. What she described is the psychological challenge of being the only Black student in an overwhelmingly white environment.

The author points out that at Princeton, students of color tend to stick together in their social groups. What she meant by this, "I expect the Princeton administrators didn't love that students of color spent so much time with each other" (Obama, 2018, p.74), was that the school wanted all students to blend together, which was not always possible for marginalized students.

Princeton's administration may not have approved of the decision to "not love" their institution. It is possible that the university felt racial solidarity was more of a problem than a help for minorities coping in a largely white and privileged environment. Building close-knit circles among students of color was not about excluding others, but about making a safe place to connect, share, and help each other. Most people don't realize how racial isolation affects someone emotionally. Barack Obama found comfort among people he related to and used those friendships to feel less alone and to confirm his identity. As a result, this reflection stresses an ongoing theme found in *Becoming*. How valuable it is to be resilient and care for your safety when your identity is often misunderstood.

The author examines how her racial and cultural background uniquely shapes her understanding of social issues. She uses her lived experiences as a tool for social awareness. The statement, "Being black and from the South Side, I suddenly saw, helped me recognize problems that a man like Art Sussman didn't even realize existed" (Obama, 2018, p.147) highlights the value of lived experience in developing social awareness. By identifying herself, Obama emphasizes how her identity, both racial and geographical, equips her with insights that those from more privileged backgrounds may overlook. This follows the idea from standpoint theory that those who are marginalized usually see more clearly the inequalities in society because they experience them close up. This is where I began to see the problems that I had. points out that her experiences in life help her see and understand problems in society. By contrast, her mention of Art Sussman points out the flaws in those who have privilege. When Obama says Sussman didn't realize the problems, he makes it clear that people who face inequality are not always seen the same way by outsiders. This passage reinforces one of the central themes in *Becoming*, the idea that identity and lived experience are invaluable in shaping one's understanding of the world. Obama's reflection affirms that marginalized voices are essential in identifying and addressing social disparities, challenging the notion that privilege alone equates to insight or expertise.

It's really surprising how a stereotype .....doesn't that just cause more of the same? (Obama, 2018, p.265)

This passage highlights the damaging cycle created by the "angry Black woman" stereotype, emphasizing how it functions as a psychological and social trap. Not only does this stereotype get Black women's emotions wrong, but it also makes their responses to fit this label.

An intersectional view shows that this trap happens when race, gender, and emotional expression all come together to cause discrimination. Black women are regularly faced with a choice they cannot win. When they express themselves, there is a chance others will consider them to be aggressive or hostile. If they don't share their concerns, their opinions are ignored and their power weakened. If no one is listening to you, the author says, "Of course you get louder." highlights this frustrating paradox. If marginalized people's voices are not heard, it only makes sense for them to raise their voices higher. Even so, Black women's natural assertiveness is often used to reinforce the



same negative stereotype about them. The stereotype keeps repeating itself because of the logic it follows. Whenever angry is assigned to someone, any explanation or defense is taken as further evidence of that emotion. As a result, Black women can't fully stand up for themselves because they fear being unfairly judged.

## Conclusion

Michelle Obama's *Becoming* and Cicely Tyson's *Just as I Am* give us the more understanding of racial and gender problems for African American women. Looking at the data using an intersectional approach makes the following results clear. Obama and Tyson, feel that race, gender, and class influence them. They realized that being a Black woman in America is not the same as being a Black man or a white woman. All of the narrators in the autobiographies handle race and gender prejudice with courage. Obama went to the most prestigious schools to be known, and Tyson made certain his work in the media reached many people. For these people, success means helping and developing those from disadvantaged communities. The organization makes stories that highlight community, service, and realness. They believe that their family, mentors, and community contribute to their growth and set goals. The network is struggling against forms of oppression in society. By telling their stories and mentioning racism and sexism, Obama and Tyson make African American women's lives more visible. They give new and significant images of Black women that were missing before.

## References

- Brown, M., Ray, R., Summers, E., & Fraistat, N. (2017). # SayHerName: A case study of intersectional social media activism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(11), 1831-1846.
- Carnes, M., Devine, P. G., Isaac, C., Manwell, L. B., Ford, C. E., Byars-Winston, A., Fine, E., & Sheridan, J. (2012). Promoting institutional change through bias literacy. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(2), 63-77
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 38(4), 785-810.
- Coon, D. R. (2013). *Look at this: African American identity in American media*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dickson-Carr, D. (2005). *The Columbia guide to contemporary African American fiction*. Columbia University Press.
- Giménez, M. E. (2018). Reassessing the race, class, and gender debate from a Marxist perspective. *Critical Sociology*, 44(6), 905-920.
- kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, 139-67.
- Maitse, T. (2001). *Gender and racism*. Lola Press
- Maylor, U. (2009). Is it because I'm Black? A Black female research experience. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12(1), 53-64
- Moore, M. R. (2012). Intersectionality and the study of black, sexual minority women. *Gender & Society*, 26(1), 33-39.
- Prince, G. (2004). *A dictionary of narratology* (Rev. ed.). University of Nebraska Press.
- Puhl, R. M., Andreyeva, T., & Brownell, K. D. (2008). Perceptions of weight discrimination: prevalence and comparison to race and gender discrimination in America. *International journal of obesity*, 32(6), 992-1000.
- Ross, M. S., Fletcher, T. L., Cox, M. F., & Main, J. B. (2015, June). *African American women in the academe: a comprehensive literature review through the lens of intersectionality*. In 2015 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition (pp. 26-166).
- Saxe, A. (2017). The theory of intersectionality: A new lens for understanding the barriers faced by autistic women. *Canadian journal of disability studies*, 6(4), 153-178.
- SteelFisher, G. K., Findling, M. G., Bleich, S. N., Casey, L. S., Blendon, R. J., Benson, J. M., ... & Miller, C. (2019). *Gender discrimination in the United States: Experiences of women*. *Health services research*, 54, 1442-1453.

- Tatli, A., & Özbilgin, M. F. (2012). An emic approach to intersectional study of diversity at work: A Bourdieuan framing. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 14(2), 180-200.
- Ward, J. W. (2013). *African American literature and the classicist tradition: Black women writers from Wheatley to Morrison*. University Press of Florida.