Started from the Bottom Now I'm Here: Life at the Intersection

Good afternoon parents, students, colleagues, and the Bowdoin Community. My name is Chryl Laird and I am an assistant professor in Government and Legal Studies. Today I will be giving my lecture, "Started from the Bottom, Now I'm Here: Life at the Intersection."

I begin this lecture inspired by a song by the rapper Drake, also known as Drizzy Drake or Champagne Papi. Drake is a high-profile rapper that has put out numerous albums and songs. But before "Hotline Bling" and "Kiki Do You Love Me," "Started from the Bottom" was the 2013 hip-hop hit. Now, I'm not going to read the lyrics of this song because the language is incredibly explicit and inappropriate for this venue. I like my job. But, I believe that the sentiment is one that I can apply to my own lived experience as well as many others. Drake's song follows the cannon of many rappers who discuss the hardships that they have escaped in order to make it to success. Clearly, I'm not Drake, nor am I rapper. Though, I often think about where I started, and ponder how I find myself here, standing in front of you today. In this contemplative place, I puzzle with and reflect on the ways in which my identities were central to my upbringing.

Here is an image of me from when I was in 7th grade going through the trials and tribulations that was middle school. It is one of those transition periods of

life that I try to throw to the recesses of my mind. I was awkward and a "geek." When I see this photo, I see a young first-generation black girl, that is the child of Jamaican immigrants, that was often stepping into spaces in which my race and gender were quintessential factors in my life.

Around this time, I found myself engaging in social circles with my peers that often-highlighted and differentiated me based on my race and gender. I grew up in a predominantly black low-income, working-class neighborhood, but the public schools that I attended were outside of my community which resulted in a second friend group that was comprised of white young girls from the suburbs. How did I know that they lived in suburb that was different from my own? Well, they had a giant evergreen tree in the center of their community where all the families paid extra on their electric bill to light it up at Christmas. The whole neighborhood would then gather around the tree and sing Christmas carols and celebrate. I thought they lived in Whoville from How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Navigating back and forth between these two worlds meant that I was frequently challenged about who I was and what I represented.

Even prior to 7th grade I had a clear realization of this difference. When Halloween came around in elementary school there used to be a school Halloween parade. Little kids dressed up in homemade and store-bought costumes and marched around the suburban neighborhood where my white

friends lived to show-off their creations. Now, my mother is a Jamaican woman through and through where the belief in superstitions, witchcraft, spirits and dupees (Jamaican patois term for ghost) are real and not to be played with. Additionally, she had heard stories about children receiving tainted candy so trick or treating was out of the question. However, she realized that by sending my brother and I to these schools we needed to fit in, even if she detested the holiday and we were working with a very limited budget. This meant that our costumes came from the grocery store. These are the kind of costumes with the plastic mask with the rubber string that goes behind your head to keep it in place and a plastic bag-like onesie that you pull over the top of your clothes. Yeah, it was low budget.

One year, my mother bought the clown outfit that came with a clown mask for my brother and I was Barbie. At this time, Barbie's collection was very minimal in terms of diversity and Dr. McStuffins wasn't a thing. Mattel's most available Barbie products were ones with white skin, pink lips and blond hair. So, I need you to understand what that means: I am a black girl, with brown skin, wearing a white Barbie mask in a pink and white plastic onesie with the word "Barbie" written across it. You can see my brown skin through the eye sockets of the mask and my black hands are sticking out the arm holes. Additionally, my mother had done my hair in a twist with the click clack hair ties at the base of each twist and barrettes on the end. Because my hair is curly textured and the twists were large, they didn't lay flat. They were cute, but

yeah, Barbie is rocking blonde plastic hair and afro-textured twists that stick out.

I went to school with my costume and when it came time for the parade we were all rounded up outside. Quite reminiscent of people attempting to wrangle and heard cats. With my plastic Barbie costume on, I looked over to my white gal pal at the time….and my jaw dropped. My friend, let's call her Kelly, was a princess on a horse!!! Her mother had sewn her entire costume so that she had a princess gown, pointed hat with veil, a hand-made horse that hung on suspenders that went over her shoulders that sat around her waist, and her legs were decorated to look like a horse's. To boot, her mother had sewn two little legs on the side of the of the horse so that it looked like Kelly was riding side saddle! And there I was in my Barbie costume with my white and blonde mask, with black filled eye holes, afro-textured twist and black hands sticking out of my Barbie onesie. To this day, a photo of me and Kelly from Halloween sits on my mother's dresser. We are standing there, my arm over her shoulder smiling at the camera. Either because I managed to mess up the cheap rubber string on the mask or I realized, even at that young age, just how ridiculous I looked dressed up as white Barbie, I had taken the mask off. With my genuine gap-toothed smile and Kelly accidently blinking while grinning, the photo was shot by her mother. That photo enshrined one of the earliest moments in which my race and gender were prominently placed into high-relief.

In the years after, these types of experiences continued. At any number of slumber parties and sleep overs with my white girlfriends I was the black girl that became the center of attention because I pulled a bag of rollers out of my overnight bag and had to "set my hair" to go to sleep. When the game "beauty shop" was decided as an activity, I ended up playing beautician because I had clear instructions from my mother that these young girls are not allowed to undo my braids and plats. It was clear to me from a young age that beauty standards were different between me and my friends. Their understanding of girlhood was one in which the basic routines that were normal in my life were distinctive and unusual to them.

At home, the experiences with my black girlfriends were quite different. My neighborhood peers thought I was an odd duck and often characterized me as "sounding white" or behaving in white ways due to my love of reading and school. At the time it was hurtful, but when I peeled back the layers of what was happening around my I realize that many of my girlfriends were dealing with distinct and unique constraints that were not happening over in Whoville. As low-income black girls, many of my neighbors were dealing with constrained resources because they were disproportionately in homes with single-mothers with limited education. Some were the children of teenage mothers that had to sacrifice numerous social and economic opportunities to raise their kids. They were just making it on jobs that were significantly

underpaid and without the dual-income that was much more common among my white suburban friends. To put this in perspective, The National Partnership for Women & Families reported that in 2017, black women make 66 cents to the dollar relative to white men. This means that black women have to work an extra eight months to make the same wages as their white male counterparts.

I recall when we transitioned into our teen years my mother being very adamant about where I was allowed to go and who I was allowed to hang around when it came to young boys in the community. My naivete and ignorance of the unique space in which I fell as a black girl minimized my understanding of her concern. My mother's concern was that I could become a teenage mom. Her worry was not without merit. One after the other the black girls in my neighborhood were becoming mothers. In some cases, two or three times over. I watched many not finish high school, others attempt relationships with their child's fathers that often fell through, and most having to decide on what they would do next to support their family. My friends were having to take on these stressors in a space and time in which black teenage motherhood was stigmatized and vilified. These young women were viewed as individuals that went counter to societal norms. They were defined as a "problem" and seen as representatives of a cultural pathology that could not uphold mainstream values and that their promiscuity plus poor decision making was to blame for their circumstances. Only a few miles apart, two

girlhoods existed where the intersection of race, gender, and class were defining of those experiences.

Legal Scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her 1989 article to describe this unique form of marginalization experienced by black women and women of color broadly construed. Crenshaw argues that, "…Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."

In layman's terms, intersectionality describes the experiences that result from the interaction of both race and gender when in each group one is of a marginalized status. Traditional structures and institutions are not designed to think in terms of this interaction. Furthermore, other identities like class are inextricably intertwined with race and gender, exacerbating the distinctive marginalization one may experience. Crenshaw's examination of this phenomenon primarily focused on black women in employment and women of color experiencing domestic violence, but the framework can be applied

more broadly to understand the numerous places in public policy and politics where the current structures are unable to answer key questions about these unique experiences.

For instance, I stand here today as an expectant mother. My partner and I are quite excited about our new arrival and like typical expectant parents trying our best to "prepare." Yes, we are in denial about any notion of "preparedness," but ignorance is bliss, right? At the time we planned to start our family we took into consideration any number of typical factors, but at the time news was also breaking on factors that had not come to mind. In 2017, National Public Radio and ProPublica did an investigative special series entitled, "lost mothers: maternal mortality in the U.S." In this series, they documented the high levels of U.S. maternal mortality and the potential failures of the medical community and political institutions to be responsive to this trend. They note in the report that, "The ability to protect the health of mothers and babies in childbirth is a basic measure of a society's development. Yet every year in the U.S., 700 to 900 women die from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes, and some 65,000 nearly die — by many measures, the worst record in the developed world." The story garnered substantial media attention and resulted in other major news outlets including the New York Times covering the report. The ways in which we are socialized to understand motherhood and pregnancy in American society often overlooks the substantial dangers and harms being faced by expectant moms.

Furthermore, when this data is disaggregated to account for difference based on identities, the chasm between the maternal mortality rates of white mothers and black mothers is staggering.

Black mothers are fighting an uphill battle during pregnancy and child birth. Black women are dealing with immense social inequalities stemming from institutional racism and sexism including limited access to safe neighborhoods, clean drinking water, and proper educational systems. Black women are also more likely to have unreliable, or a lack of, continuous health care coverage. In medical institutions, unconscious biases prevail where black women are frequently questioned during their care due to stigmatization and stereotypes; they often find their concerns ignored; and their reports of pain dismissed, resulting in a overall sense of devaluation. The research from the field of public health shows that ultimately, the most significant factor to explain black maternal mortality disparities relative to whites has to do with life-long stress experiences that result from the intersection of racism and sexism. Journalist Nina Martin and Rene Montagne conclude from their interviews with public health scholars that, "…it's the discrimination that black women experience in the rest of their lives — the double-whammy of race and gender — that may ultimately be the most significant factor in poor maternal outcomes. An expanding field of research shows that the stress of being a black woman in American society can take a significant physical toll during pregnancy and childbirth." Dr. Arliene Geronimus coined the term

“weathering” to define how the trauma of intersectional life has severe physiological and biological implications. Geronimus argues that, “weathering causes a lot of different health vulnerabilities and increases susceptibility to infection, but also early onset of chronic diseases, in particular, hypertension and diabetes.” She found that the health vulnerabilities created by weathering disproportionately effects black women and it accelerates their aging at a cellular level by 7 ½ years.

In the realm of pregnancy, the stress of an intersectional life can result in life-threatening and even fatal side effects. This stress is unique to the lived experiences of black women and incomparable to that of their white peers. Black women are 49% more likely to deliver prematurely. Black infants are twice as likely to die as babies relative to their white peers. Unlike white women, accounting for factors like income and education do not diminish these effects. The risk during pregnancies starts early in life for black women due to immense and unique inequalities which means that from a public health and public policy perspective, the medical field should be approaching the care for black women with greater attention to the potential challenges.

From this series, the story of Shalon Irving stands out most to me. Irving was a striver, similar to myself, she earned a B.A., two master’s degrees, and a dual-subject Ph.D. She had experienced trauma at a young age and as an adult was often riddled with self-doubt. She often felt like she wasn’t doing enough

and need to try to do more to help African American women that mattered to her and to her research at the Centers for Disease Control. While career driven she desired to be a mother and medical complications due to uterine fibroids, non-malignant tumors that affect up to 80 percent of black women, made this difficult. When she did become a mom, the relationship with the child's father did not work out, creating added stress to her body. Three weeks after having her C-Section, Irving collapsed and passed away. Irving was a lot like me. She started from the bottom and she had made it. At a similar place to where I stand today. She had done everything right, pushed herself to the heights of excellence in the face of incredible odds and yet still, her resources, her education and the village she had created for her and her child could not save her. What happened to Irving is chilling, sad, and unacceptable.

So, I conclude with these final thoughts. We must ask ourselves how we can do better. It demands a substantial examination about how we provide care. It requires us taking an intersectional approach to addressing health policy and practice in medicine. It necessitates a holistic examination of the numerous political, social and economic factors that define life chances for those that are marginalized at the intersections. We should not limit ourselves to understanding the world using singular categories that don't capture the essence of what it means to live in a particular body or life. We must

complicate it and ask ourselves, what patterns have we missed because we opted to not interrogate the data and what may not yet be understood.

Thank You