

“I’m Still Here”: Black Women and the Politics of Belonging at Davidson College in the 1970s

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Each day, Renee ‘Denise’ Fanuiel Blackwell would pass a historical marker on Davidson College’s campus in Davidson, North Carolina, that commemorates the future President Woodrow Wilson’s time at the College. Contending with Davidson’s academically strenuous demands during her first year at this historically White and male school, Blackwell would address the marker defiantly, a tone of understated resilience rolling off her tongue: “I’m still here, I’m still here.”¹ One hundred years after Wilson’s brief stint at Davidson from 1873-74, Denise Blackwell reassured herself that she belonged at Davidson by staying longer than the future president had and eventually graduating from the College. Despite the living history and memory of Davidson College’s exclusion and oppression of Black people and women, Blackwell and other Black female students like Olivia Ware in the mid-1970s insisted that they belonged at Davidson College and refused to allow Davidson’s legacies of racist and gender-exclusive practices and cultures to convince them otherwise.

As Davidson College began the processes of integrating Black and female people into its classes in the 1960s and ‘70s, one might presume—given our current feminist and anti-racist consciousness-building—that Black and female students would recount memories of racism and sexism as pervasive features of their collegiate environment. But, as scholars like Lynn Abrams have found in conducting oral historical research with women in post-war America, having a political agenda and bringing up words like ‘feminism’ can sometimes close off or quiet down women who are recounting their experiences.² Bringing my political consciousnesses of feminism and anti-racism as an implicit agenda to this project, I recognize that I have a biased

¹ Franklin, McNeill, Madeline Chanfrau, and Ross Hickman. Interview with Denise Blackwell. 8 October 2020. Women’s Oral History Collection. Davidson Archives, Davidson, NC.

² Lynn Abrams, “Talking about Feminism: Reconciling Fragmented Narratives with the Feminist Research Frame,” in *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Franca Iacovetta (London: Routledge, 2018), 81-94.

framework from which to read and write political meaning from oral history, yet I seek to represent these Black women as their own memories led them to speak, while keeping historical and political context as a means of both reconciling and rupturing the dominant narratives of Davidson College in the twentieth century.

The status and composition of political consciousnesses on Davidson's campus have evolved significantly since the 1970s. As a student at the College, I can attest that critical theories of race, gender, sexuality, and class are fixtures of discussions across and beyond academic life. In the 1960s and '70s, however, Davidson College was a predominantly White and male institution of higher education that was just beginning to show public cracks in its traditional political affiliations with White supremacy and sexism. While many residents in the town of Davidson resisted racial integration in the town's public spaces, the "college whites" on Davidson's campus earned a reputation for political progressiveness when they boycotted racially-segregated stores and protested the Vietnam War.³ Such political activity at Davidson College, however, largely elided Black voices of anger and resentment toward American racism that were coming to the fore of American political and cultural consciousnesses in the 1960s and '70s.⁴

In keeping with this narrative of progressive openings and public fissures with longstanding traditions of White and male supremacy on Davidson's campus, Davidson College began admitting several Black students in the early 1960s and would admit women for full matriculation in 1972.⁵ 'Welcoming' Black students onto Davidson's campus was more a political performance for donors, prospective students, and broader society than it was an effort

³ Jan Blodgett and Ralph B. Levering, "The Times Were Changing, 1961-1984," in *One Town, Many Voices: A History of Davidson, North Carolina* (Davidson: Davidson Historical Society, 2012), 180-223.

⁴ Blodgett and Levering, 204.

⁵ Blodgett and Levering, 186.

to include Black people in significant numbers.⁶ For Black students at Davidson in the 1960s, racism was a constant feature of their experiences, especially in the town of Davidson where one student, George Nzongola-Ntalaja, remarked that “racism was everywhere.”⁷ Only 13 Black students matriculated at Davidson throughout the 1960s, and Black students’ difficulty in building Black community on campus made a keen degree of integration with White students, faculty, and townspeople a sometimes awkward but necessary practice for surviving Davidson.⁸

By 1973, when Denise Blackwell started her first semester at Davidson College, the campus and the communities surrounding it were reckoning with the greater racial and gender integration at the College. In the midst of these political and demographic adjustments, student organizations on Davidson’s campus such as the Black Student Coalition (BSC) called repeatedly for greater recognition of Black voices on campus.⁹ But with the small numbers of Black students enrolled at Davidson and the continued prevalence of overtly racist campus social cultures, cultivating Black community at Davidson was a straining and alienating affair.¹⁰ Despite the recent history and contemporaneous realities of overt racism on Davidson’s campus in the 1970s, both Denise Blackwell and Olivia Ware remember their time fondly—as academically challenging yet relationally fruitful and professionally advantageous. In oral historical interviews with current Davidson College history students, Ware and Blackwell articulate their senses of belonging as matters of insistence, resilience, and a growing sense of confidence in their abilities to find community at Davidson and utilize its resources to build professional futures. As Black women from the Southeastern United States, Blackwell and Ware

⁶ Blodgett and Levering, 182.

⁷ Blodgett and Levering, 183.

⁸ Blodgett and Levering, 184-185.

⁹ Anne Pelfrey, “BSC Seeks Student Recognition,” *Davidsonian*, March 20, 1975.

¹⁰ Tom Engle, “Black Students Struggle to Compensate for Minority Status,” *Davidsonian*, October 8, 1976.

expressed an acculturation to interracial cooperation with Whites while diverging in the extent to which each recognized critical race and gender consciousnesses, perhaps owing in part to their class differences.

From an early age, Denise Blackwell knew she was going to college. Born into a family in which everyone was a professional of some sort, Blackwell remarked that *not* attending a university would have been more surprising for her community.¹¹ And when she found a Presbyterian-affiliated liberal arts college in North Carolina that promised her a good shot at opportunities in the medical field, Blackwell, her family, and her community viewed it as a matter of course. Like many middle-class, professionally oriented Black families in the American South, Blackwell's family put primary emphasis on rigorous education as a means of maintaining prudent, viable families and communities.¹² As scholars like Glenda Gilmore have elaborated, striving to be the 'best' Black women and men was part of a broader anti-racist politics of respectability, through which Black Southerners worked within the expected metrics of education, material success, and class status in a White supremacist and capitalist society to assert their racial dignity.¹³ With a legacy of her family's professional aspirations and successes in hand upon arrival at Davidson College in 1973, Blackwell entered a community of students that she found especially admirable for their studiousness on Saturdays.¹⁴ Having visited other schools like the all-women's Converse College and historically Black universities, Blackwell actively negotiated which institution of higher education would best fit her needs and aspirations.¹⁵

¹¹ Blackwell interview.

¹² Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1895-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 38-52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴ Blackwell interview.

¹⁵ Blackwell interview.

Likewise, Denise Blackwell navigated inclusion at Davidson College—as one of the first and only four Black women to attend the College in her year—by placing the burden of fretting over “what to do with” a Black woman on the institutions and organizations in which she asserted her belonging.¹⁶ When she joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in her first semester, Blackwell became the first woman to join the ROTC in the group’s history at Davidson.¹⁷ Despite the ROTC’s apparent lack of preparedness for welcoming women into its previously all-male ranks, Blackwell belonged to this organization for the remainder of her time at Davidson, and would go on to do nursing and counseling work in military-related fields after college.¹⁸ As part of a broader paradigm of color- and gender-blind inclusion with her peers, Blackwell neither encountered nor would have wanted a particularized agenda of meaningfully emphasizing racial or gender difference in academic, extracurricular, or personal settings.¹⁹

Like Denise Blackwell, Olivia Ware—who matriculated at Davidson in 1974—did not in her interview emphasize critical gender or racial consciousnesses as guiding factors while at Davidson College. For Ware, focusing on her marginalized status as a working-class Black female student would have been too demoralizing during her time at Davidson.²⁰ Reflecting on how she experienced a sense of belonging at this historically exclusive institution, Ware remarked that, “my being [at Davidson] is a statement that I belong there.”²¹ Though she knew that her presence on campus was a jarring sight for some, Ware was well-accustomed to “being one of a few” Black people in a room or community dominated by White people.²² Both Ware

¹⁶ Blackwell interview.

¹⁷ Blackwell interview.

¹⁸ Blackwell interview.

¹⁹ Blackwell interview.

²⁰ Graham, Piper, and Courtney Clawson. Interview with Olivia Ware. 6 October 2020. Women’s Oral History Project. Davidson Archives, Davidson College, NC.

²¹ Ware interview.

²² Ware interview.

and Blackwell had grown up in majority-White communities, so determining how to coexist with White students and teachers was a life-long process. Unlike Blackwell's more middle-class upbringing, Olivia Ware came from a working-class background and was the first in her family to attend college.²³ Like many Black women who did not have access to generational wealth and were entering institutions of higher education in the second half of the twentieth century, success at Davidson College was essential for Ware's financial viability.²⁴

In terms of both the material contingencies and social realities of cooperating with a historically and contemporaneously White- and male-dominated institution, Blackwell and Ware perceived a largely color- and gender-blind academic environment, while recounting both incidental and pervasive forms of racism and sexism in Davidson's social and residential structures. Though both Blackwell and Ware had moments of suspicion that professors could have exercised racist judgment in handing down a punishment or poor grade, neither conclusively found that Davidson's classrooms and other academic structures were racist, at least in light of their own personal experiences and perceptions.²⁵ As well as many other women in their interviews with the Davidson College Women's Oral History Project, Ware and Blackwell remember and make light of the fact that the campus was not physically ready for female students—gender-appropriate bathrooms and other facilities were not available in all residence halls or other campus buildings.²⁶

Perhaps the most incisive forms of racist prejudice and discrimination at Davidson were within the campus's social circles and institutions, which continued well-known traditions of Old

²³ Ware interview.

²⁴ Linda Eisenmann, "Building the New Scholarship of Women's Higher Education, 1965-1985," in *Women's Higher Education in the United States: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Margaret A. Nash (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 262.

²⁵ Blackwell interview.

²⁶ Ware interview; Blackwell interview.

South Balls, mock ‘slave auctions,’ and other idealizations of White supremacist legacies.²⁷

Within and beyond these social structures, sexual racism was a defining feature of Ware’s and Blackwell’s experiences with dating, such that Black students quickly gathered that White students were off-limits.²⁸ Neither Blackwell nor Ware was overly concerned about cultures of racism at Davidson, which they dismissed as not substantially affecting their well-being—focused as they were on Davidson’s academic rigors. For Ware and Blackwell, such racism was more *incidental* than it was pervasive, and both Black women knew how to navigate White-dominated spaces in ways that minimized their exposure to spaces and organizations that openly accepted racism. As Black women in the South, Blackwell and Ware were well-aware of the kinds of public and performative racism that flourished in White communities and that threatened Black people’s lives, and each expressed an ability to distance themselves from the most explicitly racist and harmful settings.²⁹

Denise Blackwell and Olivia Ware may not have identified in their memories the kinds of systemic racism that we might recognize today, but their respective recollections as some of the first Black female students on Davidson College’s campus demonstrate an active, pragmatic negotiation of utilizing Davidson’s resources for their future welfare and reckoning with the College’s White- and male-dominated legacies. Before casting either of their memories aside as relics of a more color-blind or apolitical era, a politically-attentive historian might take into account the specific status of Black people broadly and Black community in particular at Davidson College in the 1970s. As both Ware and Blackwell expressed, the extreme paucity of Black students—and even more so, Black *women*—on Davidson’s campus made building Black

²⁷ Blackwell interview.

²⁸ Ware interview; Blackwell interview.

²⁹ Ware interview; Blackwell interview.

community difficult, though not impossible. Despite Davidson's failures to create and sustain conditions for Black community on its campus, both Blackwell and Ware fashioned meaningful experiences while at the College, went about inclusion at Davidson as a matter of insistence, and proved to *themselves* that they belonged by virtue of their continued dedication to Davidson.

Epilogue: Who's Still Here?

Since the 1960s, one of Black students' most abiding concerns about Davidson College was not its failures to stamp out racist cultures or reckon with its racist past—though these were too of concern—but more so, Davidson's repeated failures to attract and sustain a large community of Black students and professors on campus. Throughout the 1960s, the '70s, and into the '80s, Black students pressed Davidson College to increase the number of Black students it would recruit and admit, and to seek out Black faculty members. By 1984, organizations like the Black Student Coalition (BSC) were becoming exhausted with the yearly feature in the *Davidsonian* giving lip-service to Black students' demands. In what became known as Project '87, the BSC expressed a well-grown frustration with the “foot-dragging and intellectualism” that Davidson offered in response to calls for greater Black representation on campus; and the group laid out actionable plans for bringing more Black students, Black professors, and Black studies courses to Davidson College in the following three years.³⁰ As Janet Stovall, one of the editors and leaders of Project '87, has remarked, sustaining pressure on institutional administrations can yield some, if not all, of the results that persistent, anti-racist, single-minded students put forth and don't put down.³¹ As my own investigation into the history of Black

³⁰ Black Student Coalition, “BSC Proposes Project '87,” *Davidsonian*, April 13, 1984.

³¹ Janet Stovall, “How to Get Serious about Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace,” filmed July 2018 at TED@UPS in Atlanta, GA, video, https://www.ted.com/talks/janet_stovall_how_to_get_serious_about_diversity_and_inclusion_in_the_workplace?language=en.

students' activism on Davidson College's campus reiterates, identifying systemic issues, coming up with solutions, and insisting that they be implemented—these are decades-long projects of consciousness-building across coalitions of students invested in making Davidson a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive institution that values both solidarity and difference in its communities.

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