Sabbatical Report
(2016)

Christina N. Baker-Foley
American Multicultural Studies

Purpose of Sabbatical Leave

• The primary purpose of my sabbatical leave was to pursue research for a book project about African American women filmmakers. I began my research with the question: In what ways have African American women filmmakers shaped the film industry? My research is grounded in Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, which challenge the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories and emphasize the importance of examining the unique and complex perspectives of women of color. These theories provide the groundwork for critiquing the racialized and gendered ideologies that have been dominant in the mainstream media’s representation of women of color.

Outcomes of Sabbatical Leave

• I completed a review of literature, including books and articles on film theory and history, intersectionality theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory. Literature related to intersectionality theory and feminist standpoint theory were especially relevant to my project. Additionally, the following are a few books that focus on how Black women have challenged dominant ideologies and created their own images: Black Women Film and Video Artists (1998) by Jacqueline Bobo; Black Women as Cultural Readers (1995) by Jacqueline Bobo; Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity (1997) by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster; Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race (2002) by Maxine Craig; Why we make movies: Black Filmmakers Talk about the Magic of Cinema (2003) by George Alexander; Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film (1992) by Julie Dash.

• There were 19 films that I had initially considered including in my analysis. After my initial screening, I decided to focus on six recent films that met the following criteria: theatrically released films that were based on original screenplays, written and directed by a Black woman, and star at least one Black woman in a leading role. The filmmakers that are included in my analysis are Ava Duvernay, Tanya Hamilton, Kasi Lemmons, Gina Prince-Bythewood (two of her films are included in my analysis), and Dee Rees. The films that I chose to analyze are Middle of Nowhere (Duvernay), Night Catches Us (Hamilton), Eve’s Bayou (Lemmons), Love and Basketball (Prince-Bythewood) - the top grossing film written and directed by an African American woman, Beyond the Lights (Prince-Bythewood), and Pariah (Rees).
After analyzing the films, I drafted three chapters, detailing the ways in which the films provide nuanced narratives about Black women. I argue that Black women’s voices have previously been silenced by the film industry. However, filmmaker Julie Dash paved the way for other Black women when in 1991 she became the first Black woman filmmaker to have a feature film she directed (and wrote) receive national theatrical distribution. I analyze films that were written and directed by Black women filmmakers since the 1990s, highlighting the ways Black women filmmakers incorporate multidimensional images of women of color that challenge the controlling images of Black women in mainstream culture.

The chapters are organized into how the filmmakers portray Black women characters in roles related to: (1) vocation/occupation, (2) motherhood and (3) relationships/love life. I chose to organize the chapters into these sections because of my interest in showing how Black women filmmakers challenge the areas of social life in which one-dimensional images of Black women are common in mainstream film and media. For example, the characters in the sample of films are portrayed with complex emotions that are often part of love/relationships, which challenges the hypersexual jezebel and emasculating sapphire controlling images of Black women that are often seen in media. I am in the process of revising the chapters in order to submit to a publisher.

In April, I gave a presentation about my research at the annual conference of the Pacific Sociological Association. For this presentation, I focused on information about how filmmaker Gina Price-Bythewood has portrayed Black women characters’ vocations/occupations.

I had considered performing interviews with women involved in the International Black Women’s Film Festival (which has since changed its name to Black Laurel). I submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board and received approval in December. However, I faced some challenges when coordinating the interviews, which lead me to suspend the interview portion of my project. I may complete the interviews at a later date and incorporate them into a future project.

Another goal of mine for the sabbatical was to revise a course that I teach titled Ethnic Images in Film and Media. This fall semester, I incorporate some of the films from my analysis and readings from my review of literature into the course.

I revised and finalized an entry that I wrote about Gender and Advertising for The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies.

I reviewed manuscripts for the journals Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, Feminist Media Studies, and Sex Roles.