

Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, Thank You for the Roadmap, Your Paper, *The Dominant Values of Black Culture*

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When I enrolled in Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s course “The Black Woman in Society” I was 19 and an undergraduate at Princeton University. Tall, gangly, and lacking the curves I believed ushered in womanhood, I was new to both the notion and the experience of being a woman; much less, a Black woman. The idea of taking Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s course excited me—the first I’d ever taken from a Black woman professor.

To that point in 1983, I’d self-identified in terms of my family/extended family, community, as teenage, for athleticism, with high school, and with my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. As the child of parents who believed in integration and who had taken groundbreaking and potentially dangerous steps to position their children in the emergent spaces that ushered it into existence—and as a female coming of age during the Title IX era that increased opportunities for women and girls—the radical messages that I was equal both to Whites and to males came through loud and clear in our home.

That said, I had never considered the meaning, implications, possibilities, or Powers at the crossroads of race and gender, as I grew up as this theoretically free and equal Black and female young woman—a human who’d not existed in the history of the United States.

Among many conversations in Rodgers-Rose’s classroom, we discussed African American women’s resourcefulness and resilience in the face of White dominant culture. Unlike many conversations taking place during that era, our discussions about Black womanhood assumed our wholeness and the fact that Black people had existed and had thrived long before enslavement.

When we discussed our socialization—which included reading Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s (1972) paper “*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*”—I recall fidgeting at her description of the dominant values of White middle-class culture. Both of my parents had migrated away from their childhood communities in search of better opportunities. I realized that to some degree they’d adopted and aspired to something similar to this middle-class family structure. The fact that I didn’t fit squarely into the traditional Black

cultural values Rodgers-Rose described stirred up my pre-existing insecurity that I might not be “Black enough.”



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I noticed that some of my classmates lived more consistently within the traditional paradigm she described. There were times when that knowledge made me squirm as I owned how I'd been encouraged to aspire to and had, in fact, internalized some of the middle-class White values she described. "Who is she to say this?," I'd ask myself as I wrestled with these aspects of my identity. Also, "What does it mean about me if she's right?" With hindsight, I'm sure I was not the only one quietly asking these sorts of questions, though it felt like it at the time. Let's be honest: We were Black Princetonians. Many of us had already been raised and/or educated in settings that had somewhat unmoored us from Black traditions—whether in predominately White communities, AP classes, or preparatory and/or boarding schools. In one way or another, we'd been indoctrinated that we were "different" or "special" and had a high level of responsibility within that—messages that alternately offended me and presented exciting possibilities.

But throughout my life, summers had been different. Released from chores, school schedules and the need to fit into the Whiteness "I didn't not know" was already making me feel uncomfortable when my family would join our sprawling extended clan at my maternal grandparents' family farm. During those hot and lazy days, as I played with my cousins, I'd innately slide into ways of being that fell well within the traditional values Dr. Rodgers-Rose's research described. My grandparents farmed and gardened the land; our parents swapped stories and hand-me-downs; aunts and uncles inspected, corrected, and interjected their values into us; my mother and aunts dragged us on seemingly endless day trips to visit various elders; and we cousins jockeyed toward the front of the bath line—all required to wash in the same two inches of precious well water. This way of living—untethered from time, soft as the drawl I'd slide into, and organic as the peas we'd shell—relaxed me in a way racial integration and forging new possibilities for my gender did not. I found comfort in the reality that this part of my life conformed more closely to what Dr. Rodgers-Rose described in "*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*." I discovered that I was "Black enough" after all.

Decades would pass before I'd more deeply understand both the accuracy and depth of Dr. Rodgers-Rose's analysis. During those years, I became more aware of the ways the externally imposed White middle-class values she'd described had created dissonance, imbalance, and dis-ease within me.

As I embarked upon my healing journey, the Ancestors placed various readings we'd explored in Dr. Rodgers-Rose's class along my path, including this groundbreaking paper, "The Dominant Values of Black Culture."

It was then I realized how powerfully Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose had impacted me—and her paper had become part of the roadmap I'd used to heal my Self.

Along the way, I grew more deeply into Black womanhood, though still lacking the curves I once believed womanhood required.