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Book Review *Women of Color in the Aviation Industry*

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Women of Color in the Aviation Industry takes a gallant position on the contemporary state of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within U.S. aviation through the lenses of several women of color working in the industry. The exploration of their experiences as women of color aviation professionals provides a compelling and nearly irrefutable backdrop for the many inequities, challenges, and barriers they face as a function of their race and/or gender. The author contends these inequities persist because aviation entities are engaged in “performative DEI” measures rather than reflecting upon their extant structures and systems to ascertain what is causing the inequities and why minoritized groups, particularly women of color, are adversely impacted. The text strives to encourage readers to critically reflect upon the reason(s) why minoritized groups, specifically women of color, continue to have low participation rates in an industry that proclaims to be committed to DEI to make a more just workforce. Such a conundrum is explored through semi-structured interviews with numerous women of color who hold various aviation positions. This approach was most apt to obtain first-person accounts of the challenges women of color and presumably other minoritized groups experience. Consequently, industry leadership can leverage these experiences and focus efforts on making equity-centric change instead of concerning themselves with remaining on the “right side” of DEI. The author provided several robust examples of how current DEI efforts, coupled with a lack of reflection, do more harm than good because they propagate a “diversity that maintains Whiteness.” Combined with the six commonly used controlling images, these examples help refute the state of social equity many believe the U.S. is in. The primary messages are written to make it easy for the layperson to understand, but the text falls short of providing actionable recommendations leadership can implement. Despite this limitation, the text may benefit a broad audience, especially for leadership overseeing commercial airlines, government, and collegiate aviation programs. Further, the experiences described have some transferability to sectors and industries external to aviation, meaning they can be incorporated within the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to enhance public administration and social policy to make a more just society.

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Introduction

Women of Color in the Aviation Industry provides enthralling insight into the lived experiences of minoritized women, referred to as women of color by the author, working in various capacities within the aviation industry. From the very first pages of the text, a critical analysis of the multifarious reasons why U.S. aviation continues to be an underrepresented industry for minoritized groups, especially for women of color, despite intentional outreach efforts to these groups through the implementation of robust Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within the industry (Morrison, 2023). The rather stagnant participation of minoritized groups and in particular, for women in aviation, should be of concern for industry, government, and congressional leadership because it is indicative there are other factors at play that are deterring these groups from entering and/or making it less appealing to remain in aviation (Lutte et al., 2023). This text sounds an alarm that has been silenced by the aforementioned leadership for years, drawing attention to these factors and explicitly outlining what they are while situating their gravity, frequency, and impact on minoritized groups through profound examples. These issues are rooted in inequity and are irrefutable through interviewees' quotes that highlight the issues in real-time from the lenses of those experiencing them. If history has shown us anything, it is that the issues stressed are not new, as evidenced by 20% of women comprising the aviation workforce (Lutte & Morrison, 2022) or the 0.5% of airline pilots identifying as Black women (Sisters of the Skies, 2022). Such abysmal participation rates further underscore the aviation industry is not doing enough to cultivate and maintain a diverse or inclusive workforce predicated upon equity.

The text aims to forcibly encourage the industry, specifically its leadership, to consider actions that will result in lasting change rooted in equity to rectify systems of inequity (Morrison, 2023). These long-standing systems hinder minoritized people, especially women of color, from pursuing careers in aviation and/or make them more inclined to leave the industry. This text contains insightful definitions, nuanced concepts, and prominent examples that orient readers to visible and invisible issues extant within aviation. These issues are salient to the industry's ability to develop a diverse workforce across various sectors, within government (e.g., the Federal Aviation Administration [FAA]), and even aviation higher education, bolstering its utility and applicability within public administration contexts. Given the worsening of the workforce demand shortage across a variety of occupations that is impacting the aviation industry currently, the spotlight this book places on the inability of aviation entities to effectively retain and recruit minoritized groups and, in particular, women of color, casts a large, dark shadow on contemporary efforts made by the industry to foster an inclusive workforce through DEI. As such, the salience of this scholarship is inexplicable because it forces industry leadership to critically reflect upon their lackluster DEI efforts and ascertain how they can utilize the guidance encompassed within this text to initiate change that will redress inequity at the root (e.g., within systems, processes, protocols, etc.). The text also places a new sense of gravitas on the current state of DEI and its impact on the diversification and development of the aviation

workforce. This gravitas accentuates the urgency that if swift and intentional action is not taken by industry leadership to make concerted efforts to abandon their over-reliance on performative measures and instead focus on removing systems that propagate inequity, then minoritized participation rates will remain low and potentially worsen the industry's continuity, productivity, and longevity (Johnson, 2023b; Lutte, 2021; Lutte et al. 2023).

Book Summary

The core theme of this book is equity, specifically racial and gender, both of which have not received the attention necessary within the aviation industry by its leadership. The current DEI efforts made by the industry, specifically within commercial airlines, are performative at best, which is a crucial argument Morrison repeatedly makes throughout the book (Morrison, 2023). This performative diversity does more harm than good because it is ingenuine, provides entities with an “out” to lean on when challenged about their efforts to make a more equitable workforce, and does nothing to address the root issues outlined by the interviewees. It is not enough for entities, Morrison contends, to create DEI-centric programming and/or participate in heritage months (e.g., Black History or Pride Month) because these activities alone do not address the institutional structures that hinder the recruitment and retention of minoritized groups (Morrison, 2023). This type of counterfeit diversity allows organizations to circumvent the critical self-reflection that serves as a precursor to foster change that would positively impact the experience(s) of minoritized groups.

The purpose of the book is two-fold. The first is that it seeks to engage readers in meaningful self-reflection to ascertain why DEI efforts challenge an industry that proclaims to be developing an equitable workforce. This leads to the book's second purpose: to encourage readers to question how DEI efforts within aviation continue to diminish the lived experiences of women of color (Morrison, 2023). Such encouragement and reflection were facilitated through the qualitative methodology underpinning the book. Semi-structured interviews allowed for rather informal conversation with the interviewees, all women of color who held various positions (e.g., administration, pilots, collegiate aviation students, etc.) within the industry. Consequently, there was skillful leverage of the lived experiences of these women to explain their challenges and barriers in great detail. This enables readers to place themselves in the shoes of the minoritized women and begin to understand the incessant bouts of workplace inequity they face daily. An exciting element of the methodology was the author's positionality statement. The author listed and explained all her identities, recognizing the innate privilege and power that is incumbent on these identities. This shows a deep understanding of reflexivity and aids in not obscuring or diminishing the lived experiences of those interviewed.

The book consists of four chapters plus a conclusion; these chapters are prefaced by the positionality statement, which serves as an example and reminder for readers to think about their identities, positions, power, and privileges before immersing themselves in the shoes of several women of color. The first chapter provides a brief history of U.S. aviation. It comprises several sub-chapters meant to contextualize many of the claims proffered in the text that center barriers for minoritized groups. The second chapter furnishes an assessment of recent DEI efforts in the industry and outlines the reliance on performative diversity measures aviation entities have, which ultimately maintain “Whiteness” (Morrison, 2023). The third chapter explores how

women of color are misidentified or presumed to be out of place within aviation spaces through the use of controlling images and other stereotypes (Morrison, 2023), both of which maintain oppression. The fourth and final chapter details the importance of community and coalition building for women of color pursuing aviation careers (Morrison, 2023). It identifies critical elements (e.g., mentorship and advocacy) that aid in retaining these women. The conclusion coalesces the prominent points made in the previous chapters, acknowledges the emotional and general labor the book is predicated upon, and provides a parting reminder to readers of what they can and ought to do to assist in making U.S. aviation a more socially just workforce.

The Four-Pronged Trident: A New Tool to Combat Inequity

Strengths

This book possesses four innate strengths, aiding in its applicability and relevance to the aviation industry regardless of the sector, audience age, or identity. The first is the provision of critical definitions of the terms “women of color” and “minoritized” (Morrison, 2023, pp. 37-38). These definitions are integral to the text and necessary for readers to understand the nuances of social, racial, and gender equity within the context of aviation. By including definitions for such contentious terms, the author supplies the reader with a detailed description of the terms and breaks them down in a palatable way for readers of any age, race, education or knowledge level, and/or experience with DEI. It also allows the reader to situate the terms properly in the context of aviation and their respective lives. Such explicit definitions are necessary when discussing something as polarized and politicized as DEI to help convey what is precisely meant by the author rather than leaving it up to the readers’ interpretation, especially since DEI and social justice are not partisan issues.

The second strength is the explicit overview of barriers women of color encounter as aviation professionals. Morrison specified three main challenges women of color faced in the industry due to race and gender. These challenges include 1) Extant diversity efforts reinforcing the status quo, 2) Assumptions about what position they hold because of their identities as women of color, and 3) The need to find mentors and advocates in the industry (Morrison, 2023). The aforementioned are derived from the lived experiences of these minoritized women; these challenges stem from inequity that is embedded within institutional structures that are upheld by “diversity that maintains Whiteness” (Morrison, 2023, p. 50). More importantly, the inclusion of these challenges connotes the U.S. is still not in a place of social or racial equity (Berry-James et al., 2020; Evans & Feagin, 2012) despite the professional advancements made by minoritized groups in sectors of the U.S. workforce such as aviation (Johnson, 2023b; Lutte, 2021; Lutte et al. 2023). The belief the U.S. is in a state of (social, racial, or gender) equity is a false maxim that intentionally ignores the lived experiences of minoritized groups, as cited by the women in the book.

The third strength is the discussion of controlling images and elaboration on how they are used by organizations to oppress minoritized women through stereotypical narratives. According to Morrison (2023), controlling images are designed to be harmful and maintain the subordination of minoritized groups and have become a tool to support the minoritization of Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (POC). The six controlling images outlined include the

Mammy, Matriarch, Jezebel, Angry Black Woman, Illegal Immigrant, and Model Minority. The author leverages the profound narratives connected to the images to convey the historical and contemporary social, racial, and gender inequity that exists in the U.S. It is through these examples that explanations are rendered to detail how controlling imagery is used to oppress women of color, perpetuate stereotypes, and most importantly, elucidate how the stereotypes translate or connect to positions in aviation. This benefits readers who may not be familiar with aviation operations or occupations in the industry, helping them understand the gravitas of the controlling images and their incumbent narratives as they pertain to aviation.

The fourth strength is the methodology that undergirds the book, specifically the methods used to garner the unique insight, perspectives, and experiences upon which the text is built. The qualitative nature and use of semi-structured interviews provided a platform for interviewees to furnish their experiences within aviation (Tracy, 2019). This allowed the author to learn of ethical issues negatively impacting the retention and recruitment of women of color from women who possessed experience with the issue. Additionally, the conversation-based interviews provided information and pertinent context on issues that cannot be easily observed or efficiently accessed (Tracy, 2019). In the context of this book, being a woman of color in the aviation industry is not something that can be easily observed nor accessed, and as the literature suggests (Johnson, 2023b; Lutte et al., 2023; Lutte & Morrison, 2022; Murillo, 2020), is characterized by challenges rooted in equity, packed with negative emotion(s) that go unvoiced, and cause some to suffer in silence. The suffering and frustration were conveyed eloquently through the numerous quotes embedded throughout the chapters, providing a first-person account of the experience in the women's own words. Thus, the interview method selected empowered interviewees to share detailed accounts of inequity and explain their feelings about the actions or inactions that resulted in challenges, barriers, and/or unfavorable outcomes (Johnson, 2023b; Tracy, 2019).

Approaching Minimums, Going Missed

As a Black Male in aviation and higher education, I hesitated to critique this excellent book because I did not want it to undermine or overshadow the profound testimonies within or labor contributed by the interviewees. This text highlights many issues within the DEI efforts made by the aviation industry, specifically by commercial airlines. The notions of racial and gender equity are contentious constructs for U.S. society when they should not be (Gooden, 2015; Johnson, 2023a), and for the aviation industry, they are “pressure points.” The book does an excellent job defining, explaining, and situating these pressure points in the aviation context so even the lay reader can understand them. It provides an opportune platform to apply pressure on the industry, specifically industry leadership, to force them to reflect and make the changes necessary to redress the inequities, inhospitable work environments, and sexist policies/practices at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. However, the book falls short and misses a keen opportunity to apply pressure on individuals with the power to execute change because it “goes missed after reaching minimums” by not providing specific action items or solutions that industry leadership can reference, adopt, implement, and execute.

Morrison leveraged several prominent examples to detail the challenges, barriers, and inequities women of color within U.S. aviation experience on a day-to-day because of their race

and gender. This facet of the text is a cornerstone in its relevance and intentionality to address performative DEI measures; it is a core strength of and reinforces the book's other strengths, accentuating the salience of the equity-centric messaging within. The messaging places the onus of DEI, particularly equity advancement back on organizations rather than the minoritized individuals. This makes sense because the organization is the entity that needs to change, and the type of change that must occur for equity to be sustained can only be facilitated from the top down despite the best efforts of employees working from the bottom up. That said, I have two critiques.

The first is that the text "approaches minimums, but goes missed." This means the text guides the audience down to minimums via an apt methodology that effectively utilizes the equity-centric messaging through the definitions, challenges, and controlling image narratives but falls short (i.e., goes missed) due to a lack of action items aviation entities and their leadership ought to implement to improve minoritized experiences. Although the book states early on that it will not provide specific solutions to the issues outlined within (e.g., the inadequate DEI efforts of organizations and institutions, which impacts the recruitment and retention ability of minoritized individuals), it does not necessarily detail any tangible analytical tools (e.g., racial equity analyses) that an aviation organization or institution could implement to begin redressing the many salient issues discussed. The second critique is that the conclusion was robust but could have been strengthened had a call-to-action been used to culminate the text. This call-to-action could have been brief, consisting of one to three recommendations for policy or practice individuals, institutions, and organizations could follow to guide them on their reflective DEI journey, which would have been a profound way to coalesce the high-level takeaways embedded within the conclusion and reinforce prominent points made in each chapter, thereby strengthening the conclusion holistically.

Conclusion

As a Black male aviation professional with theoretical knowledge and robust experience in various sectors of aviation as well as government, I find the book and its primary message resonate on many levels. Equity, especially racial and gender, are constructs that many organizations and their leadership claim to be committed to, value, and uphold, but policies, the composition of leadership, and budgets demonstrate otherwise. Part of the reason for this stems from the fact that equity (in all its contexts) is a nervous area for organizations, entities, and leadership. This is evident and especially prominent within government entities, as adduced by Gooden (2015) and Johnson (2023a; 2023b); the aviation industry is not exempt from this. Rather than engaging in reflecting right the wrongs resulting from systemic inequity, commercial airlines prefer to promulgate the "right image" via participation in heritage months and brandishing trending hashtags on their social media accounts (e.g., BLM; Morrison, 2023) so they can be on the "right side" of DEI to circumvent cancel culture.

There is an assertion in the book made by one of the interviewees that some industries in the U.S. do not want or wish to be diverse, and aviation fits that mold. This is why equity within aviation has been more of a touted self-proclamation rather than fact rooted in tangible, substantive action. Such a bold statement is supported by the testimonies of others and is accentuated by the staggering statistics that detail the historical and contemporary participation

rates of minoritized groups in aviation (Ison, 2010; 2018; Ison et al., 2016), particularly for women of color in the industry (Lutte & Morrison, 2022). Performative diversity has enabled the aviation industry, its leadership, and, to an extent, the FAA to rest on their laurels when implementing changes that will remove inequities in the system to foster DEI and improve the retention and recruitment of minoritized groups. This is because performative diversity is convenient for organizations to use (Morrison, 2023), specifically those within commercial aviation. Rather than abandoning performative diversity tactics that display a façade of counterfeit diversity and reflect upon the institutional structures, there is a staunch effort to remain “on the right side of history.”

The subsequent actions and implications of performative diversity use in conjunction with controlling imagery are meant to placate the masses, which results in aviation organizations suffering financial hits and bad media press. Such an ideological approach to DEI has paid dividends for these entities as they remain in a positive light for the public and reap the benefits of appearing to care about DEI without ever truly implementing change within their organization. However, this approach bestows an additional burden upon minoritized individuals who carry too much already simply because of their racial and gender identities (Morrison, 2023). The extra labor being referenced here is emotional in nature; instances of emotional labor and fatigue are commonplace in the public sector (e.g., higher education) due to a lack of recognition, praise, and/or compensation for leading DEI initiatives in the workplace (Fulton et al., 2019). Women of color in aviation already experience an immense amount of emotional labor because the field is coded as both White and male (Morrison, 2023), which is compounded when they are passed over for promotions or upgrades they are qualified for, expected to lead specific initiatives without additional compensation (Thomas, 2019), or have their experiences and/or voices diminished or ignored, respectively, by leadership, yet are expected to just “go with the flow.”

Morrison’s scholastic experiences within education, public policy, and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, coupled with her practical expertise leading program assessment for the Center for Aviation at The Ohio State University, provide a compelling backdrop about the state of equity within the aviation industry. Based on the types of aviation professionals interviewed and the issues explained stemming from their lived experiences, the target audience for this book is broad. However, the aviation industry, government, and congressional leaders could benefit most. This benefit stems from the multitude of perspectives brought forward by the candid testimonies of the women of color interviewed about how and why DEI initiatives do not and have not been reflective of their experiences. There is much to learn from these experiences, and if the goal is to create an equitable and just industry, then policy and practice improvements must be derived from these experiences. That said, the text also applies to collegiate aviation program leadership, who are charged with educating, training, and funneling graduates into the aviation industry. Many of the inequities detailed within the industry also exist in higher education, specifically within collegiate aviation programs. These inequities were adduced by some of the female students interviewed. Given the college-to-career pipeline between higher education and industry, this text may be helpful for educational leaders in reflecting upon and redressing equity issues within their programs to increase minoritized students’ retention, recruitment, and matriculation.

The core theme of this book, gender equity, intersects strongly with racial, social, and educational equity because of the multifarious and unique identities individuals working in aviation and society possess. Such a profound intersection serves as a robust call-to-action for those involved (i.e., allies and non-allies) to begin questioning if they are part of the problem or part of the solution and if the latter, then action needs to start with individuals reflecting upon ways the system or environment they work in has been and continues to be a part of the problem. In my opinion, this book, at a minimum, should be a required read for leaders of any aviation entity because of its content, readability, relevance, impact, and transferability to other fields, both internal and external to aviation. Further, because of the excellent messaging within the text, it should be a mandatory read for commercial airlines and collegiate aviation programs seeking to make an intentional change that is equity-centric and will be sustained instead of engaging in performative ploys or counterfeit diversity. To be most effective within educational institutions, I recommend it be assigned to all aviation faculty, staff, and administrators as a summer reading assignment and have it be a focal point of discussion during the first department meeting before the commencement of the new academic year. This provides everyone with ample time to read the book, reflect upon it, and be prepared for the uncomfortable conversations that are necessary to foster the change(s) outlined in the book to not only enhance the experiences of minoritized groups but also move the equity needle in a meaningful way. In other words, higher education institutions striving to “equity walk” instead of solely relying on “equity talk” (Johnson, 2022) should strongly consider mandating the book be read as a part of personnel professional development and, if necessary, incentivize reading the book, because I believe the text is that instrumental in the quest for equity within aviation and education.

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