



Black Feminism: Theory, Method, Practice



Summer 1 - OLLI 2021

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Agenda week 4

1 *Seeking the Beloved Community* (2013)

- Ch 1
- Part III

2 The Institutionalization of Black Feminist Thought

- Hortense J. Spillers
- Patricia Hill Collins
- Kimberlé Crenshaw



Review: 'Waves' of Feminism in the U.S.

1

First Wave (1850s-1920)

- Focus: Women's suffrage/enfranchisement
- Legislation: Bourgeois white women get the right to vote (19th Amendment)

2

Second Wave (1950s-1970s)

- Women's Liberation Movement
- Focus: Equal pay for equal work, destruction of patriarchy, man is not the center
- Legislation: Civil Rights Acts, Birth Control, Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

3

Third Wave (1970s-2008)

- Introduction and centering of black women, working-class women
- Focus: Intersectionality; identity politics
- Legislation: Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), Don't Ask, Don't Tell

4

Fourth Wave (2008-present)

- Trans-inclusive feminism vs. Trans-exclusive feminism
- Focus: fluidity of identity, rejection of essential identities
- Legislation: Marriage Equality (2014), Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

The Long 1980s: Blackness Goes Mainstream



Alice Walker

Toni Morrison

**Patricia Hill
Collins**

The Long 1980s: Blackness goes mainstream

1982

- *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* is published
- *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* is published. It is currently in its fourth edition
- *Losing Ground* (Dir. Kathleen Collins) becomes the first feature-length film by an African American woman produced in the U.S. since the 1920s

1983

- Alice Walker wins Pulitzer Prize
- *Sugar Cane Alley* (Dir. Euzhan Palcy) becomes the first film directed by a Black person to receive the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival
- Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday announced as a national holiday
- Miss New York Vanessa Williams crowned the first African-American Miss America

1984

- Jesse Jackson runs for president, becoming only the second African-American to run for the position (after Shirley Chisholm)
- *The Cosby Show* makes its debut on NBC
- Def Jam Records founded by Russell Simmons; it will go on to sign Run DMC, LL Cool J, and Kanye West

1985

- Gwendolyn Brooks, who had been the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, becomes first Black person to be National Poet Laureate
- Mayor W. Wilson Goode, the first African-American mayor of Philadelphia, instructs Philadelphia police to bomb the headquarters of MOVE, a Black leftist group members of which had received life sentences for a 1972 shootout that left one police officer dead and a dozen injured. The bombing killed 11 and left over 200 people homeless. In a 2015 interview, Wilson says he regrets the decision every day after.
- Steven Spielberg directs *The Color Purple* film adaptation. It will be nominated for eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actress for Whoopi Goldberg and Best Supporting Actress for both Oprah Winfrey and Margaret Avery. It wins no Academy Awards, but Goldberg wins a Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Drama.

The Long 1980s: Blackness goes mainstream

1986

- Mike Tyson becomes youngest heavyweight champion in the world. He will go on to become a celebrity and cultural icon
- *The Oprah Winfrey Show* becomes nationally syndicated. At its peak, it will draw 20 million daily viewers.

1987

- Rita Dove becomes just the second African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry
- Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning fifth novel *Beloved* is published. It becomes a New York Times bestseller for 25 consecutive weeks. After it is snubbed for the National Book Award, 48 black critics and writers (incl. Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and June Jordan) write a letter of protest, lauding Morrison: It reads "Despite the international stature of Toni Morrison, she has yet to receive the national recognition that her five major works of fiction entirely deserve: she has yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize... we write this testament of thanks to you, dear Toni: alive, beloved and persevering, magical."
- Aretha Franklin becomes the first woman ever to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. She later receives a Presidential Medal of Freedom
- James Baldwin dies of stomach cancer. Despite never receiving the Pulitzer or the National Book Award (the two most coveted awards in American Letters), his fiction and non-fiction are essential parts of American Letters of the mid-century.



The Long 1980s: Blackness goes mainstream

- Jesse Jackson seeks the presidential nomination again.
- Bill Cosby donates the largest gift ever made by a Black person to any college or university, \$20 million, to Spellman College upon Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole's inauguration as the first Black woman president of Spellman.
- The first PhD in African-American Studies is offered at Temple University

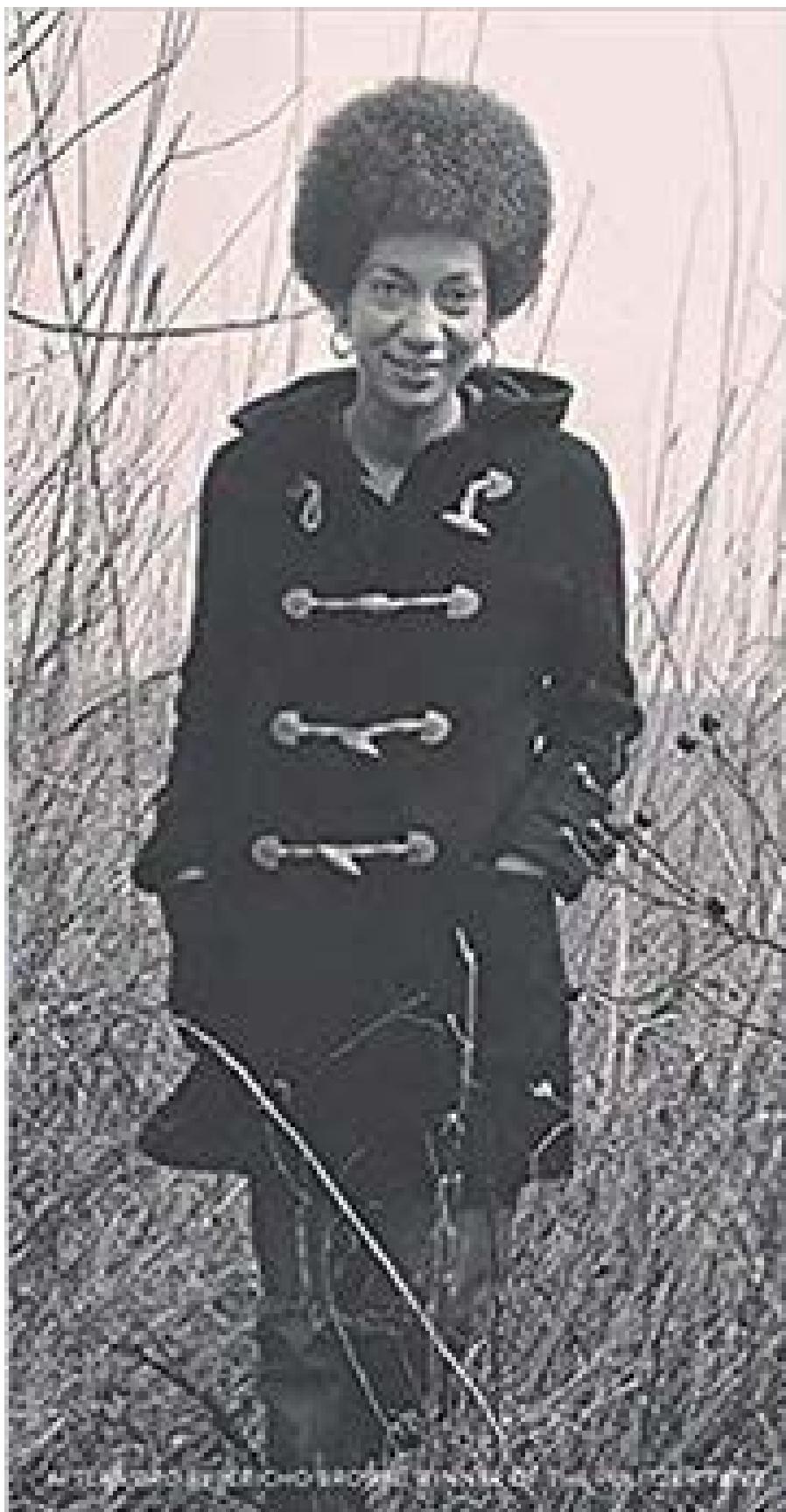
1988

- UCLA Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coins the term 'intersectionality.' She will later be on Anita Hill's legal team, become full professor at Columbia Law School, founder and director of the Center for Intersectionality & Social Policy Studies, & co-founder and director of the African-American Policy Forum (AAPF).

- Former Yale Professor and Director of the SUNY Stony Brook Poetry Center June Jordan becomes full professor of English, Women's Studies, and African-American Studies at UC Berkeley

1989

- Colin Powell, having previously been first Black national security advisor, becomes the first African-American chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
- David Dinkins wins the mayoral election in New York, becoming the first African-American mayor of the city. In his inaugural speech, he says "I stand before you today as the elected leader of the greatest city of a great nation, to which my ancestors were brought, chained and whipped in the hold of a slave ship."
- *A Dry White Season* (Dir. Euzhan Palcy) premieres. Palcy becomes the first black woman to direct a film for a major Hollywood studio and the first black woman to direct an actor to an Oscar nomination (Marlon Brando)



[P]eople of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic . . . our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create . . . [in] dynamic rather than fixed ideas. . . . How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world. . . . My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.

**—Barbara Christian,
“The Race for Theory”**



"Teaching Theory, Talking Community" (Joy James)

- Contemporary African American theorists such as Barbara Christian, who writes that theory not rooted in practice is elitist, think within a community-centered tradition in which the creativity of a people in the race for theory sustains humanity. However, teaching theory as nonelitist, and intending the liberation and development of all of humanity, specifically Africana communities, contradicts much of academic theory, which is Eurocentric.
- All philosophy and theory, Eurocentric or Afrocentric, is political. Academic "disciplines," when sexualized and racialized, tend to reproduce themselves in hierarchically segregated forms. To confront segregation means recognizing that current academic or educational standards have never worked, and were never intended to for us as a people. Our paltry presence in (white) universities and colleges speaks to the fact that individuals, but not the community, may attain some success in an educational process centered on the marginalization of all but the "European" (socially constructed as white, male, propertied, and heterosexual).
- Philosophy or theory courses may emphasize logic and memorizing the history of "Western" philosophy rather than the activity of creating philosophies or theorizing. When the logic of propositions is the primary object of study, how one argues becomes more important than for what one argues. The exercise of reason may take place within an illogical context—in which academic canons absurdly claim universal supremacy derived from the hierarchical splintering of humanity into greater and lesser beings, or the European Enlightenment's deification of scientific rationalism as the truly "valid" approach to "Truth."
- When teaching about the lives of black activist women, for example, is viewed as a descent to the particular from the "universal norm" (white, male, monied), biology becomes the destiny theory (privileged biology becomes manifest destiny).

"Teaching Theory, Talking Community" (Joy James)

- Some thinkers have argued that theory and philosophy are open to the "everyday" person and intend the good of humanity. However, few identify Africana people, women of color, women in general, and black women in particular, or poor people or prisoners as both equal partners in that humanity and important theorists in its behalf. Fewer still connect the "life of the mind" to the understanding that "black people have to a disproportionate extent supplied the labor which has made possible the cultivation of philosophical inquiry."



- They, along with female labor in the "private realm" or the "household," have disproportionately cultivated philosophies that provide nonabstract meanings of freedom and justice. Surviving genocidal oppression allows insights into (in)humanity and (in)justice that transcend the abstractions of academic philosophy and theory, infused in Western democracies by patriarchies and Eurocentrism; theory is not synonymous with European.
 - In a society and culture where the white European represents both the ideal and universal manifestation of civilization, racist iconography infuses worldviews and misshapens European philosophy, with destructive effects on the material lives of the majority of the world's people.
 - Adhering to the tastes of white supremacy, "white solipsism" masquerades as universal philosophy within the myth of racial superiority. If legitimizing a world order of domination becomes an intellectual mandate, like the carnival house of mirrors, theory projects what it distorts in solipsistic reflections.
 - The thoughts of "outsiders" are reduced to descriptions of a part (of humanity or subhumanity) rather than analyses of a whole (humanity).

Why "beloved community"?

- Outside the academic or popular worldviews of "scientific" materialism and "objective" rationalism, exist the nonduality of the sacred and secular, spiritual and political, the individual and communal. Discredited indigenous cosmologies, and political rebellions, offer concepts of not just nonlinear time, or shared spatial commitments to community, but they gesture toward the holy grail of the "beloved community."
- For centuries, Indigenous and African peoples in the Americas have theorized for their lives and so collectively crafted a revolutionary praxis. Fiercely struggling for collective freedom, ancestors Harriet Tubman, Ida. B. Wells, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, along with countless others theorized with the weight of legacies not fully comprehended and rarely engaged

If anything I do in the way of writing . . . isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams, which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted.

—**Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"**

Part III: Sovereign Political Subjects (Joy James)

- **14: Activist Scholars or Radical Subjects?**

- Institutions of higher education have a vested interest in keeping scholarship “objective” (mystifying), “nonpolitical” (nonsubversive), and “academic” (elitist) and in continuing to reserve the most advanced technical training for that small portion of the world’s population who will manage the rest, as well as consume or control its resources and political economies.
- Unless elite educational institutions are transformed, activist research will never reside within the academic mainstream as an entity that produces a revolutionary, or even radical, counternarrative and practice.
- To be able to walk in and walk out, and to return, is a freedom wielded by the radical subject (to be able to act freely is an agency wielded by the revolutionary subject). There is likely to be a price to pay for this exercise of agency and independence.
- Seeking the exit door, we search for meaning, value, and political relevance given that our institutions are incapable of providing the conditions for radicalism as anything other than performance.

Part III: Sovereign Political Subjects (Joy James)

15: Campaigns Against "Blackness"

- Election campaigns that promise to restore legitimacy to the practice and perception of U.S. imperial dominance illustrate how viable candidates—regardless of their experiential or ideological multiculturalism²—avow a monoculturalism that embraces Judeo-Christian individualism and capitalism; unsustainable consumerism; underregulated corporate finance—prior to the global recession; and the validation of what President Dwight D. Eisenhower labeled the “military-industrial complex,” now expanded to include the “prison-industrial complex.”
- In shifting class and racial identities, blackness remains fixed as negation (of civil society, of prosperity, of law and order, and of patriotism). Thus on the campaign trail, it is to be avoided or disciplined, or in the case of the candidate’s persona, transcended. Under white supremacy, only nonwhites collectively struggle with the “brand” of the criminal or uncivil; hence, only they collectively possess the trait of defective citizenry.
- Rather than pawns in the 2006 and 2008 elections, black men and women running for office minimized or erased their specificities and desires in order to foster the generic party politician. Despite the text on their campaign websites, each camp understood that to publicly embrace antiracism—if you were black—or feminism—if you were female—would be to step into an ideological bog that hampers the ability to garner votes.
 - Seeking a “more perfect union” as informed and enlightened citizenry requires challenges to racial repression coded as “law and order” mandates. Voters may yet demand a greater democracy. That they would do so independent of campaigns to resist racist and genocidal logic seems an unlikely American

Part III: Sovereign Political Subjects (Joy James)

16: Sovereign Kinship and the President Elect

- The story woven around Ann Nixon Cooper filtered one hundred years of U.S. American history, culminating in the election of its first black president. Its symbolism sweeps past distinct differences between voters and the political class they install in a representative (rather than a direct) democracy. This symbolism deflects attention from the contradictions of inequalities and dominance in a democratic nation.
- The sovereignty of the poor, the colored, the female, the queer, the ideologically independent—as nonelites and non-“mainstream”—is rooted in their agency and autonomy, their ability to lead politicians rather than follow them. Although their more talented and ambitious members may join the ruling elites, historically disenfranchised outsiders to the political realm have had no inherent kinship with the dominant political class. (in 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court demonstrated its sovereign kinship against the majority vote. The political class designed the Electoral College to override the popular vote. However, by installing George W. Bush as president, the Supreme Court intervened in the Florida recount to determine the electoral vote.)
- Race-based sovereignty and familial ties were forever splintered by the autobiography of the candidate: white mother, black African father, devoted maternal white grandmother, loyal Ivy League-educated, Southside Chicago girl-turned-political wife. Read by millions, Barack Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* made consistent claims, echoed insistently on the campaign trail: “nowhere but in America” and “my life is an American story.” In gratitude to the nation, the candidate increasingly dismissed charges of antiblack racism against its racial majority and its institutions. Thus, he revealed himself as self-made, aligned with traditional political power rather than sovereign blackness (the existence of the latter is generally doubted).

This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that's on my mind tonight's about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She's a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old.

She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when . . . someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons—because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin. . . .

In this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change.

—Barack Obama, November 4, 2008

Part III: Sovereign Political Subjects (Joy James)

17: The Dead Zone

- National and international Africana elites occupy influential posts in prestigious universities and colleges (whose billion-dollar endowments rival the gross national product of some nations). Yet even within these halls of security, or perhaps because of them, our critiques of state violence are rare
- Since the postbellum origins of the “talented tenth,” elites have disproportionately shaped Africana thought and have offered themselves as role models dispensing cautionary, constructive, or caustic advice and guidance to impoverished, “dysfunctional,” or criminal(ized) blacks.
- Consider the public’s response to Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s severe denunciations of the United States. First from his pulpit and later from a media podium, Obama’s former pastor derided no particular policy or official but an entire nation and its state apparatuses. Before his coerced retirement, Wright served as a marine and then in the medical corps for President Lyndon Johnson and later as reverend of one of Chicago’s most influential (celebrity) churches that addressed black poverty. Wright may be one example where black achievement intersects with black misery and genocide to produce an analysis from the dead zone. Obama’s denunciations of Wright—without addressing the valid content in his diatribes—exemplify how to avoid being dragged down into a zone in confrontation with white supremacy.
- Genocide is still considered to be a phenomenon practiced by uncivilized, rogue states (i.e., nonWestern democracies); it is rarely thought of as applicable to the United States. Seeking its “golden age,” the “postracial” America obscures repressive realities; thus, it mutes and deflects a general awareness of the full impact of racism on the lives of people. Sever U.S. racism from its logical conclusion—genocide—and matters become even more confusing and sadly satirical.
- Postracial is not antiracist; rather, it is a desire to be perceived as nonracist, to not be awed by moral and political failings. Postracial is supposedly a reference for being beyond antiblack racism and beyond “black racism”... Postracial is not synonymous with postwhite supremacy. Whiteness retains its hegemonic normativity. The ability to decide to “go beyond race,” which in conventional language is not leaving whiteness behind but leaving behind a blackness repressed by whiteness, is a power that most nonwhites do not wield.
- Those elite blacks who decide that discussions of white supremacy are anachronistic derive their authoritative voice from the institutional power of white patronage

Part III: Sovereign Political Subjects (Joy James)

18: Racism, Genocide, and Resistance

- Implemented into law in 1988 with restrictive amendments, the Convention on Genocide theoretically criminalizes and outlaws such policies creating or inciting genocide. In practice, the United States has consistently positioned itself as an outlaw state; its crimes against humanity, targeting African and Native Americans for the most severe repression, shape the daily life of these populations.
- Conventional language's catchall term, *racism*, which is virtually meaningless when severed from genocide, is more obscurantist than analytical. Most language mystifies racism to disconnect it from institutional white supremacy and genocide and privatize it as personal behavior and speech. Dismembered language distracts from the impact of racist state policies, since how we talk about racism determines what we do about genocide.
- "White rights" provides the ideological ground for neoconservatives to advocate, and neoliberals to ignore, genocidal policies. The ascent from rightist to leftist racism is not as steep as one would like to imagine.
- In the face of "blackness" or presence of blacks, Jews would not self-identify as black, although propaganda of European Jews as "deficient" in whiteness fuels anti-Semitism, which is not identical to racism, or antiblack racism. White supremacy accommodates non-Aryan "whites" in Israel and Palestine, Southern Africa, and throughout the Americas.
- The European Enlightenment's construction of the Western liberal individual as the standard for civilized humanity concurred with its reconstructing those enslaved or colonized by Europeans with an essentialist inferiority...State-constructed memory and meaning obstruct confronting racism as "genocide." Calls to consciousness, relying on mystified and Eurocentric constructions of humanity and suffering, are conditioned by the surrealism and hypocrisy of regret.
- Racism in U.S. foreign and domestic policy culminates in genocide. The inability of conventional language to confront the devaluing and destruction of human life based on white supremacy creates a silence around U.S. "race wars" and struggles for survival and liberation. The reduction of "racism" to speech, social manners, or the incivility of aberrational minorities ignores state racist violence and the massive increase in white supremacist hate group activities. Rendering racism an abstraction and its attendants, genocide and fascism, social fictions, racialized language's obscurantism transcends ideology and ethnic, class, and gender identity.

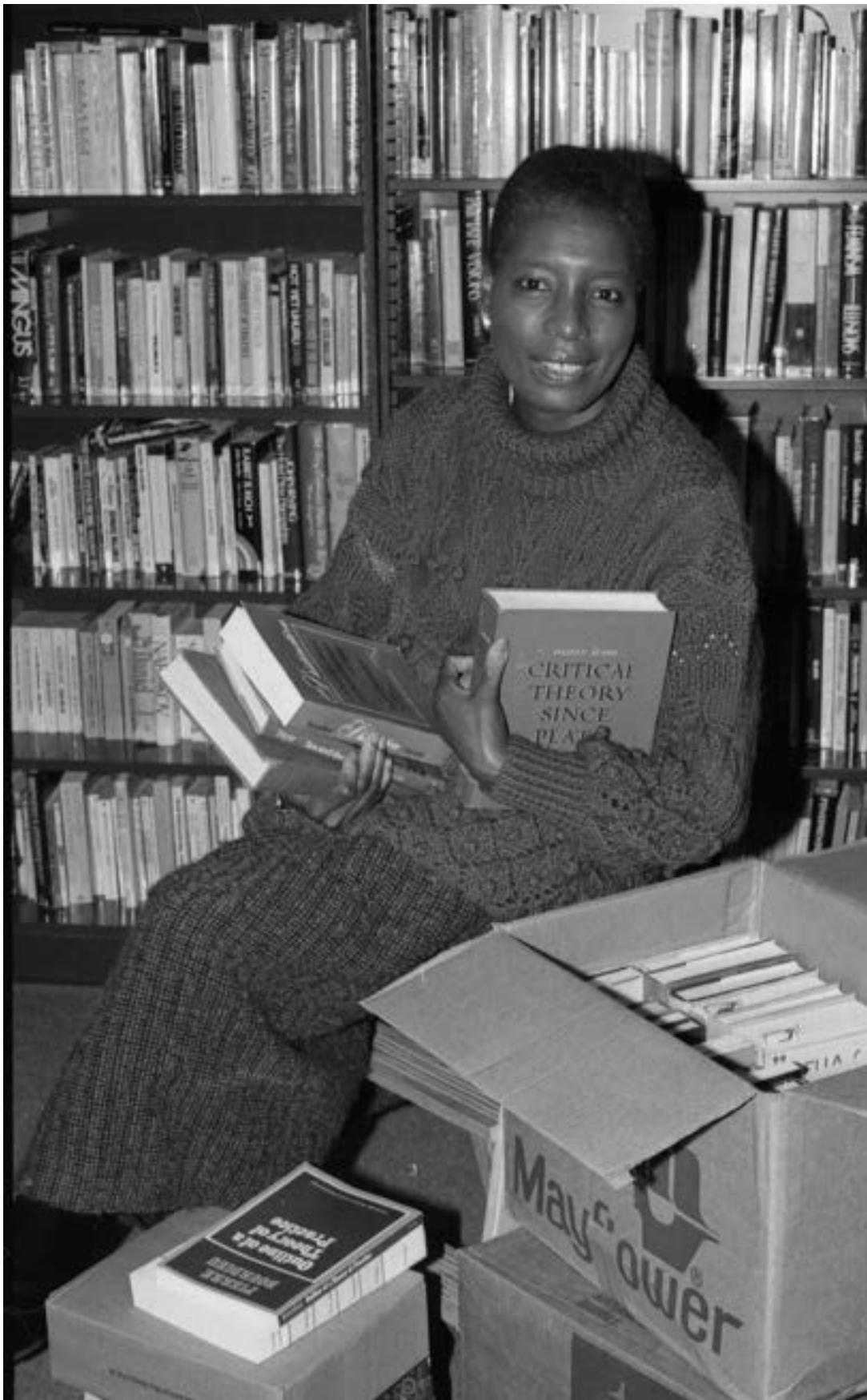
Part III: Sovereign Political Subjects (Joy James)

19: All Power to the People! Arendt's Communicative Power in a Racial Democracy

- Derived from personal experience as well as political practice and theory, Arendt's theory of power posits that it is neither force, domination, nor oppression; power is collective action for a common ideal rooted in freedom.
- Arendt's theory of power as communication rather than domination is based on the division of space into the non- or prepolitical private realm and the political public realm.
 - Arendt ignores the fact that enslavement and economic exploitation and forced relegation to the "powerless" private realm enabled an Athenian elite (of propertied males) to practice democracy. Subjugation constructed a restrictive public space dedicated to the ideal of power as communication, reason, and persuasion, a site advocating freedom but built on oppression.
 - The practice of voting disenfranchisement of African Americans through bureaucracy (poll tax), violence (imprisonment), and terror (lynching and/or police brutality) also suggests that the private realm was never truly understood in the United States as a site void of the practice of politics.
 - It is not that Arendt ignored racism. While condemning it, she tended either to generalize or to selectively examine it.
- Understanding the limitations to the manifestation of power valorized by Arendt requires an understanding of the racial dominance and violence embedded within U.S. democracy. It is critical to examine the political implications of the racist nature of policing and incarceration. Arendt warned about the military-industrial complex of her time,⁴ but given her insufficient attention to racial dominance, she could not anticipate the continuance of slavery through the prison-industrial complex.
- Her assertion that totalitarian terror is a relatively new form of government oppression is odd. Genocide is not unique to the twentieth century, assuming that one would agree that genocide is a byproduct of totalitarian terror. As a form of state racial terror, it is a relatively stable feature in history through European and American imperialism
- U.S. politics revolve around coeval manifestations of democracy and tyranny, of collective power expressed in its electoral bodies and dominance through violence or terror.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" Hortense J. Spillers

- Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.
- "Ethnicity" perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor.
- That order, with its human sequence written in blood, represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body-a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.



"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" Hortense J. Spillers

1. the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality;
2. at the same time-in stunning contradiction-the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor;
3. in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness";
4. as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.

- But I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African "middleman," we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard.
 - This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh "ungendered"—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.
- Those African persons in "Middle Passage" were literally suspended in the "oceanic," if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet "American" either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally "unmade," thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that "exposed" their destinies to an unknown course.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" Hortense J. Spillers

- The loss of the indigenous nameland provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations, including the displacement of the genitalia, the female's and the male's desire that engenders future.
- If, as Meillassoux contends, "femininity loses its sacredness in slavery", then so does "motherhood" as female blood-rite/right. To that extent, the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange. While this proposition is open to further exploration, suffice it to say now that this open exchange of female bodies in the raw offers a kind of Ur-text to the dynamics of signification and representation that the gendered female would unravel.
- Under these arrangements, the customary lexis of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire" are thrown into unrelieved crisis.
- the project of liberation for African-Americans has found urgency in two passionate motivations that are twinned- 1) to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behavior that make such syntax possible; 2) to introduce a new semantic field/fold more appropriate to his/her own historic movement.
 1. motherhood as female blood- rite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment
 2. a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's banished name and body and the captor father's mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject.

"The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" Patricia Hill Collins

- As more Black women earn advanced degrees, the range of Black feminist scholarship is expanding. Increasing numbers of African-American women scholars are explicitly choosing to ground their work in Black women's experiences, and, by doing so, many implicitly adhere to an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Rather than being restrained by their "both/and" status of marginality, these women make creative use of their outsider-within status and produce innovative Black feminist thought. The difficulties these women face lie less in demonstrating the technical components of white male epistemologies than in resisting the hegemonic nature of these patterns of thought in order to see, value, and use existing alternative Afrocentric feminist ways of knowing.
- In establishing the legitimacy of their knowledge claims, Black women scholars who want to develop Black feminist thought may encounter the often conflicting standards of three key groups.
- Alternative knowledge claims, in and of themselves, are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect. An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. The existence of an independent Black women's standpoint using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth.



"Demarginalizing the Intersection of Gender and Race" Kimberlé Crenshaw

- 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. ...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.
- If any real efforts are to be made to free Black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community's needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy. Similarly, feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women. Neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents. In order to include Black women, both movements must distance themselves from earlier approaches in which experiences are relevant only when they are related to certain clearly identifiable causes (for example, the oppression of Blacks is significant when based on race, of women when based on gender). The praxis of both should be centered on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties.
- If their efforts instead began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit. In addition, it seems that placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action.



For Next Time...

THE LONG 1990S



Readings:

- Ch 1-2 of *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* by Joy James
- Ch 5 & all of Part II from *Seeking the Beloved Community*
- “Sisterhood: Beyond Public and Private” by bell hooks and Tanya McKinnon
- Ch 1-2 of *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis
- Watch *13th* on Netflix