



Black Feminism: Theory, Method, Practice



Summer 1 - OLLI 2021

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Agenda

week 5



- 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

The 1990s: Hip-Hop goes Female



Queen Latifah

Lauryn Hill

[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”**

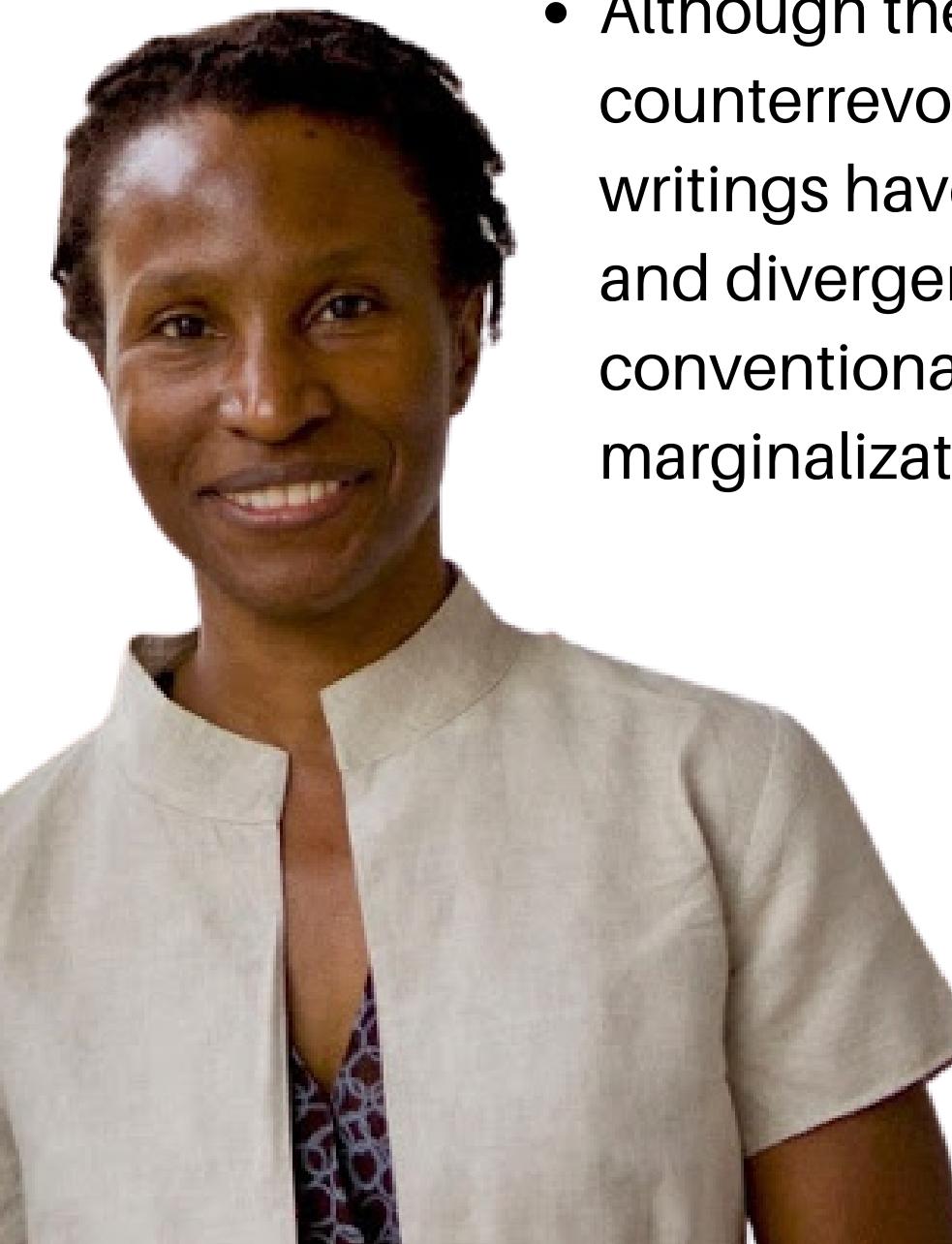


"Radicalizing Black Feminism" (Joy James)

- Despite agitational movements, the concept of African Americans participating in political decisions has historically been translated through corporate, state or philanthropic channels.
- A century ago, the vision and resources of the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) allowed wealthy, white Christian missionaries to create the black elite Talented Tenth as a shadow of themselves as influential, liberal leaders, and to organize privileged black Americans to serve as a buffer zone between white America and a restive, disenfranchised black mass. Funding elite black colleges such as Spelman and Morehouse (named after white philanthropists) to produce aspirants suitable for the American ideal, the ABHMS encouraged the development of race managers rather than revolutionaries.
- To the extent that it followed and follows the founders' mandate, the Talented Tenth was, and remains, antirevolutionary. The formation of the Talented Tenth—supported by white influential liberals—historically included women. It therefore liberalized the protofeminism of historical black female elites.
- The 1960s ushered in a more democratic, grassroots-driven form of leadership. The “new wave” of black feminisms originating from the 1960s, invariably connects with historical antiracist struggles in the United States. Black women created and continue to create feminism out of militant national liberation or antiracist movements in which they often functioned as unrecognized organizers and leaders. Equally, their contributions to American feminism are inadequately noted, even among those who document the history of contemporary radical feminism.

"Radicalizing Black Feminism" (Joy James)

- How to maintain Combahee's integrative analyses—intersecting race, gender, sexuality and class—with more than rhetoric, that is, in viable political practice that organizes in nonelite communities, became a major challenge for feminists. All antiracist and antisexist politics, notwithstanding the rhetoric, are not equally ambitious or visionary in their demands and strategies for transforming society. The majority culture's desire or need to bring "closure" or containment to the black revolutionary struggles that fueled radical black feminism (such as Combahee) has filtered into black feminist ideology, altering its potential for transformation.



- Although the greatest opponent to antiracist and feminist revolutionary struggles has been the counterrevolutionary state (embodied in the twentieth century by the United States), black feminist writings have, by and large, paid insufficient attention to state repression and the conflictual ideologies and divergent practices found within black feminisms...All black feminists, including those who follow conventional ideology to some degree, share an outsider status in a commercial culture. That marginalization is not indicative of, but is often confused for, an intrinsic or inherent radicalism.
 - Black feminisms that accept the political legitimacy of corporate state institutional and police power, but posit the need for humanistic reform, are considered liberal. Black feminisms that view (female and black) oppression as stemming from capitalism, neocolonialism and the corporate state that enforces both, are generally understood to be radical.
 - Black feminist liberation ideology challenges state power by addressing class exploitation, racism, nationalism, and sexual violence with critiques of—and activist confrontations with—corporate state policies.

"Radicalizing Black Feminism" (Joy James)

- The “radicalism” of feminism recognizes racism, sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy, but refuses to make “men” or “whites” or “heterosexuals” the problem in lieu of confronting corporate power, state authority, and policing. One reason to focus on the state, rather than on an essentialized male entity, is that the state wields considerable dominance over the lives of nonelite women. The government intrudes on and regulates the lives of poor or incarcerated females more than bourgeois and nonimprisoned ones, determining their material well-being and physical mobility, and affecting their psychological and emotional health. Never the primary economic providers for black females, given the history and legacy of slavery, un- and underemployment, and racialized incarceration, the majority of black men exert little economic control over female life, although they retain considerable physical, sexual, and psychological dominance.
- In corporate culture, gender and race are filtered through class to juxtapose and contrast “workers” and “professionals.” To the extent that corporate culture has infiltrated U.S. progressivism, the polarities of worker/manager resurface to foster a resistance to, or reshaping of, radicalism embodied in a “corporate Left.” Those able to raise large sums of money through corporate largesse to institutionalize their political formations and identities as astute “organizers,” maintaining a political leadership that reflects the style of chief executives and mirrors state corporate sites (among which academia is included), would qualify as members of the corporate Left.
- The legacies of black female radicals and revolutionaries contest arguments that state repression and subaltern resistance are not “black women’s issues” or are too “politicized” for “feminism.” Such legacies also contradict contentions that feminism is inherently “bourgeois” and therefore incapable of an organic revolutionary politics.
- The blurred lines between revolutionary, antirevolutionary, and counterrevolutionary politics allow, in the United States, for the normative political and discursive “sisterhood” that embraces conservative and liberal women, yet rarely extends itself to radical or revolutionary women.
- Seeking a viable community and society, antiracist feminism can serve as either sedative or stimulant.

From the slave democracy to the penal democracy

"According to the U.S. Constitution, "other persons" (racially fashioned without any racial marker in the text to designate them as African), and later, according to the Thirteenth Amendment, "other persons" (criminally fashioned again with no apparent racial referent) are designated real and potential slaves. I highlight the Thirteenth Amendment to argue this: *The state does not create legal categories in abstraction*. Legal narratives materialize and manifest in political practice(s). Within its possessions and territories, in the very act of (re)naming involuntary servitude, the United States re-created rather than actually abolished slavery." (Joy James)

"The question of whether the prison has become an obsolete institution has become especially urgent in light of the fact that more than two million people (out of a world total of nine million) now inhabit U.S. prisons, jails, youth facilities, and immigrant detention centers. Are we willing to relegate ever larger numbers of people from racially oppressed communities to an isolated existence marked by authoritarian regimes, violence, disease, and technologies of seclusion that produce severe mental instability?" (Angela Davis)

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

– THIRTEENTH AMENDMENT, SECTION 1, U.S. CONSTITUTION

FOLLOWING THE **MONEY** of Mass Incarceration

Judicial and Legal

Criminal law only
\$29.0 billion

Prosecution
\$5.8 billion

Indigent Defense
\$4.5 billion

Public Corrections Agencies
Prisons, jails, parole, and probation
\$80.7 billion

Public Employees
\$38.4 billion

Health Care
\$12.3 billion

Policing
Criminal law only
\$63.2 billion

Civil Asset Forfeiture
\$4.5 billion

Bail Fees
(only the fees paid to bondsmen)
\$1.4 billion

Costs To Families
\$2.9 billion

Commissary
\$1.6 billion

Telephone Calls
\$1.3 billion

Health Care
\$12.3 billion

Construction
\$3.3 billion

Interest Payments
(on past construction)
\$1.9 billion

Food
\$2.1 billion

Utilities
\$1.7 billion

Private Corrections
aka private prisons
\$3.9 billion

Private Prison Profits
\$0.37 billion
aka \$374 million

Annual Total \$182 billion

Except for private prison profits, this graph only includes costs of more than \$1 billion a year.
All figures are based on the most recent available.

Part II: Democracy and Captivity (Joy James)

Democracy and Captivity

- Can we call ourselves a democracy of freedom when we incarcerate?
- Under what circumstances is someone incarcerated? What have we deemed criminal and why?
- Who is surveilled, arrested, booked, incarcerated more often and why?

Black Suffering in Search of the "Beloved" Community

- "What is black death in American democracy but a political phenomenon?"

"Historical political imprisonment, black suffering, and death have become familiar—forming a backdrop to everyday reality. Premature violent death and captivity cease to astonish or seem unusual in this landscape. They no longer register as political phenomena. Consequently, when suffering blacks and their rare militant allies break into rebellion, most people seem surprised and outraged. They seem less disturbed by the repression, which they accept in resignation or complicity, and more by the resistance. According to the state, no suffering warrants rebellion; although 'freedom from tyranny' is one of its hallmark phrases. Perhaps what is explicitly meant, but only implied, is that no black suffering warrants rebellion." (Joy James)

American Prison Notebooks

- "'Law-abiding dissent' represents a political risk taking with broader social acceptance."

Part II: Democracy and Captivity (Joy James)

Violations

- Ostensibly, this work first raised its head in the expanding military theater of U.S. imperial aspirations and its domestic/foreign policy with their attendant human rights abuses. Yet, in truth, however you wish to define it, the smaller, closeted military theater (the “pit” as opposed to the amphitheater) permitted the ducking and dodging of difficult struggles precisely because academe is not the “streets.” So what it and this academic engagement offer is not a political coalition (although old political ties and shared respect among some contributors indicate that coalitions exist and so manifest here—just not as an editorial process or text). Not a home, this literary intervention, a politics of sorts, challenges while it also reproduces containment.

War, Dissent, and Social Justice

- So American exceptionalism rewrites history and time lines to make immediacy and punitive reflex action normative and to place the wounded and traumatized American body center while denying the terror it has inflicted and does inflict on other bodies.

Sisterhood: beyond public and private



- Early on, there were individuals like Charlotte Bunch who were writing feminist theory but who were not conventional academics, folks who had been academically trained but had retained a commitment to community activism outside academic institutions. Individuals who did not have Ph.D.'s were creating feminist theory that was emerging from movement-based activism. However, when women in the academy centralized the issue of academic within hierarchical legitimization patriarchal institutions, everyone began to move away from an emphasis on feminist theory that was concerned with building mass-based movement. Feminist theory became much more the site where the politics of legitimization within academic hierarchy was played out. This is the path that has brought us to where we are today, to where the kind of work (done by those feminist thinkers who see themselves as theorists) that makes no attempt to engage feminist politics is the work that is often most respected.
- I do believe feminist theory can be transformative—that it is absolutely necessary for feminist politics. I'm not interested in gender-based scholarship that is completely divorced from a concern with eliminating sexism and sexist oppression in the lives of women, men, and children in our world. We have so many more people today, men and women, doing scholarship that makes use of feminist thinking, that focuses on gender, that is not rooted in a commitment to feminist politics.

Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture

- Foucault's elision of racial bias in historical lynching and contemporary policing predicts his silence on the racialization of prisons and the death penalty in the United States. For Foucault, during the ancien régime "the infinite segmentation of the body of the regicide" manifested "the strongest power over the body of the greatest criminal, whose total destruction made the crime explode into its truth". That dominating, totalizing power, he argues, appears in contemporary society as "an interrogation without end" or "an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, a judgement that would at the same time be the constitution of a file that was never closed, the calculated leniency of a penalty that would be interlaced with the ruth- less curiosity of an examination". Constant monitoring, bureaucratic documentation and analysis, and interrogation without end are in fact characteristics of American prisons.
- Yet through its police and penal executions, the United States also enacts violence that is fundamentally different from such ceaseless interrogation:
 - In the bombing of MOVE members in Philadelphia, for instance, interrogation was never intended; rather, the policing objective was the death of the targeted subject(s).
 - The FBI-COINTELPRO'S harassment and assassination of black and indigenous leaders during the civil-rights, Black Panther, and American Indian movements, including the 1969 shootings of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by Chicago police and the FBI and the shootings at Wounded Knee, as well as police killings of nonactivist blacks, Native Americans, and Latinos all indicate levels of violence in **U.S. domestic policies** (rarely reflected on in academe) that suggest little interest in interrogation.
- One may argue, following Foucault, that the "carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside. . . . It saves everything, including what it punishes". The U.S. carceral net- work kills, however, and in its prisons, it kills more blacks than any other ethnic group. American prisons constitute an "outside" in U.S. political life.

For Next Time...

QUEER BLACK FEMINISM; OR, BLACK FEMINISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Readings:

- “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” by Cathy J. Cohen
- “But Some of Us Are Brave Lesbians: The Absence of Black Lesbian Fiction” by Jewelle Gomez
- Selections from Wayword Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals by Saidiya Hartman
- “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” by Audre Lorde
- “Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle” by Laure Alexandra Harris