
BLACK FEMINISM

Liberation Limbos and Existence in Gray

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chapter 17

"LIMBO" HAS multiple meanings. In its primary negative usage, it refers to: Christian theological constructs of a site neighboring hell; prison; oblivion or neglect; suspension between two states. In its secondary meaning marked by play, struggle, and pleasure, limbo refers to the black/Caribbean dance where dancers lean backwards, with knees bent to pass below an obstacle or bar that blocks their path. When I was growing up in the Southern U.S., it was a broom handle which was lowered with each procession. As children, we danced singing, "Do the limbo, limbo rock—All away around the clock!" Only the very flexible and very audacious improvisers were determined and managed to last more than several rounds.

Black feminisms (there is no monolithic black feminism) revolve around the varied meanings, both negative and positive, of "limbo." Black feminisms respectively evade and evoke the two types of limbos. Evaded is the relega-

tion of black women's issues to marginal sites where critiques of racial-sexual oppression are distanced from the centers of social and political debate. Like unbaptized children and the non-Christian righteous, black feminisms have been relegated to an outer realm where, while not exactly punished for their sins, they are ghettoized for an alleged poor timing and inability to encounter the "larger paradigms" undergirding existence. Women from oppressed peoples routinely find themselves in liberation limbos. For instance, when Native-American women, who survive the most intense forms of state violence in the U.S., begin to organize the Indigenous Women's Network, they face criticism from some men in their communities through the International Treaty Council and the American Indian Movement, who argue that by dealing with the specificity of their oppression, indigenous women separated themselves from indigenous men and thereby weakened the collective power of Native Americans. Similar accusations have been levied or leveled by black men and women against black feminists. Suspended midway between eurocentric or postmodern feminism and afrocentric masculinism, they are institutionally relegated to the state of oblivion and neglect.

As they interpret and dissect, describe and agitate around human existence via reflections on and interventions by and for black females, African-American feminisms display an agility in paradigm-building and trashing, an imaginative power and material resistance that grant fluidity to bend lower and lower and with limber steps dance past a descending bar of political-intellectual dismissals. Their evocative agency reasserts the centrality of struggles and analyses often passed over in mainstream discourse. Still, in the wake of (feminist) antiblack racism and (black) antifeminism, black feminisms appear to progress only with considerable effort.

CRITICIZING (BLACK) FEMINISMS

Legitimate criticisms of mainstream black feminism include its (neo)liberalism, its failure to sustain economic critiques, its antiradicalism, and its neglect of state violence. Concerning its antiradicalism, some black feminisms elide the radical nature of black women's resistance to state oppression. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* omits black women's associations with the Communists Party, the Black Panther Party, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as well as self-defense organizations from black feminist history and theory. The occlusion of radical praxis is normative in a culture and state where conservatism and liberalism are hegemonic. Black feminist writers' struggles for recognition, diversity, and strategies for dismantling oppression necessitate a self-critical awareness and willingness on the part of literary elites to be reflexive about economic and educational privileges. Having made important contributions to critiques of white (feminist) racism and (black) sexism, black feminisms have offered less focused analyses of class and educational elitism, liberalism, and state nationalism in the general society and among African Americans.

Other accusations leveled by some feminists against black women and black feminisms include the charges that black feminisms speak only to the particular and that black women are, more than their white counterparts, less inclined toward feminism given their allegiance to a romanticized “black community” that privileges males. The criticism that black feminisms are not “feminist” enough simplifies the existential dilemmas of black women’s lives and struggles in a racist state. The liberation of black women as a group rather than as atomized individuals is inseparable from—but not identical with or reducible to—the liberation of their people or communities of origin, what some label a black or an Africana community. With historical, cultural worldviews which privilege ancestors and community, and a historical genocidal diaspora in the Americas, and centuries of antiblack racism from a motley assortment of ethnic groups, black women’s associations and experiences of sexual and gender politics—from exploitation in domestic work and economic inequities to sexual abuse and reproductive rights struggles—will necessarily reflect racist barriers and racialized worldviews. This need not constitute an inherent antifeminism or counterfeminism, although those tendencies exist. Rather it can lead to a unique form of feminism. In their best forms, countering a false unity built on the exclusion of other disenfranchised groups, black feminisms offer new languages for formulating the well-being of “community” and “family,”¹ expanding and redefining liberation politics and rhetoric to address the issues of black women as an outsider group and outsiders within this grouping such as lesbians, prostitutes, bisexual, poor, incarcerated, and immigrant women.

The dismissive by some African-American males that black feminisms are handmaidens to Euro(American)-feminisms, or that black feminisms are not “black” enough, has been widely circulated. Sometimes in their roles as correctives to white racism, some black feminisms have served as the “clean-up woman” or domestic of racial messes and seem overly preoccupied with white, privileged women. Also, in their construction as the source of exotic, emotive stories of colored pain and bizarreness for white consumers, black feminisms have at times been commodified for entertainment. Both reflect the historic functions of the colonized black as servant and entertainer. (That black feminisms are best known, and usually taught, through fiction and film that emphasizes black male/female conflicts such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place*, and Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* has proved a source of contention and criticism.)

These criticisms, that black feminisms divert attention from black liberation (if they are black *feminisms*) or women’s liberation (if they are *black feminisms*) construct walls of isolation. Such criticisms reflect Afrocentric arguments that sexism and misogyny are European construction (imperialism’s patriarchal and racial colonizing of women does not absolve African societies from gender inequities); they also mirror Eurocentric narratives that white civilization rescued black women from the sexual barbarism and gender oppression of their traditional cultures. Both

discourses obscure the complexities of antiracist and antisexist struggles and present a false binary. Ironically, in their antiracist discourse with an interest in multiculturalism, certain forms of black feminism are criticized for oppositional ethnic politics. The assertions that black feminism privileges antiblack racism to reify the polarized binary between “black and white,” making “race” the central issue and thereby deflecting from “universal” feminism or other “ethnic” women, ignores the phenomenon of antiblack violence which cuts across both universality and ethnicity. In the modern and postmodern eras, dark-skinned or black/Indians, Latinas/Chicanas, Asians, and Arabs occupy the lowest strata and contend with an intensity of racialized abuses, economic exploitation, and state violence from which their white or light-skinned “ethnic” counterparts are often spared.

In its attempts to synthesize emancipation theories on race, gender, sexuality and class, black feminisms improvise, constructing integrative analyses in limbos toward their own constructions. Progressive intellectuals have posited that research is mediated by the lived-experience of the scholar, not positivistic scientific objectivity. Confronting or ignoring contemporary intellectual and social crises, theoretical and political advancement will be largely determined by one’s ability to deliver rather than looking backwards for authority or longing for a paradise devoid of traditional high culture.

Ability to deliver will be largely determined by the political, ethical, and intellectual projects. In limbos, the incompatibility of linearity to overlapping and contradictory relations of dominance are witnessed. In this regard, illustrating the intersections of existence, oppression, and freedom with integrative analyses might be one of black feminisms’ most important contributions to liberation movements. In limbos of our own progressive movements, time is not linear. One bends backwards in order to move forwards: the past, present, and future coexist and overlap. For those who are not first born into color and ethnicity, later into an economic class, next into gender socialization, and finally into sexuality, linearity is dysfunctional. Those who are born simultaneously into experiences and relationships shaped, enriched, or vampirized by cultural, economic, and nation-state policies are assaulted by our society’s acquiescence to racism, classism, and (hetero)sexism. In developing a critique of these experiences and relationships, the notion of linear struggle is inadequate and illusory. Linear projections prioritize abstract “primary” over abstract “secondary” oppression. Expressing an agile ability and willingness to grasp a multidimensional world and its multiplicity and intersection of repression, black feminisms usually forgo reified evil and trickle down liberation theories. Rather than issue a critique of a succession of oppressive institutions—“patriarchy,” “white supremacy,” “transnational capitalism,” “colonizing culture,” “homophobia”—most black feminisms examine the simultaneity of oppression and the inter-relatedness of gender, race, and class struggles.

ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS

Struggling for recognition from dominant intellectuals, academic black feminisms vacillate between conservative and progressive interventions. Academics have been accused of “hyperintellectualism,” of reflecting upon abstractions of reality, disdaining and distancing themselves from the ground of everyday life and the specificity of political struggles around labor and racism, immigrant’s and women’s rights. Black feminisms seem an unlikely candidate for the label of disembodied theory, given their largely ethical and pragmatic objectives and accessible language. Although a blueprint for liberation is generally disparaged, there are both a need and demand for functional discourse with a liberating intent that reflects peoples’ material and spiritual battles to survive poverty, drudgery in labor, premature births, and deaths. With women and children of African descent disproportionately in the ranks of the impoverished, malnourished, illiterate, diseased, and dying, many of those struggling to survive and resist destructive conditions are black women and children. A black existence marked by oppression and resistance has historically galvanized and directed black women’s intellectual productions.

Making the contributions of “subaltern” survivors and resisters, making the “invisible” visible has been a good part of the work of black women scholars and writers. Countering the marginalization of women’s voices in academic discourse, women of color have greatly expanded academic discussions and knowledge. Black feminisms’ antiracism makes it quite distinct from academic, nonradical, Euro-feminism or pomofeminism trends towards the erasure of race and racism in constructions of “woman” or the “female body.” Rejecting the concept of women as a “class,” Angela Y. Davis observes that some influential white feminists’ “theories and practice have frequently implied that the purest and most direct challenge to sexism is one exorcised of elements related to racial and economic oppression—as if there were such a phenomenon as abstract womanhood abstractly suffering sexism and fighting back in an abstract historical context” (Davis [1983a]). Likewise, when theories and practice imply that the most effective challenge to racism is one ignorant or dismissive of sexual and economic and gender oppression, other delusions are created—those of “abstract blackness” abstractly suffering racism, devoid of gender, devoid of class, devoid of history; of “abstract impoverishment,” severed from racism and sexism’s effects on economic exploitation, of abstract sexual beings. Abstractions create other sites of limbo in which the specificity of liberation struggles is supplanted by theorizing on the “representative” woman or black or worker—who generally tends not to reflect the lives of women of color or black women.

Despite its slippery footing in academe and seeming dependence upon the favor of Women’s or African-American/Africana Studies programs, black feminist studies have provided new dimensions for the study of women and blacks’ existential intersections of economic, racial, and sexual violence. One case in point is the January 1994 conference, “Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name

1894–1994,” held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the conclusion of the conference, 2,000-plus attendees (most of whom were black women) issued a conference resolution to President Bill Clinton: “86% of black women who voted, voted for the Democratic Party ticket which brought you and Hilary Rodham Clinton to the White House and a Democratic Congress to Washington in 1992...this was the largest proportion of any constituency to vote for your administration.” With copies sent to the Congressional Black, Women, and Hispanic Caucuses, the petition requested the Administration to commission a “Blue Ribbon panel on race relations” building on the 1968 Kerner report, examining that original report and its 1988 review of a diverging America and make recommendations to alleviate “the continuing injuries of racism, sexism and homophobia.” It also asked the Administration to promote black women’s research for the well-being of African-American communities and extend the mandate of the “Glass-Ceiling Commission to explore issues of career advancement for women of color in higher education.” Increased funding for community-based service organizations for poor black families was also requested: “We stress the need to extend economic empowerment and development programs, support service, health care, housing, child care, and education. Women in prison, those with AIDS, and in crisis need special attention.” The petition addressed U.S. domestic and foreign policies, calling for the end of antidemocratic covert actions against Haiti and the restoration of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the Presidency; lifting the embargo against Cuba; as well as U.S. governmental support for the democratic process in South and Southern Africa and aid for Somalia.

Those intellectual, politicized interventions by black women academics and others are essential yet cannot serve as surrogates for political organizing with working-class and impoverished women. In their work, black feminist educators continue to build upon the contributions of their historical predecessors. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s work on black church women notes, blacks who attained higher education, the literate and literary, have since Reconstruction been feted to function as a “talented tenth”—which in the American Home Baptist Missionary Society’s proselytism meant a cadre of managerial race leaders who instilled and disciplined disenfranchised blacks into the rewards of “traditional family values” and a protestant work ethic. A deified black intellectual vanguard was rejected, however, by those who realized its constraint on a transformative praxis and that nonelite blacks sustain communities and social movements. Now many feminists or nonfeminists share an older W.E.B. Du Bois’ reflective rejection of an intellectual elite leadership which he had popularized:

My faith hitherto had been in what I once denominated the talented tenth. I now realize that the ability within a people does not automatically work for its highest salvation...[N]aturally, out of the mass of the working classes, who

know life in its bitter struggle, will continually rise the real, unselfish and clear-sighted leadership. (Du Bois [1952])

The other 90 percent created considerable political space for the talented tenth in education, politics, and business. The majority of social change agents continue to be women working in triple shifts for depressed wages, unpaid childbearing and housework, and community-building voluntarism (although underrepresented in clergy and formal political leadership). In these struggles, which often go undocumented and unnoticed in literary and academic exchanges on existence, black or otherwise, African-American women hold pivotal roles.

EXISTENCE IN GRAY: HISTORICAL POLITICAL STRUGGLES

Between black and white exist curious sites of amnesia, the gray areas surrounding political agency. Amnesia partly stems from the erasure of historical archetypes (particularly those at odds with neoliberal politics) and the erasure of the ways in which black women ancestors historically fought for racial and gender justice. One of the first U.S. women to lecture publicly on political issues and the first published African-American woman political writer, Maria W. Stewart (1803–1869), called for women of African descent to develop their highest intellectual abilities.

Born a free African-American woman in Boston, widowed at an early age, impoverished by white swindlers, and childless, Stewart wrote for *The Liberator*, an abolitionist paper established by David Walker. After Walker's death, as copublisher of *The Liberator* Stewart became noted for an antislavery militancy and religiosity that incensed white racists as well as alarmed Boston's more conservative, free blacks. Her claims to religious authority through conversations with God (Stewart maintained that divine revelations shaped her speeches, writings, and grounded her hope in African liberation) estranged her from the male-dominated church's Paulist scriptures which advocated the subservience of women and their exclusion from ministry. Assuming that the martyrdom which claimed Walker awaited her, Maria Stewart wrote in 1831 that "many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa, and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs...[God] is able to take me to himself, as he did the most noble, fearless, and undaunted David Walker" (Stewart [1987]).

Unlike Walker, Stewart was not murdered.² Her militant public life was, however, cut short by African-Americans: Stewart suffered continuous criticism and censorship from the Bostonian African-American community for violating values of a proper lifestyle for a woman. Proslavery voices cursed her. Bostonian blacks silenced her for violating middle-class bourgeois gender sensibilities of church and society. In "Farewell Address to her Friends in the City of Boston, Delivered September 21, 1833," Stewart castigates those who were trying to curtail her radicalism: "I find it is no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city...[M]y respected friends, let us no longer talk of prej-

udice, till prejudice becomes extinct at home. Let us no longer talk of opposition, till we cease to oppose our own" (Stewart [1987]: 70–1). The "Farewell Address" was her last public speech until the close of the U.S. Civil War (during which Stewart worked as Matron of the freemen's Hospital in Washington, DC, and coordinated refugee camps for African Americans).

Likewise, one might also pull from the gray areas of political memory the work of Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1935). Cooper was ousted from her principalship at the prestigious Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, because of racist and political resentment that emerged from her preparing her black students to attend prestigious white schools such as Harvard rather than follow Booker T. Washington's vocational education mandate. (She herself eventually earned a doctorate from the Sorbonne.) One of three African-American women invited to address the World Congress of Women in 1893, Cooper also addressed the 1900 Pan-African Congress Conference in London, which she helped to organize; five years later she co-founded the colored women's YWCA. In her classic text, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper gages the progress of liberation of Africans not by the elevation or achievements of black elites, particularly those by men, but by the freedom from exploitation of the masses of laborers who worked the longest hours, for the lowest wages, under the most arduous circumstances: "Only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*" (Cooper [1987]: 30–1). Cooper's calls for a mass standard to measure the efficacy and relevance of black praxis go against the tendency to focus on elites and minimize the significance of laborers, of black women who, as change-agents in local churches, schools, streets, farm fields, factories, and prisons, reveal radical and communal traditions of democratic power.

As the lives of Stewart and Cooper exemplify, historical and contemporary black feminisms are tied to African-American struggles. From the nineteenth-century abolitionist movements to the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement, blacks and nonblacks received and shared political training, language, theory, and strategy from and with black women as movements worked to radicalize intellectual and political formations.

Those unfamiliar with black women's radicalism will likely not be well informed on contemporary liberation struggles in the U.S. influenced and shaped by the often unacknowledged contributions of antilynching militant Ida B. Wells-Barnett, civil rights revolutionary Ella Baker, and black liberation militant Assata Shakur. Confronting the marginalization of women leaders and activists in historiography, Delores Williams observes that "By uncovering as much as possible about such female liberation, the womanist begins to understand the relation of black history to the contemporary folk expression: 'If Rosa Parks had not sat down, Martin King would not have stood up'" (1991: 68). More precisely, if Miss Parks had not sat down and later organized with E.D. Nixon, Joanne Robinson, and the

Women's Political Caucus, the Montgomery Improvement Association and its Bus Boycott would not have emerged.

Black women abolitionists, Reconstruction radicals, "Second Reconstruction" civil rights activists, and black movement militants fought against racial and sexual restrictions. Their courageous commitments were responses to the threats against black existence posed under a state built on black enslavement, exploitation, and white colonization.

Today, white supremacy, economic exploitation, and the disenfranchisement of women have mutated rather than disappeared. In the U.S., the black life span, already less than that of whites, continues to decline; whereas black poverty, which is greater than that of whites, is increasing. State policing and protection are as selective and as discriminatory as state punishment and execution. Social, political, economic equality are chimerical rights for black peoples, as is equal protection under the law from racial and sexual violence/exploitation. Contemporary "existence in black" occurs among nations where blackness symbolizes sexual pathology, violence, and criminality, and where racial paranoia constructs a fetish for prison and punishment. These constructions ensure that although most violent attacks tend to occur within one's own ethnic group—for example, the majority of whites are beaten, raped, and robbed by other whites—the dominant image of the batterer, rapist, and thief is "the black," ergo what needs to be disciplined, policed, and punished (including through punitive policies for the poor is, as Fanon observed, *le nègre*).

Historically, invoking "the black" as breeder and instigator of violence conveniently masked "white" and state violence. At the same time that blacks gained notoriety as the most infamous perpetrators of crime in a racialized society, they are given less recognition in anticrime crusades as the victims of violence. Black feminisms that deconstruct "the black" as primitive morally and sexually degenerate and counter the mythology that criminalizes black existence and rationalizes antiblack violence, still must contend with the tendency among African Americans to emphasize the common but sporadic racist violence of police brutality, Klan killings, or hate crimes over the more prevalent racial and sexual violence inflicted by blacks on other blacks.³

CONCLUSION: BLEACHING BODIES

As a preteen in the 1970s, visiting my first big city, L.A., I met an older play-kin who instructed me on smoking, sex, race, and politics. My study, sequestered from family trips to Disneyland, was relegated to our visit to Hollywood's drag strip, hanging out in the neighborhood, or running errands to local stores. The most memorable lesson occurred while my play-kin, with her large Afro, hooped earrings, and dark black skin, reclined one afternoon in a great-aunt's clawfoot, cast-iron tub. The visual memory survived the verbal instruction. With face and knees