PART I

Race and the Critical Space of Black Women's Voices

bell hooks

George Yancy: Over the years, you have used the expression 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' to describe the power structure underlying the social order. Why tie those terms together as opposed to stressing any one of them in isolation?

bell hooks: We can't begin to understand the nature of domination if we don't understand how these systems connect with one another. Significantly, this phrase has always moved me because it doesn't value one system over another. For so many years in the feminist movement, women were saying that gender is the only aspect of identity that really matters, that domination only came into the world because of rape. Then we had so many race-oriented folks who were saying, "Race is the most important thing. We don't even need to be talking about class or gender." So for me, that phrase always reminds me of a global context, of the context of class, of empire, of capitalism, of racism, and of patriarchy. Those things are all linked—an interlocking system.

G. Y.: I've heard you speak many times and I noticed that you do so with a very keen sense of humor. What is the role of humor in your work?

b. h.: We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor. Every time we see the left or any group trying to move forward politically in a radical way, when they're humorless, they fail. Humor is essential to the integrative balance that we need to deal with diversity and difference and the building of community. For example, I love to be in conversation with Cornel West. We always go high and we go low, and we always bring the joyful humor in. The last talk he and I gave together, many people were upset because we were silly together. But I consider it a high holy calling that we can be humorous together. How many times do we see an African-American man and an African-American woman talking together, critiquing one another, and yet having delicious, humorous delight? It's a miracle.

G. Y.: What is your view of the feminist movement today, and how has your relationship to it changed over time?

b. h.: My militant commitment to feminism remains strong, and the main reason is that feminism has been the contemporary social movement that has most embraced self-interrogation. When we, women of color, began to tell white women that females were not a homogenous group, that we had to face the reality of racial difference, many white women stepped up to the plate. I'm a feminist in solidarity with white women today for that reason, because I saw these women grow in their willingness to open their minds and change the whole direction of feminist thought, writing, and action. This continues to be one of the most remarkable, awesome aspects of the contemporary feminist movement. The left has not done this, radical Black men have not done this, where someone comes in and says, "Look, what you're pushing, the ideology, is all messed up. You've got to shift your perspective." Feminism made that paradigm shift, though not without hostility, not without some women feeling we were forcing race on them. This change still amazes me.

G. Y.: What should we do in our daily lives to combat, in that phrase of yours, the power and influence of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? What can be done on the proverbial ground?

b. h.: I live in a small, predominantly white town in the Bible Belt. Rather than saying, "What would Jesus do?," I always think, "What does Martin Luther King want me to do today?" Then I decide what Martin Luther King wants me to do today is to go out into the world and in every way that I can, small and large, build a beloved community. As a Buddhist Christian, I also think of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who talks about throwing a pebble into the water, and while it may not go far in the beginning, it will ripple out. So, every day, I'm challenging myself. "What are you doing, bell, for the creation of the beloved community?" Because that's the underground, local insistence that I be a fundamental part of the world that I'm in. I've been to the Farmer's Market, I've been to the church bazaar this morning. I really push myself to relate to people, that is, people that I might not feel as comfortable relating to. There are many Kentucky hillbilly white persons who look at me with contempt. They cannot turn me around. I am doing the same thing as those civil rights activists, those Black folk and those white folk who sat in at those diners and who marched.

It's about humanization. And I can't think of another way to imagine how we're going to get out of the crisis of racial hatred if it's not through the will to humanize. Personally, I draw incredible strength from the images of Black people and white people in social movements. I personally did not think *Selma* was a great film, but the strength that I gained from the film was thinking about all of those people, those white folks who see *Selma* and say, "My God, this is unjust! Let's go do our part." And it's awesome when we're called. There

are many times in this life of mine when I ask myself, "What are you willing to give your life for, bell? When are you willing to get out in the streets knowing that you're risking your health?" And if those older Black women who were there in Selma, Alabama, can do this stuff, it just reminds you how incredibly vital this history of struggle has been toward allowing you and me to be in the state of privilege that we live within today.

G. Y.: That point hits home, especially as I think about my own intellectual identity and yet often fail to think about the privilege that comes with it.

b. h.: I am a total intellectual. I tell people that intellectual work is the laboratory that I go into every day. Without all of those people engaged in civil rights struggles, I would not be here in this laboratory. I mean, how many Black women have had the good fortune to write more than thirty books? When I wake up at four or five in the morning, I do my prayers and meditations, and then I have what I call my "study hours." I try to read a book a day, a nonfiction book, and then I get to read total trash for the rest of the day. That's luxury, that's privilege of a high order—the privilege to think critically, and then the privilege to be able to act on what you know.

G. Y.: Absolutely. You've talked about how theory can function as a place of healing. Can you say more about that?

b. h.: I always start with children. Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them. I think that theory is essentially a way to make sense of the world. As a gifted child growing up in a dysfunctional family, where giftedness was not appreciated, what held me above water was the idea of thinking through, "Why are Mom and Dad the way they are?" And those are questions that are at the heart of critical thinking. And that's why I think critical thinking and theory can be such a source of healing. It moves us forward. And, of course, I don't know about other thinkers and writers, but I have the good fortune every day of my life to have somebody contacting me, either on the streets or by mail, telling me about how my work has changed their life, how it has enabled them to go forward. And what greater gift to be had as a thinker-theorist, than that?

G. Y.: How do you prevent yourself from being seduced by that? I think that there is that temptation by intellectuals/scholars, who are well known, to be seduced into a state of narcissism. How do you resist that?

b. h.: First of all, I live in a city of twelve thousand people where most of them don't have a clue about who bell hooks is for the most part, or where someone asks, "Is bell hooks a person?" There is humility in the life that I lead, because one thing about having my given name, Gloria Jean, which is such a great Appalachian hillbilly name, is that I'm not walking around in my daily life usually as bell hooks. I'm walking around in the dailiness of my life as just the ordinary Gloria Jean. That's changing a bit in the little town that I live

in because more of me as a thinker, writer, and artist is coming out into the world of the town that I live in.

I think that I've been coming out more and more in the fact that the work that I'm writing is about spirituality, because one of the central aspects that has kept me grounded in my life has been spirituality. Growing up, when my mom used to tell me, "You're really smart, but you're not better than anyone else," I used to think, "Why does she go on about that?" And, of course, now I see why. It was to keep me grounded and to keep me respecting the different ways of knowing and the knowledges of other people, and not thinking "Oh, I am *so* smart," which I think can happen to many well-known intellectuals.

I always kind of chuckle at people labeling me a public intellectual. I chuckle because people used to say, "How have you written so much?" and I'd say, "By not having a life." There is nothing public about the energy, the discipline, and solitude it takes to produce so much writing. I think of public intellectuals as very different, because I think that they're airing their work for that public engagement. Really, in all the years of my writing, that was not my intention. It was to produce theory that people could use. I have this phrase that I use, 'working with the work.' So if somebody comes up to me, and they have one of those bell hooks books that's abused and battered, and every page is underlined, I know they've been working with the work. And that's where it is for me.

G. Y.: Is there a connection between teaching as a space of healing and your understanding of love?

b. h.: Well, I believe whole-heartedly that the only way out of domination is love, and the only way into really being able to connect with others, and to know how to be, is to be participating in every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love, and that includes teaching. I don't do a lot of teaching these days. I am semiretired. Because, like any act of love, it takes a lot of your energy.

I was just talking with a neighbor about what it feels like to be working at a need-based college like Berea, where none of our students pay tuition, and many of them come from the hills of Appalachia. We often get discouraged any time we feel that our college isn't living up to its history of integration and of racial inclusion. But then we'd see we have students who are doing such amazing things, from the hills of Virginia, or Tennessee. You just know, I am right where I am meant to be, doing what I should be doing, and giving and receiving the love that comes anytime we do that work well.

G. Y.: You've conceptualized love as the opposite of estrangement. Can you say something about that?

b. h.: When we engage love as action, you can't act without connecting. I often think of that phrase, *only connect*. In terms of white supremacy right now, for instance, the police stopped me a few weeks ago here in Berea, because I was doing something wrong. I initially felt fear, and I was thinking about the fact

that in all of my sixty-some years of my life in this country, I have never felt afraid of policemen before, but I feel afraid now. He was just total sweetness. And yet I thought, what a horrible change in our society that that level of estrangement has taken place that was not there before.

I know that the essential experience of Black men and women has always been different, but from the time I was a girl to now, I never thought the police were my enemy. Yet, what Black woman witnessing the incredible abuse of Sandra Bland can't shake in her boots if she's being stopped by the police? When I was watching that video, I was amazed the police didn't shoot her on the spot! White supremacist white people are crazy.

I used to talk about patriarchy as a mental illness of disordered desire, but white supremacy is equally a serious and profound mental illness, and it leads people to do completely and utterly insane things. I think one of the things that is going on in our society is the normalization of mental illness, and the normalization of white supremacy, and the evocation and the spreading of this is part of that mental illness. So remember that we are a culture in crisis. Our crisis is as much a spiritual crisis as it is a political crisis, and that's why Martin Luther King Jr. was so profoundly prescient in describing how the work of love would be necessary to have a transformative impact.

G. Y.: And of course, that doesn't mean that you don't find an important place in your work for rage, as in your book *Killing Rage*?

b. h.: Oh, absolutely. The first time that I got to be with Thich Nhat Hanh, I had just been longing to meet him. I was like, I'm going to meet this incredibly holy man. On the day that I was going to him, every step of the way I felt that I was encountering some kind of racism or sexism. When I got to him, the first thing out of my mouth was "I am *so angry!*" And he, of course, Mr. Calm himself, Mr. Peace, said, "Well, you know, hold on to your anger, and use it as compost for your garden." And I thought, "Yes, yes, I can do that!" I tell that story to people all the time. I was telling him about the struggles I was having with my male partner at the time and he said, "It is OK to say I want to kill you, but then you need to step back from that, and remember what brought you to this person in the first place." And I think that if we think of anger as compost, we think of it as energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good. It is an empowering force. If we don't think about it that way, it becomes a debilitating and destructive force.

G. Y.: Since you mentioned Sandra Bland, and there are so many other cases that we can mention, how can we use the trauma that Black people are experiencing, or reconfigure that trauma into compost? How can Black people do that? What does that look like therapeutically or collectively?

b. h.: We have to be willing to be truthful. And to be truthful, we have to say, the problem that Black people face, the trauma of white supremacy in our lives, is not limited to police brutality. That's just one aspect. I often say that

the issue for young Black males is the street. If you only have the streets, you encounter violence on all sides: Black on Black violence, the violence of addiction, and the violence of police brutality. So the question is why at this stage of our history, with so many wealthy Black people, and so many gifted Black people, is it that we don't provide a place other than the streets for Black males? And it is so gendered, because the street, in an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, is male, especially when it is dark. There is so much feeling of being lost that it is beyond the trauma of racism. It is the trauma of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, because poverty has become infinitely more violent than it ever was when I was a girl. You lived next door to very poor Black people, but they had very joyful lives. That's not the poverty of today.

G. Y.: How is the poverty of today different?

b. h.: Let's face it, one of the things white people gave us when they gave us integration was full access to the tormenting reality of desire, and the expectation of constant consumption. So part of the difference of poverty today is this sort of world of fantasy—fantasizing that you'll win the lottery, fantasizing that money will come. I always cling to Lorraine Hansberry's Mama saying in *A Raisin in the Sun*, "Since when did money become life?" I think that with the poverty of my growing up that I lived with and among, we were always made to feel like money is not what life is all about. That's the total difference for everyone living right now, because most people in our culture believe money is everything. That is the big tie, the connecting tie to Black, white, Hispanic, native people, Asian people—the greed and the materialism that we all invest in and share.

G. Y.: When you make that claim, I can see some readers saying that bell is pathologizing Black spaces.

b. h.: As I said, we have normalized mental illness in this society. So it's not the pathologizing of Black spaces; it's saying that the majority of cultural spaces in our society are infused with pathology. That's why it's so hard to get out of it, because it has become the culture that is being fed to us every day. None of us can escape it unless we do so by conscious living and conscious loving, and that's become harder for everybody. I don't have a problem stating the fact that trauma creates wounds, and most of our wounds are not healed as African-Americans. We're not really different in that way from all the others who are wounded. Let's face it—wounded white people frequently can cover up their wounds, because they have greater access to material power.

I find it fascinating that every day you go to the supermarket, and you look at the people, and you look at us, and you look at all of this media that is parading the sorrows and the mental illnesses of the white rich in our society. And it's like everybody just skips over that. Nobody would raise the question, "Why don't we pathologize the rich?" We actually believe that they suffer

from mental illness, and that they deserve healing. The issue for us as Black people is that very few people feel that we deserve healing. Which is why we have very few systems that promote healing in our lives. The primary system that ever promoted healing in Black people is the church, and we see what is going on in most churches today. They've become an extension of that material greed.

One of the reasons for why so many Black rebel antiracist movements failed is because they didn't take care of the home as a site of resistance.

G. Y.: As you shared being stopped by police, I thought of your book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, where you describe whiteness as a site of terror. Has that changed for you?

b. h.: I don't think that has changed for most Black people. That particular essay, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," talks about whiteness, the Black imagination, and how many of us live in fear of whiteness. And I emphasize the story about the policeman because, for many of us, that fear of whiteness has intensified. I think that white people, for the most part, never think about Black people wanting to be in Black-only spaces, because we do not feel safe.

In my last book, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, I really wanted to raise and problematize the question: Where do we feel safe as Black people? I definitely return to the home as a place of spiritual possibility, home as a holy place.

I bought my current house from a conservative white male capitalist who lives across the street from me, and I'm so happy in my little home. I tell people, when I open the doors of my house, it's like these arms come out, and they're just embracing me. I think that is part of our radical resistance to the culture of domination. I know that I'm not who he imagined in this little house. He imagined a nice white family with two kids, and I think on some level it was very hard for him to sell his house to a radical Black woman, a radical Black feminist woman. I think all of us, in terms of houses, have our idea, when we love our home, of who we want to be in it. But I think Black folks in general across class have to restore that sense of resistance in the home.

When we look at the history of antiracist rebels among Black people, so much organizing happened in people's homes. I always think about Mary McLeod Bethune : "Let's just start the college in your living room." Self-determination really does begin at home. We're finding out that one of the reasons for why so many Black rebel antiracist movements failed is because they didn't take care of the home as a site of resistance. So, you have very wounded people trying to lead movements in a world beyond the home, but they were simply not psychologically fit to lead.

G. Y.: That's an important segue to the question about your concept of "soul healing" with respect to Black men. What does soul healing among Black men

look like? And what role do you think Black women play in helping to nurture that soul healing?

b. h.: Every now and then, George, I write a book that hardly anyone pays any attention to. One such book in my life is my book on Black masculinity, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. An aspect of that book that I found deeply moving is when I use the metaphor of Isis and Osiris. Osiris is attacked, and his body parts are spread all over. Isis, the stern mother, sister, and lover, goes and fetches those parts and puts him back together again. That sort of metaphor of harmony and friction that can be soul-healing for Black people is so real to me. Often I feel sad, because I think we are in a culture that keeps Black men and women further apart from one another, rather than meeting us in that place of shared history, shared story.

I am so grateful for the Black male friends in my life. Like so many professional Black women, I don't have a partner. I would like to have one, but I've been grateful for having conscious, caring, Black male comrades and friends, who keep me from any kind of integration of Black masculinity, who just keep me in this space of loving Blackness.

To have that kind of bonding is precious. These are the constructive moments of our time, and they're not televised. When Malcolm X said we have to see each other with new eyes, I think that's where self-determination begins and how we are with one another. Let's face it, so many Black males and females have suffered mental abandonment, and more than police brutality, that's the core for many of us of our trauma. Betrayal is always about abandonment. And many of us have been emotionally abandoned. These are the wounds we have yet to correctly attend to so both Black children and biracial children can have the opportunity to truly care for themselves in a way that's optimal for all.

G. Y.: How are your Buddhist practices and your feminist practices mutually reinforcing?

b. h.: Well, I would have to say my Buddhist Christian practice challenges me, as does feminism. Buddhism continues to inspire me because there is such an emphasis on practice. What are you doing? Right livelihood, right action. We are back to that self-interrogation that is so crucial. It's funny that you would link Buddhism and feminism, because I think one of the things that I'm grappling with at this stage of my life is how much of the core grounding in ethical-spiritual values has been the solid ground on which I stood. That ground is from both Buddhism and Christianity, and then feminism that helped me as a young woman to find and appreciate that ground. The spirituality piece came up for me in my love of Beat poetry. I came to Buddhism through the Beats, through Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac—they all sort of gave me this other space of groundedness.

I talk about spirituality more now than ever before, because I see my students suffering more than ever before, especially women students who feel like so much is expected of them. They've got to be the equals of men, but then they've got to be submissive if they are heteronormative; they have to find a partner. It's just so much demand that has led them to depression, to addiction, or suicide. And it's amazing how spirituality grounds them.

Feminism does not ground me. It is the discipline that comes from spiritual practice that is the foundation of my life. If we talk about what a disciplined writer I have been and hope to continue to be, that discipline starts with a spiritual practice. It's just every day, every day, every day.

Patricia Hill Collins

George Yancy: Speak to the contemporary importance of Black feminist thought and its relevance to making our society aware of the *intersectional* dimensions of Black women's oppression.

Patricia Hill Collins: Black feminist thought centers on a few simple ideas. At its essence, Black feminist thought examines how Black women's ideas, experiences and actions reflect their social location within racism, sexism, class exploitation and similar intersecting systems of oppression. These intersecting oppressions structure social inequalities, which in turn result in specific social issues such as wage inequality, stereotypical and demeaning media images, limited educational opportunities, and differential access to health services. Because individuals, as well as the social groups to which they belong, are differentially positioned within power relations, their analyses of, experiences with and actions in response to social inequalities vary greatly. Drawing from the distinctive social location of African-American women at the intersection of racism, class exploitation, sexism, and heterosexism as systems of power, Black feminism argues that trying to address the social problems that Black women encounter through mono-categorical lenses is inadequate.

In the United States, Black feminism has highlighted the particular intersections of race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality. Yet within this broader intersectional framework, race and racism constitute foundational systems that, by law or by custom, have regulated everything from where African-American women could live, the schools they attend, the opportunities they encounter, to whether they could keep their children. Black feminist thought thus brings a more complex view of racism to the forefront of analysis, as well as how a more complex understanding of racism might shape social problems and solutions to them. Yet the core ideas of Black feminist thought concerning intersecting power relations, complex forms of social inequality

and the particularities of social problems can be and have been broadly applied. Specifically, the saliency of particular intersecting power relations reflects particular histories. Across diverse social contexts, varying combinations of ethnicity, religion, age, and nationality are all possible.

Many people think that Black feminist thought is primarily for and about African-American women. Black women are at the center of Black feminism, yet the ideas of Black feminist thought have travelled far beyond the forms they've taken within the US context. The term *intersectionality* has been closely associated with US Black feminism, in part because African-American women have consistently advanced this interpretive framework as a way of thinking more expansively about inequality. Yet intersectionality is applicable beyond the experiences of African-American women. The tools of intersectional analysis, with its emphasis on intersecting systems of power as foundational to social justice, appear within such contexts as diverse as global Human Rights initiatives, within social media, across academic fields, as well as within policy venues.

Rather than seeing Black women primarily as victims of oppression, a broader intersectional lens also examines Black women's actions as political actors in resisting multiple oppressions. Black feminism exists not simply to document oppression, but also to do something about it. Rather than being a victim-claiming discourse that teaches Black women how oppressed they really are, Black feminism aims to empower Black women by showing all the ways that Black women have resisted oppression.

Black women's resistance to intersecting oppressions can take multiple forms. It can be something as simple as my mother's insistence that I needed to go to school every day. She convinced me that reading was fundamental and that, although she didn't say it, words could serve as powerful weapons against racism and sexism. Through their activities as mothers, artists, grandmothers, teachers, community other-mothers, intellectuals, and leaders, numerous Black women have taken on the task of nurturing children of African descent and carrying the weight for assaults on Black populations. For example, African-American women who show a powerful commitment to their families in the face of policies of the mass incarceration of their sons, brothers, and grandsons exemplify this resistance. Most understand on some level how power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality coalesce in shaping not only their own experiences as African-American women but also those around them.

G. Y.: In your book, *Black Feminist Thought*, you write, "One key feature about the treatment of Black women in the nineteenth century was how their bodies were objects of display. In the antebellum American South white men did not have to look at pornographic pictures of women because they could become voyeurs of Black women on the auction block." In the various ways in which Tennis player Serena Williams, for example, has been the object of racist and

sexist caricature, one might argue that she has been returned to a symbolic "auction block" despite her success and athletic genius. In what ways do you think Black women, in the twenty-first century, continue to be objects of sexual oppression?

P. H. C.: Because I don't routinely separate out racial oppression and sexual oppression, it's hard to parse out the specific effects of sexism. I'll begin to answer this question by examining how the body politics that construct ideas about Black femininity and Black masculinity are central to intersecting systems of oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Privileged, straight white men encounter a distinctive form of body politics that ironically disembodies them by attributing characteristics such as intelligence and leadership ability to those inhabiting these idealized white, straight male bodies. People of color and women encounter a different body politics, one that attributes characteristics such as lack of intelligence, hypersexuality, and a lack of leadership ability to those who are ostensibly ruled by their female and/or colored bodies. An intersectional framework provides a more finely-tuned analysis of how diverse social locations contribute to the different body politics.

For example, young African-American men and women living in poor or working-class urban neighborhoods encounter an historically specific form of body politics that reflects their placement within intersecting oppressions—how police, teachers, social workers, and judges perceive the bodies of young Black people contributes to the gender-specific treatment they receive. The easiest way to see the workings of body politics is to consider changing places with someone who inhabits a different body. How many white men would consider changing places with Black women, or Black straight men with Black lesbians? Would they recognize themselves as the person they understand themselves to be if their lived experiences occurred a different body?

Like most African-American women, for reasons of survival, Serena Williams has developed her own interpretations of the body politics that permeate racism, sexism, heterosexism and class exploitation. In this context, the issue of representations of Serena Williams is more complex than her being watched on an auction block by consumers who fetishize her body as a pornographic object. Certainly some viewers will do this, but contemporary mass media has facilitated new understandings of auction blocks and viewers who enjoy them as entertainment. In *Black Feminist Thought*, I wrote about the power of controlling images that aim to influence how we think about each other's and our own bodies. Controlling images are most effective when they create pornographic representations of African-Americans that in turn dehumanize Black people. Yet African-American women who are armed with an analysis of how controlling images work in shaping our daily experiences often bring different analyses to the same set of images and, via these oppositional interpretations, undercut the power of controlling images.

The case of actual Black people who were displayed on auction blocks during slavery and of representations of Black people within contemporary mass media spectacles of sports in particular resemble one another, yet they are not the same. First, Serena Williams and her sister, Venus Williams retain their agency in how they take the stage. Over the course of their careers, they have consistently worked to strip the tennis court of its power to function as a "symbolic auction block." Venus and Serena Williams reject the uniformity of tennis whites, choosing instead bright colors, unusual outfits, and ostensibly black hairstyles such as African-influenced beads and colorful weaves. The Williams sisters have rejected the social scripts of how women tennis players should look and perform. Neither Venus nor Serena can hide the fact that they are Black women, nor do they try. They are strong and athletic. And they win. There's visible agency in all of their choices. This was not the case for enslaved African women. The important idea here is that ideas and images do not "make" anyone do anything. Society may provide social scripts and derogatory interpretations of how Black women are supposed to look and act if they want to be successful. Yet it's up to Black women whether we choose to believe and act on them.

Second, by claiming control over her own image while on the court, Serena Williams demonstrates her resistance to longstanding body politics in women's tennis. We will never know with certainty how the women on the actual auction block felt about their nakedness and treatment and what strategies they deployed to protect their dignity. Yet, because the awareness of always being under surveillance has long been a core theme within Black feminist thought, we do know much about how contemporary African-American women use the inordinate attention given to their bodies in public space. The Williams sisters have broken new ground in women's tennis, but they are not alone. Popular culture icons such as Nicki Minaj, Viola Davis, Beyoncé Knowles, and Janelle Monae all claim their representations in public space and use that space differently. Behind the scenes, the cultural production of African-American women artists and filmmakers such as Shonda Rhimes turn traditional scripts concerning Black womanhood on their heads. Serena Williams is but one figure in this universe of African-American women who lay claim to representational space.

Third, Serena did not prevail in women's tennis as a solitary individual. Venus and Serena Williams both competed and won. Neither could be discredited as the exceptional individual—here were *two* exceptional individuals. I suspect that because they had each other, the Williams sisters were better able to ward off the crippling effects of hypersurveillance and the negative treatment both encountered during their long and stellar careers. Serena's success is her own, but she did not do it alone. Moreover, Serena and Venus Williams may be sisters, but they are also quite different from one another. As individuals, they each unsettle notions of the exceptional Black woman who

must hew to one set of standards for acceptance. Each sister is the exception to the rule that the other seemingly invokes.

The case of the Williams sisters suggests that Black women's resistance to oppression generally, and the hypersurveillance of mass media venues, can occur in public areas with longstanding rules of body politics. There is something empowering about knowing the history of one's group, because it helps make sense of the present. For example, Venus and Serena Williams play championship tennis in part because they are talented, work hard, and show a passion for their sport, and in part because they are mentally equipped to reject the "symbolic auction block." But as young Black women, they knew that they would be judged by a different set of standards. They seemingly learned not to take the racism and sexism that they experienced personally because the differential treatment they received had little to do with them as individuals. In this context, their brilliance within women's tennis by challenging the body politics of championship tennis has also redefined representations of excellence.

G. Y.: Define how you understand an Afrocentric feminist perspective and how it functions as a critical framework for resisting and fighting against such oppressive assumptions about Black women.

P. H. C.: I don't use the term 'Afrocentric feminist perspective' any more, in part, because the term 'Afrocentric' became redefined and subsequently devalued in the 1990s in ways that didn't resemble my understanding of the concept. My original use referred to cultural continuities that were taken up differently by people of African descent in a diasporic context in response to heterogeneous experiences with colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. This usage positions African-American women's experiences in relationship to those of Black women in the Caribbean, Latin America, especially Brazil, continental Africa, and Black diasporic populations in Europe. It focuses on how culture can empower and draws upon the work of complex approaches to culture of Frantz Fanon and similar anticolonial theorists. In the face of structural oppressions, culture can become a weapon, but it can also become a confining straightjacket if understood as a static bundle of performed traditions. Unfortunately some strands of Afrocentric thinking in the US embraced static notions of black authenticity that manufactured ideas about a glorious African past that was more imagined than real. Unfortunately, these strands also incorporated patriarchal and heterosexist ideas that I categorically reject.

I also have moved away from the phrase because my own thinking has evolved, in part because Black feminists in the late twentieth century were successful in carving out a space for Black feminist thought; and in part because poststructuralist social theory offered a set of conceptual tools for examining constructed social realities generally, and the meaning of Blackness. In my earlier work, I was concerned with the political difficulities of carving out a

clear space for African-American women to do intellectual work. Racism operated by categorizing Black women as inferior and then dismissing our ideas and experiences. We had to create the conditions that made our own intellectual production possible. I wrote the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought* in that narrow context. In contrast, the current expansive space enjoyed by contemporary Black women to critically engage a host of issues speaks to the success of earlier struggles for voice.

One no longer has to refute claims that anything associated with Blackness is worthless. Now there is space to analyze varying understandings of Blackness, including Afrocentric approaches. I now see Blackness as a political category, one that carries cultural meaning but that cannot be reduced to culture itself. The idea of Blackness is clearly tied to racism—there were no populations of actual Black people before slavery, colonialism and imperialism. The varying ethnicities of African descent carried distinctive names and cultures. Blackness emerges in the context of white supremacy, yet has never been a mere reaction to racism. Instead, Blackness has carried, since its inception, inherently political meanings. By queering categories of power, poststructuralism provides a vocabulary for examining hegemonic understandings of Blackness and how Black people shape interpretions of Blackness from one context to the next. Given the scope of lived experience with white supremacy and the depth of intellectual tools that are now available, performing some version of an authentic Afrocentric identity grounded in a cultural African identity seems ill equipped to handle contemporary social problems.

Cultural continuities, an idea that is central to Afrocentric analysis, are important. Yet when it comes to understanding Blackness as a political entity, continuities of Black social movements and of Black activism may be even more significant. A new generation of Black women has made real strides in applying Black feminism to contemporary social, economic and political challenges. The field of Black women's studies has progressed to the point where a new generation of young Black women embrace heterogeneous understandings of Blackness, including Afrocentrism, and use the tools of Black feminism to shape their contemporary political activism. Many of these women have moved beyond misguided views that view feminism as the property of white women or Afrocentrism as the litmus test for authentic Black womanhood. The idea of women's empowerment expressed within transnational feminism is rapidly putting the white/Black version of feminism honed within a US- or European-based race-relations framework to rest. In its place, a Black feminism that embraces a critical intersectional framework has the potential to offer much in challenging not only African-American women's oppression but also global injustices. Political resistance to social injustice as understood through intersectional frameworks is emerging as one important dimension of a Black diasporic feminism that is actively engaged in decolonizing thought and practice.

In the US, the emergence of visible political activism by young African-American women and their allies caught many by surprise. The tremendous growth of grassroots organizations for social justice such as the Black Youth Project 100 in Chicago or the Black Lives Matter Movement speaks to the aspirations of a new generation of Black people for equity and equality. Yet media coverage of this activism routinely depicts African-American women as the penultimate victims of police brutality, poor schooling, and limited job opportunities and looks to men as leaders of social movement organizations. In this context, intersectionality serves as a corrective to either/or thinking that reduces complex ideas to a matter of simple choice of race over gender or vice versa. Stated differently, elevating Black men above Black women, or straight Black people above LGBTQ people is unlikely to bring social justice to anyone.

Today, the Black Lives Matter movement is still in its infancy. Yet its four-year emergence in 2012 from a hashtag responding to the death of Trayvon Martin to its organizational reponses to urban unrest in Ferguson, Missouri (2014) and Baltimore, Maryland (2015), shows its commitment to resisting and fighting public policies and representations that derogate Black people. Moreover, since African-American women constitute a substantial part of this movement, both as participants in local struggles and as leaders of grassroots initiatives and the national organization, the Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies the ways in which intersectionality contributes to contemporary Black feminist projects.

G. Y.: Speaking of the Black Lives Matter movement, what do we say to mothers of Black sons who constantly fear the possibility that their sons could be another Trayvon Martin or Tamir Rice? It seems to be that mothers of Black sons are experiencing forms of trauma that will need to be addressed.

P. H. C.: I think the issue is less what the assumed "we" of academics, policy makers, community leaders, or political pundits say *to* Black women, women of color, mothers of Black children, poor people, and similarly located groups who care about Black youth, than what this group can say to the seeming experts about the routinized violence that targets Black youth. The experts on any given topic, in this case, the challenges that face the mothers of Black sons, or daughters for that matter, need not be the army of academics who have claimed expertise about race, gender, family, trauma, and a host of topics. The cottage industry of pundits on talk radio and television are not much help either. My sense of the Black Lives Matter movement, for all its heterogeneity and growing pains, is that everyday people who embrace the projects that are the bedrock of the Black Lives Matter movement recognize that they are the "experts" on their own lives. They exemplify identity politics, the idea of critically analyzing and speaking from the specifics of one's social location, that constitutes one fundamental tenet of Black feminism itself.

The Black Lives Matter movement challenges the social hierarchies that produce experts and victims in order to build new intellectual and political communities. Black feminist thought and intersectionality thus directly influence the Black Lives Matter movement. An intersectional framework is rarely decontextualized—one need be neither a mother nor African-American to be concerned about the precarious status of Black boys and youth in the United States. Mothers of Black boys are front-line actors and, as such, have a distinctive standpoint on the challenges that face their sons. The question is more one of who has their backs, not whose latest book on their lives reaches the *New York Times* best-seller list.

The vast majority of Black boys are raised by their Black mothers, but not all Black youth live in African American families. Many Black youth are raised by their grandparents, their fathers, other relatives, the state or are in foster care. Still other Black youth live in multiracial, multiethnic families. Despite this variability, Black mothers not only carry a disproportionate responsibility for protecting their children from racial oppression, they see how racial oppression affects their sons and daughters differently. Charged with helping their children live to adulthood, Black mothers confront the vulnerabilities that their LGBTQ children face. Some Black mothers living in poverty have gone under, whereas others have found a way to "make a way out of no way." African-American mothers of Black children can draw on prior generations' experiences with navigating the challenges of white supremacy—Black mothers have always had to fear for our children.

Black children and youth in the US, especially those who are poor and working class and who live in urban areas, experience overt or subtle forms of macro- or microaggressions that limit their opportunities. Regardless of social class, Black youth are pressured to go to their assigned places. Adolescent boys and young men on the street encounter a heightened and often tragic version of these general social relations. Specifically, differential policing contributes to their being far more likely to have criminal records than other groups, and to be injured or killed by police. Adolescent girls and young women are differently vulnerable; they encounter gender-specific yet equally harmful mechanisms of enforcement. Sexual assault of young Black girls in private spaces of families, churches, and communities, often by the very people who should be protecting them, can leave wounds that are just as damaging as the bruises on young Black men who have been victimized by the police. Many African-American mothers sense these dangers that lie ahead for their children.

Albeit a much smaller group, White mothers of Black and/or biracial children encounter a different set of issues, especially those who are middle class. White, middle-class mothers are more likely to have resources that provide important forms of protection for their children, yet neither white parents nor money provide the full level of protection of having white skin. Many white mothers are surprised by the differential albeit often more subtle treatment

their Black and/or biracial children receive, even in the best of neighborhoods and schools. The same gender-specific processes affect their children, not because people actively discriminate against them. Rather, the seemingly hardwired residue of racism makes their children vulnerable as well. The fact of Blackness in the US means that if you are obviously identifiable as Black, Latino, and/or Muslim, if you are young, and male, and are in the wrong place at the wrong time, you are at risk.

When will American adults begin to see that the current treatment of children constitutes a failure of the democratic possibilities of the American Dream? Placing Black children in the precarious position of fearing for their lives from one generation to the next impoverishes us all. No child should live in fear and poverty; the fact that children do so in a global context, especially children of color, is more than a trauma for those who love them—it is a tragedy.

G. Y.: You've discussed the importance of love in reference to the work of June Jordon, Katie G. Cannon, and Toni Morrison. What does political work look like when it is fueled by love?

P. H. C.: My comments about the kinds of advocacy we must do on behalf of Black children and youth, children and youth of color, and children living in poverty stems from this kind of deep love. The notion of privatized love, of seeing one's own child as one's own private property to do with whatever one wishes, contributes to a host of social problems.

I aim to draw upon traditions among African-American women of caring for the community's children, a commitment to youth and the next generation that is fueled by a form of love. I remain awed by what Black women have and can do on behalf of children. This is a politics that stems not solely from the intellect, but from the heart. It can be a focused, razor-sharp analysis where a Black mother confronts an uninformed and unsympathetic teacher because her child's future is at stake; or acts of organized political activism, as is the case in the work of Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and other important yet-lesser-known figures of the Civil Rights Movement. Neither romantic nor sentimental, this kind of love is fueled by a passion for social justice.

The problem is that far too few of us go above and beyond what is expected. This kind of love can easily slide into exploitation, one where everyone expects African-American women to take care of others before they care for themselves, with little reciprocity in mind. I am heartened to hear the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement raise issues of self-care. They realize that they cannot continue their political work that is grounded in this kind of love without the support of allies, friends, colleagues, and communities; they cannot sustain political work that is not fueled by love.

G. Y.: You've also talked about the importance of spirituality. In *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, you write, "Spirituality broadly

defined continues to move countless African-American women like Sojourner Truth to struggle in everyday life."[1] In what way does spirituality play a role within your scholarship, your life?

P. H. C.: There are many forms of spirituality, some religiously inspired, others less so. The term 'spirituality' is not one that I apply to my everyday life or to my scholarship. I have a deep respect for people who manage to claim forms of spirituality that work for them, yet when it comes to my work, I aim to retain space that can accommodate womanist theologians, Muslim clerics, Christian evangelicals and atheists. Any system of ideas that so powerfully draws people into political engagement cannot be uncritically censured and condemned or, alternately, uncritically followed as truth.

I do think that living by ethical principles is important and that this notion of ethics differs from general understandings of spirituality. Stated differently, I see a third space between the secularism of the the academy and the religiosity of oppressed peoples who often call upon a Supreme Being to get through times of trouble. In my own work, I rely on a short list of ethical principles to shape my everyday decision-making. Social justice is one of them. I'm especially drawn to Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Pauli Murray, and similar Black women intellectual-activists who have expressed a passion for justice. The idea of justice was not a philosophical construct, but was something that permeated their everyday lives. They breathed life into the idea of social justice by the actions they took in their everyday lives. This perspective draws upon experience as the crucible for testing beliefs. I see ethical work as neither a dogma of applying a theology or ideology to society and following the rules, nor as a way of working that is untethered from ethical considerations.

G. Y.: What are some conceptual gaps and problems vis-à-vis the sociological imagination that you would like to see critically engaged when it comes to the issue of race in America. Of course, I'm thinking of race through an intersectional lens.

P. H. C.: Quite frankly, the US has a wonderful vision of what society should be. Equity and opportunity—it's that simple for me and, most likely, for many new immigrant populations who strive to come to America despite significant personal or financial cost. People want to live in a society with opportunities, and they want those opportunities to be fairly distributed. Yet because the denial of both opportunity and equity in the US fosters intergenerational social inequalities, participatory democracy in the US is potentially unstable and most likely unsustainable. Despite the specific topics we study, the broader issue of social justice should inform our sociological imaginations. No one has all the answers because no one can see the myriad configurations of the social problems that accompany social injustice.

No one wins within a society characterized by bitter partisan politics that pits one political party against the other; or who engages in endless arguments

to rank *either* racism *or* sexism *or* class exploitation as a more fundamental oppression; or the frontier mentality in some urban neighborhoods that pressures twelve-year-olds of color to choose their gang colors for safe passage to a failing public school. Holding fast to a worldview of winners and losers makes losers of us all.

The way forward regarding racism in America lies, in part, in critically analyzing our most cherished assumptions about what we think we know to be true. For many people living in the US, our media experiences are far more desegregated than anything we experience in everyday life. Intersectionality can help with this. No one wants to be wrong, but sometimes we are. We'll never know how wrong or right our ideas actually are until we listen to alternative perspectives. Remaining within insulated social groups with threadbare explanations that doing so protects our children, or that we just want to be with our kind of people ring hollow. Refusing to settle for the status quo and imagining something different, or at least believing in the possibility of such, begins with individual commitment to critical thinking.

The way forward regarding racism in America lies in choosing to commit to building something new. We have to commit to something bigger than ourselves. People of color have a long history of being on the front lines of antiracist projects, primarily because our safety and futures depend on it. African-Americans who want to see our children and grandchildren not only survive but also thrive know we cannot do it alone. Like the Black mothers discussed earlier, we do this work without expectation of praise or acknowledgement. I would like to see an army of quiet, committed, everyday activists, who get up every day and try to do the right thing, especially when no one is looking.

NOTE

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 247.

Hortense Spillers

George Yancy: In perhaps your most frequently cited essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," you discuss how, as a marked woman, you are nominated as "Peaches," "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire," "Earth Mother," "Aunty," a "Miss Ebony First," and so on. Within this context, you show, quite powerfully, that Black women have been stereotyped through a certain racist and masculinist discourse or grammar. Since the publication of that essay in 1987, in what ways has that grammar book expanded? In what ways are Black women or women of color still overdetermined by what you call "nominative properties"?

Hortense Spillers: My genuine surprise is that the picture whose outlines were rather starkly clear to me in 1987 has not been radically displaced or replaced by a different synthesis of discursive elements. Even though the public image horde of faces has been multiplied across the color line—in the movies, on television, and in other symptoms of media presence, i.e., cyberspace—the fundamental "grammars" of interracial relations and exchange still mandate "Blackness" as social deficit. We know this primarily by way of the acute outbreak of racist pathology that has shadowed and accompanied the presidency of Barack Obama; that it is still possible to draw him in malicious effigy and to mock the features of the First Lady as an exercise in denegation; that police brutality not only persists, but appears to have increased to the point of deliberate systematicity and provocation. All of this suggests, to my mind, that the mechanisms of public relations and belonging that situate individuals in the general economy of citizenship have not been sufficiently altered or even challenged. It is simply not enough that Black names and faces have been "added" to the national imaginary so much so that they are now no longer "alien" to the dream life of the nation, but whether or not such appearances have reconfigured the scale of value—in other words, the count or account in *quantity*

must be subtended by a respect of persons that would disallow the everyday re-embrace of toxic misnaming. The fraternity jingle concocted by the frat boys at the University of Oklahoma recently lends a case in point—one can say such things just as a matter of course!

G. Y.: The point that you raise about First Lady Michelle Obama is an important one. She has also been caricatured as a male. I'm also reminded of what Shamil Tarpischev, Russian president of the Tennis Federation, said regarding the Williams sisters. He referred to them as "the Williams brothers" and said that it is "frightening" to play against them. Here we've got the masculinization of Black women's bodies in the twenty-first century, which perpetuates forms of toxic misnaming. Is this way of denigrating Black women's bodies still implicated in the nineteenth-century assumptions of the Cult of True Womanhood, especially with respect to the denial of any measure of "femininity" to Black women?

H. S.: Something quite peculiar has taken place: the "Cult of True Womanhood" no longer fits the ambitions of any American demographic, I would say, but its values have been absorbed into the national imaginary in such a way that the old "cult" has generated powerful surrogates that perform overtime. Today's "powerful" female, or "power" woman, is all the more fetching and seductive because she is presented *contrastively* to the outgoing "feminine mystique." As far as I can tell, African-American women, as a national demographic, do not participate in this mythos, or myth-making, except as a glaring absence. When one speaks of, or thinks of, women "overcoming," they usually do not mean Black women at all. It just occurred to me again that the major beneficiaries of the Civil Rights era, or we could say, the major "subjects" or "symptoms" of the Civil Rights era, which I'd say runs from 1948 (and Truman's Executive Order that mandated the desegregation of the armed forces of the United States), through the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court case in 1954, to the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, were Black men and white women. Relatedly, the measure of the nation's success as an open and assimilative engine is determined by these subjects' access to the public sphere. Supposedly, one relinquishes "femininity" in achieving public standing, but it seems to me that it is precisely the *denial* of the feminine that rethreads it because one can now appreciate the "new" woman only insofar as she repeats the "old" one, *by contrast, by contradiction.* There seems to me an element of deep erotic (and male?) pleasure attached to this reel of a "wonder woman" with beautiful tits, or a queen in armor, wielding it over the guys in her band as a "femme fatal." It only appears to be female empowerment, while in truth it is a delicious disguise that fools no one, although we pretend to be deceived. And that's part of the fun, of the joke, that a critically emancipatory scheme has sadly become.

G. Y.: As you put it, this toxic misnaming is also evident in the racist chant that was captured on video of members of the University of Oklahoma's Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter where "nigger" is used and where there is reference to lynching Black people. Say more about how you see anti-Black racism as not merely an aberration, but as something far more pervasive and systemic.

H. S.: Since Trayvon Martin's murder by a citizen-vigilante, the incidence of Black men shot down by police force seems to have soared. If you ask me, we are in the midst of a veritable pandemic of such killings. Need we be reminded that this pandemic is taking place, despite the fact that there is now a considerable number of Black law enforcement officers across the country and up and down it, that the Department of Justice is currently headed by a Black person, and if Attorney Loretta Lynch is ever confirmed, will continue to be? What does this mean? It is nearly unbearable that perhaps it doesn't mean very much in terms of actual power. We can certainly not say with unalterable conviction that it doesn't mean zip because a Black attorney general does hold tremendous *symbolic* power. But such power has not yet wielded sufficient *real* power enough to stare down anti-Black racism. I cannot get over those US senators and their letter to the Iranian government, for example, or the congressional approval that lent a stage to a foreign prime minister in defiance of the President of the United States. This stuff goes deep, and I cannot for a moment imagine it happening to a Bill Clinton or a Bush, the elder or the younger; the racial antipathy in these cases goes well beyond party and strikes at the very heart of the republic and its constitutional order. The President of the United States takes an oath of office to defend the country against *all enemies, foreign and domestic*. But are we keeping quiet because we're looking an enemy in the face, and it is us? We're quiet because it's true and to do something about it would move our heaven and our earth. That's how deep anti-Black racism is: we can't even talk about it, but only nibble around the edges.

G. Y.: I recall US Representative Joe Wilson, though I understand that he apologized, saying to President Obama in 2009 during his health care speech, "You lie!" Is it possible to disconnect this sort of outburst from the exercise of white male power? What does this sort of disrespect say about mere *symbolic* power?

H. S.: Actual power strikes fear while symbolic power does not necessarily do so. As I understand it, symbolic power is akin to something nice. One can take it or leave it, while what I am calling actual power or material power has genuine consequences. As far as I remember, nothing about the life of Representative Wilson changed as a result of his outburst. He was neither booted out of office or prosecuted for anything, nor lost life, limb, or income. I'm not necessarily saying that any of that would have been a desirable result in this case, but I am saying that *consequences* matter, and everybody understands that they do, and especially a congressman!

G. Y.: If it is true that we are keeping quiet because the enemy is us, what should we be saying? What is it that we should be admitting to ourselves, especially when it comes to the issue of race?

H. S.: It's hard to say all at once what we should be saying because there would be too much to try to sum up here. In thinking about an answer to this question, it occurred to me that the crisis of race, as old and time-honored as it is, cannot be "answered" all the time at the place of race, if that makes sense. In other words, certain race matters might be cleared up if we were more conscious about our own lives—what goes into our minds and bodies; James Baldwin says everywhere in his work, especially "Notes of a Native Son,"[1] that white America has a problem with Blackness because it evades and avoids dealing with its own denial of death, its own inability to face its vulnerabilities, its humanness. The determination to confront one's own demons is what I mean by greater consciousness. Racism seems to come out of a profound self-ignorance that expresses itself variously, e.g., a congressman yelling out in public space, the arrogance of power, etc. It also occurs to me that racism is one kind of problem, but actually, there is another and related one that I would call a form of "tribalism," which disorder appears to affect and infect metropolitan police departments in particular. This is an infantile view of the world, really, that demands, indeed *expects*, to find little replicas of itself repeated all over the place. For the "tribalist," the world is no bigger than his den and everybody in it looks like his mama and daddy and sisters and brothers, or ought to, and when they don't, he is disturbed! This family model of gaining access to the world through the assumptions and lenses of one's own family meets neither the requirements of modern living, nor the strenuous cordiality, let's call it, of fellow citizenship; in the latter case, the citizenry does not always, does not most of the time, repeat me, or give me back a friendly or exact image of myself, and coexistence is the game of learning to live with that. We call it "difference," and I suppose that's what it is, but to say difference is to speak about having to accept the dire fact that the world is big, and everybody in it does not know me. But some theorists suggest that learning to live with such ideas is what it means to live in a nation-state, which is not based on ethnicity and race, but rather the *political* idea. For example, American citizenship is not based on race or blood, at least not in its *theory* about itself. In other words, we are *constitutionally* defined, which has nothing to do with the way we look, the color of our skin, what God we serve, etc. The "tribalist" didn't get the memo, however!

G. Y.: I think that what Baldwin says is profound and important. So, how do we get white people to love themselves?

H. S.: George, if I knew the answer to that one, I'd patent it and retire a rich woman! I really don't know the answer to that question at all. But my guess is that it has something to do with parenting and working at eliminating all the

funky little tyrannies and cruelties that begin, ironically enough, with family at the parental knee! But that's the chicken and the egg debate, isn't it? Better education? Greater self-esteem? I think I can catch hold of this question only *after* the tide comes in: my observation is that predominantly white organizations or units, for example—many of them academic—tolerate a lot of abuse, a great deal of *psychological* violence, carried out by immature actors, or people we'd call "a-holes," really; what we've isolated as "domestic" and "spousal" abuse, mostly directed at women and children, seems to identify a much broader pattern of dominance and timidity and willful surrender that expresses itself as the unhealthy status quo of many of our institutions. Probably wider spread than we realize, the kind of violence I am talking about often finds displacement in debates about the worth and significance of intellectual work, and because our highest value is critical intelligence and the production of knowledge, we often overlook conduct, which we read as "personal" or noninstitutional. The only conduct that we outright invigilate in our precincts is known as "sexual harassment," but it is clearer and clearer to me that there are whole provinces of the ethical that go untended in, for example, administrators' relations to faculty and staff, and in the latter's relations with each other. When this stuff crosses racial lines, you will discover, if you look closely enough, that the racial angle is often only the most visible and dramatic layer of an underlying fault line of fear and malice that racism allows to be staged. I'm certainly not saying that academic institutional racism is not real, but rather that it scratches the surface sometime of a more encompassing dis-ease. If academic white people, as a portion of a much larger human sample, cannot practice charity and intelligence in mutual human contact, then we really shouldn't be all that surprised that greater numbers do not either, those who supposedly don't know any better. I am suggesting that Baldwin was right to maintain that some of the racist cure would have to be sought elsewhere, in combatting the failures of self-love and regard. In racism, one finds distraction from the one subject that he utterly refuses to confront precisely because it is so repulsive to him! Baldwin, however, was no less vigilant and articulate about the spiritual health of Black folk in part because that of white folk was so poor.

G. Y.: Given what you've said about Black men and white women, perhaps when it comes to Black women, we need to ask a more specifically intersectional question: Do the lives of Black women, especially *poor Black women*, matter in America?

H. S.: The truth is that—and this is my strengthening impression—no one matters in America anymore! That's a far-out statement, but when you think about what's happening to our bought-off, bought-out political class, what I am suggesting gains some force. If you need two billion dollars nowadays to run for presidential office, that means that the office is out of the people's

hands and into the hands of those who can afford to play the game. That is a transformation in American political life that we'd better pay careful attention to. What kind of system is it where those who rule are those who can pay? This has a name, and it is too fearful to repeat. Under such conditions, it might not be ridiculous to say that the posture of poor Black women is representative for any number of others.

G. Y.: And, yet, despite the claim that "no one matters in America anymore," which I think is indicative of moral decay, Black men continue to go missing. As one recent article has shown, "For every 100 Black women not in jail, there are only 83 Black men. The remaining men—1.5 million of them—are, in a sense, missing."[2] The concept of missing suggests the sense of having been abducted, or missing in action, or having been stolen.

H. S.: Yes, you've hit on a key narrative of Black presence in the West and the demographic and other complexities that such presence has assumed over the centuries. But it's interesting to me that what "begins" in abduction, if we think of the slave trade as a sustained story of theft and alienation, continues on this side of Middle Passage; I have often wondered what geographers might tell us if they could guess what the percentages of African losses have been since the fifteenth century when the transatlantic trade opens by way of Lisbon. If I'm not mistaken, this marks a pre-Columbian conjuncture that gathers speed and momentum as time passes, and the African Continent never recovers. I'd be curious to know how this massive human gap might be explained, compared to rates of growth in other parts of the world. I guess I'm asking a kind of counter-intuitive question that defies words, but it goes something like this: all things being equal and correcting for natural and man-made disasters, what would be the number of African peoples on planet Earth today if the transatlantic trade had not happened, or had been definitively interrupted sooner than the early nineteenth century? Closer to home, we wonder what the implications of that missing million and half men might be today—for sure, a lot of people don't get born, but even more importantly, those who do are not always properly nurtured and cared for. In the final analysis, that, to my mind, is the real import of "Black Lives Matter": in other words, Black life is not spawned or self-generating like amoeba (this seems to have been the idea of slavery), but must actually come into *birth*, and that is a supremely social idea. We can have children, can have generations, but what *happens* to them?

NOTES

1. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon Press, 1965).
2. Dartagnan, "The Unspoken American Experience: 1,500,000 Missing Black Men," *Daily Kos*, April 21, 2015, http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/4/21/1379162/-The-Unspoken-American-Experience-1-500-000-Missing-Black-Men.

Joy James

George Yancy: There are times when I've asked myself if philosophy can console in times of pain and suffering. Among my friends and colleagues of all races, the killings of Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner and so many others like them have caused emotional pain—feelings of being sick and hurt, feelings of depression, angst, hopelessness. It's crazy.

Joy James: That's grief. And yes, it is crazy. Welcome to Black life under white supremacy.

Grief as a painful historical trajectory is one thing; to grieve intensely in the misery of the present moment is another. Ferguson, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and Cleveland (we can add Detroit for seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Bastrop, Texas for Yvette Smith)—these dispersed sites have forced diverse people around the country and internationally to huddle closer together as we scrutinize laws and policies that reward police violence with immunity.

Being denigrated and victimized by your designated protectors is shocking to the core, because their job is to protect and serve. We're stunned because our trust in law is violated; police departments tolerate hyperaggressive officers by underreporting and underdisciplining them. These officers are not "going rogue" in wealthy, white communities because those communities have the economic and political resources to discipline them.

Police are our employees whom we have to obey ostensibly for our own safety and that of the general good; but also because they will hurt us, often with impunity, if we don't and sometimes even when we do obey.

Of course, police crime and the duplicity of law are not new to America. During the convict prison lease system and Jim Crow, a Black person could easily be arrested for not stepping off the sidewalk to let a white person pass. In Ferguson, it appears that not stepping on the sidewalk to let a white person

pass—one whose salary was paid in part by Blacks—sparked the encounter that ended Michael Brown's life.

Nonetheless, despite how disturbing these structural and episodic assaults are, they also work as catalysts for substantive change. Police incompetence, malfeasance, and murder inspire outrage.

G. Y.: What are your thoughts on the killings of officers Wenjian Liu and Raphael Ramos? Does it complicate these issues?

J. J.: The murders of these New York City police officers highlight the dangers that both police and public face. When Ismaaiyl Brinsley first shot his former female partner in a domestic violence dispute in Baltimore then traveled to Brooklyn to randomly kill police officers, he invoked the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as motivation. This invocation has been denounced by the Brown and Garner families, civil rights activists, the president and attorney general, and city leaders. What any mentally ill or criminal person does is not representative of a movement for human rights.

G. Y.: What are the implications of the suffering amid police violence?

J. J.: In a democracy, the implications for an ill-informed citizenry are grim. The recent tragedies remind us that this violence is sadly familiar to those who have a complex memory. We've grappled with racial animus and hatred from overseers, Klansmen and women, police, segregationists, integrationists, and various sectors of society from academia to athletics.

The implications of public servants and deputized vigilantes violating Black life with impunity are profound, especially for young Black people. If police are sending some message indicating that, despite having a Black president and attorney general, in regards to anti-Black violence, the police have immunity and a renewable license to overcriminalize, overprosecute, traumatize, and kill, then their position has been noted in social media throughout the globe.

We need to publicly debate whether it is just, moral, and appropriate, or even safe and sane, to believe in modern policing given the fallibility, corruption, and danger present in the institution. Police agencies have a history of racial bias and violence that has been investigated and condemned by governments as well as civil and human rights organizations. Citizens are supposed to flee or fight criminals, not the police. But reality teaches you that in Black life you need to be ever vigilant for both.

We have diverse strategies. Some offer extensive documentation on how the legal system adversely and disproportionately affects Black life due to gender and racial-economic bias. Some debate those who deny crises structured through state-sanctioned violence. Others expand the civil rights struggle into international human rights, using petitions to the UN and testimony before the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT).

Many instruct their children about the meanings of teenagers and children dying violently at the hands of those seemingly "above the law": the

Michael Browns, Tamir Rices, Renisha McBrides, Aiyana Stanley-Joneses, Trayvon Martins. A few have the ironic pleasure of false hope fading into realism when they see that their children can instruct them; for example, the Deacons for Defense Robert Williams audio-documentary they are listening to is not a courageous NPR special report sensitively attuning its listeners to the historic place and need for Black self-defense from racist violence, but a CD offering slipped into the player by an inquisitive six-year-old, a random act of grace.

G. Y.: What do we do with despair at the moment regarding these killings? What do we do to avoid feelings of implosion?

J. J.: We mix sorrow with something else. We've historically done that as a people. Ida B. Wells as an antilynching activist, who was eventually marginalized by more integrated and institutionally powerful Blacks, always said she would sell her life "dearly" to a lyncher. She didn't have to (apparently she died from exhaustion and lack of support for her radical opposition to racism). Ida B. Wells loved, deeply and immensely; traumatized and transformed by the Memphis lynching of Thomas Moss, the father of her goddaughter, she became an activist. Targeted for economic competition with whites, Moss was lynched in 1892 with other Black men following the exchange of gunfire with white, unidentified policemen who approached the Black grocer's store at night, through a dark alley, with their guns drawn. Realizing the injured men were police, Moss and his associates went to the police to explain the mistake. Their murders at the hands of mob and police sparked an antilynching movement.

Decades later, just before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat because, she stated, she thought of Emmett Till, Mamie Till defied the law and held an open casket for her mutilated fourteen-year-old son, Emmett, who broke "law" and custom by allegedly whistling at a white woman. He had a lisp; and later, in 2017, the press reported that the woman felt "tender sorrow" for lying in court that the teen had accosted her. Emmett was subsequently tortured and murdered; his white killers acquitted, later confessed to the crime for a $3000 payment in a LIFE interview. Women activists such as Till and Parks loved life, family, and community and inspired the courageous reinvention of America through social and political movements.

People sometimes miss that outrage and resistance are guided by love and the desire to bring honor to life brutally taken. We continue to remember atrocities through demonstrations and protests in sports, although traumatized by social and domestic violence and struggling with depression or lack of resources, Black communities still organize forums against gun violence, unequal educational resources, drug addictions, gentrification, employment and housing discrimination.

G. Y.: Why has racism persisted so long within the North American context?

J. J.: Because it is desirable and profitable. As the late great civil rights leader and historian Vincent Harding noted, this crisis is structural and endemic. But it is not evenly felt and for some it is enjoyable. Anti-Black prejudicial bias exists not only in policing but also in education, employment, health, and housing. "The law" has been an impediment to Black lives mattering since the "three-fifths clause" to the US Constitution legalized bodily theft to build a democracy favoring white property holders placing presidential power disproportionately into the hands of southern slave owners who benefited from the electoral college counting of nonvoting enslaved. The Thirteenth Amendment, known as the emancipation amendment, legalized slavery for those duly convicted of crimes, establishing the foundation for the convict prison lease system where Blacks died faster in freedom than they had on plantations as they were worked to death to benefit northern capital, emergent southern state economies, and an expansion of the white middle class through the trade of Black bodies via policing, courts, agricultural and infrastructure development. Jim Crow, foster care disproportionality, racially fashioned policing and incarceration and—as Marvin Gaye notes in "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)"—"trigger-happy policing" are all part of the fabric of American life that has a historical relation to Black lives based on consumption.

North American (Canadian, US, Mexican) racisms have violent directives tied to genocidal wars of annihilation and capture of Native and African Americans. In the ambitions of assimilation, one of the fastest ways to become "American" is to become "white." So, various ethnic groups position themselves along the continuum in which Blacks and Blackness are the antithesis of white as civic virtue and economic wealth. Racism is also economically and existentially profitable. Proximity to "whiteness" helps, as studies have shown, in obtaining jobs, housing, promotions; just as gender and sexism lead to differential pay for women, race and racism create differentials in the acquisition of resources.

Racism is sexualized, embedded with racial–sexual slander, and micro- and macroaggressions against Blacks (males and females, trans and gender fluid people). Normative as entertainment, fungible and edible, we are key to the American "libidinal" economy. For some, Black suffering is enjoyable as spectacle; and so for Black people in public or private life, there is in first and all encounters no suffering or confusion that is sacred or worth protection.

G. Y.: How does your understanding of that persistence relate to the current situation?

J. J.: Now, as historically, there is inadequate public thought and language about institutional, interpersonal, and internalized violence consuming Black people and society in general.

2014 is our 1892 (the year whose atrocities sparked Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching crusades). In 2014, we saw more clearly the "crazy" of our social order

and how important and necessary international interventions are, such as CAT (which ruled that the US needed to de-militarize its police; address torture of minorities in police custody and diminish rape in prison). In October 2014, former Chicago police commissioner Jon Burge was released from prison, after running a torture ring that imprisoned over one hundred Black men. For over twenty years, Burge, who is white, led an anti-Black torture ring to obtain false confessions. Torture included cattle prods to their genitals, and near suffocation through plastic bags over their heads (some of the tactics evoke the report on the CIA's interrogation techniques). Due to the statute of limitations, Burge was convicted of perjury in 2010 and sentenced to four and a half years in prison. The officer-torturers now reportedly collect millions in pensions; and Chicago has settled more in compensation to their victims. Where the nation compensates racial and sexual predators by keeping them on the taxpayers' rolls, restorative justice remains elusive and structural accountability is rarely possible. Talking about the tragic murder rate in Chicago of mostly Black males is empty talk if it is severed from predatory policing, exploitative governance, the scarcity of decent jobs, housing, food, and schooling.

Restorative justice is complex. It is also unnecessarily complicated by police structures that claim omnipotence in the face of Black lives. In the absence of a clear line between criminal and police behavior, fear is the enforcer. Ironically, Black Americans are regularly taxed to pay salaries, pensions, and benefits to police forces that disproportionately target Black life through penalties and fines, brutality, and disrespect. We are also, like other Americans, taxed to pay for military interventions waged for geopolitical dominance rather than the expansion of human rights. In 2014 as our 1892, the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on CIA interrogation reported that the CIA lied to the public and government about its use of torture, and that its human rights violations rendered the United States not safer but more barbaric. Why would state and local police expect a different outcome if they treat Black communities as "enemies" and against whom excessive force can be legitimately deployed?

G. Y.: So, where do we go from here?

J. J.: When Congressman John Lewis, a former SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) activist, stated at the beginning of the rebellion that Ferguson may have sparked another Civil Rights Movement, he was initially met with skepticims from the president through media to the local preacher. One constant is that older generations, and nonactivists, tend to underestimate the power of outraged, young Black people who demand justice. During the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker emphasized that the movement was about "more than a hamburger," that is, its goals aspired to more than access to consumer society at the highest levels. Historical leadership of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Audre Lorde prepared us for the present moment.

We've witnessed, feared and contested police violence for centuries. Resistance is resilient until it is broken; then for a time, it becomes dormant, but it always reappears. Today more attention is paid to sexual and physical assaults against Black women and girls, and structural, social, and interpersonal violence against transwomen, girls, women, boys and men, by state and society. The demands for institutional and communal goals of "zero death" and "zero trauma" increase as we better understand our real vulnerabilities and our desires to transcend them.

Black lives matter as a coda is both an assertion and a desire. The women who crossed gender divisions to follow in and bend traditions of political leadership to make this a shared language maintain that Black lives matter because we make them matter. Yet, all Black lives do not equally matter even to us. Propertied and impoverished Blacks are exhausted by legal and policing apparatuses that have historically preyed upon Black life. Transgressions into Black lives cut across class lines, but disproportionately the poor and working class are the most vulnerable to violence.

If we as ideologically diverse Black people have a no-divorce clause with US democracy, the site of our battery, then where do we go from here? The divide between de jure and de facto justice concerning Blacks in the Americas is a chasm. Our struggles are opportunities to bridge or jump; either way we are engaged in movement for security, justice, and a greater democracy.

PART I DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hortense Spillers and Patricia Hill Collins discuss the divisive tendency of some forms of love and love's privatization. Love of this sort appears to bring about and perpetuate racial hate. The inclusive, public, and expansive kind of love that bell hooks discusses is likely crucial in overcoming racial hate, but it also requires vulnerability. George Yancy asks Hortense Spillers how we can get white people to love themselves; but how do we even secure the condition for the possibility of love, namely that white people become vulnerable with respect to race?
2. How can we incorporate self-criticality among white people that encourages self-awareness without fueling counterproductive self-hatred?
3. Joy James points out that civil and human rights movements are about more than acquisition through consumerism, or, in reference to Ella Baker's assertion: "the movement was about 'more than a hamburger.'" How might we redirect consumer society's (surplus) consumption and excess toward a public ethics focused on universal access to healthcare, economic decency and employment, and the right to life and security from violence and neglect?
4. One of the strengths of Black Feminist thought is its intersectional capabilities and the ability to appreciate and account for the multiplicity of suffering beneath layers of oppression. How can one avoid falling into relativism when including many intersections of oppression and injustice in a single person's experience? Does ideology play a role in our analysis of intersectionality?