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Teaching Theory, Talking Community

Joy James

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

Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory"¹

The Erasure of Africana Women in Academic Theory

Contemporary African American theorists such as Barbara Christian, who writes that theory not rooted in practice is elitist, think within an African and community-centered tradition in which the creativity of a people in the race for theory sustains humanity. However, teaching theory as nonelitist, and intending the liberation and development of humanity, specifically African communities, contradicts much of academic theory,² which is Eurocentric.

All philosophy and theory, Eurocentric or Afracentric, is political. Academic "disciplines," when sexualized and racialized, tend to reproduce themselves in hierarchically segregated forms. To confront segregation means recognizing that current academic or educational stan-

dards have never worked, and were never intended to work, for us as a people. Our tenuous presence in (White) universities and colleges speaks to the fact that individuals, but not the community, may attain some success in an educational process centered on the marginalization of all but the "European" (socially constructed as White, propertied heterosexuals).

In academia many philosophy or theory courses may emphasize logic and memorizing the history of "Western" philosophy, rather than the activity of philosophizing or theorizing. When the logic of propositions is the primary object of study, how one argues becomes more important than for what one argues. The exercise of reason may take place within an illogical context. Catechizing academic canons obscures the absurdity of their claims to universal supremacy and the massive flaws in legacies, such as Platonic and Aristotelian "universal" principles derived from the hierarchical splintering of humanity; and/or the European Enlightenment's deification of scientific rationalism.

Some thinkers canonized in academia have argued that theory and philosophy are open to the "everyday" person and intend the good of humanity. However, few identify African people as both equal partners in that humanity and important theorists in its behalf. Fewer still connect the 'life of the mind' to the understanding that "Black people have to a disproportionate extent supplied the labor which has made possible the cultivation of philosophical inquiry."³ We have also disproportionately cultivated the philosophies that provide nonabstract meanings of freedom and justice: surviving genocidal oppression allows insights into (in)humanity and (in)justice that transcend the abstractions of academic philosophy and theory. The root knowledge of African living thinkers, of democratic power and philosophy, is not often practiced inside ivory towers where provincial thinking, itself almost a universal in academia, reflects rather than critiques Eurocentrism.

"Eurocentrism" is not synonymous with European. In a society and culture where the White European represents both the ideal and universal manifestation of civilization, unsurprisingly, "Black" as well as "White" people adopt or adapt this icon as worldview. My schooling in White-dominated institutions has painfully impressed on me the depth of indoctrination and the difficulty of deprogramming myself from "truths" formulated under the tutelage of institutional bigotry which relegated "Blackness" and "femaleness" to savage superstition, invisibility or exotica and "Whiteness" and "maleness" to a paragon and the sublime.

Samir Amin defines Eurocentrism as:

a culturalist phenomenon in the sense that it assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time.⁴

White supremacy rationalizes Eurocentrism's anti-universalist stance. It has shaped and misshapened European philosophy, with destructive effects on the material lives of the majority of the world's people and the spiritual and intellectual lives of all. Cornel West's description of White supremacy applies to the Eurocentric, academic mindset:

the idea of white supremacy emerges partly because of the powers within the structure of modern discourse—powers to produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity which set perimeters and draw boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas.⁵

Adhering to the tastes of White supremacy, "white solipsism"⁶ masquerades as philosophy within the myth of European "racial," therefore intellectual, superiority. As legitimizing a world order of domination becomes an intellectual mandate, Eurocentrism, like the carnival house of mirrors, projects what it distorts. Its solipsistic reflections racialize (and sexualize) theory, "whitening" thinkers indispensable to its canons: the Egyptian philosophers, Aesop, Jesus of Nazareth, Augustine. Given the broad paintbrush of White supremacy, it is a tragicomedy that historical African or Semitic figures are depicted in illustrated academic texts as physically "White," some with blond hair, or taught paradoxically as if they had no ethnicity or race (in which case their racial identities are assumed to be "White"). With or without illustrations falsifying historical identities, students receive theory with the bias that philosophy is the product of the minds of "great" White men, and in Women's Studies of "great" White women, respectively beneficent patriarches or matriarches. (In African American studies the prioritizing of African American men as theorists produces its own distortions.)

With the European centered as "universal" or normative, all else, by default, becomes marginal. When Eurocentric bias is seen as incidental

rather than endemic to academic thinking, "indiscretions" are thought to be containable if cauterized to allow the work to retain its status.⁷ Consequently critiques of (hetero)sexism, racism, and classism failing to analyze individual writers as representatives of a collective consciousness reinforce Eurocentrism's hegemony as a metaparadigm, albeit as a flawed one.

Philosophical traditions, such as those of service to ancestors and community, challenge the authoritarian, authoritative voice of this metaparadigm. Living thinkers⁸ operate, outside the worldview of "scientific" materialism and "objective" rationalism, within paradigms which hold the nonduality and interpenetration of reality—the sacred and secular, the political and spiritual, the individual and community. Presenting community as the foundation of reality and knowledge, these paradigms reject the elitism of academic thinking. They are consequently heresies; academia discredits indigenous cosmologies, and their concepts of nonlinear time, nonduality and commitments to community, as exotic aberrations and primitive thought. Since academia recognizes neither the intellectual nor moral authority of the (African) communities it dissects, and African communities do not determine how African people are to be "studied," our misrepresentation seems the rule.⁹ Dismissing the centrality of African ancestral and living thinkers creates a catastrophic loss of realities and commitments present in traditional African cosmology.

The designation of academia, with its biases, as *the* legitimate intellectual realm for philosophy and theory deflects attention from traditional cosmologies and living thinkers. Theorizing within a tradition for liberated communities presents a worldview centered in spirituality, community survival, and human development. The devaluation of community and African thinking overlooks the universal aspects of the philosophy and theorizing of African "traditionalists," particularly women. Academic thinking promotes not only obscurantism but also the erasure of Africana women from theory.

Playing by its house rules, academia can set standards which no African American woman can meet *as an African American woman*. If it is assumed that we only speak as "Black women"—not as *women*—or "Black people"—not as *human beings*—our stories and theorizing are considered irrelevant or not applicable to women or people in general; they are reduced to descriptions of a part rather than analyses of a whole (humanity). When teaching about our lives as Africana women is viewed as a descent to the particular (*everything* African) from the "universal norm" (*anything* European), biology be-

comes destiny, with European biology as manifest destiny. Receiving recognition as "theorists" or "intellectuals" because of the "Westernization" and masculinization of our thinking (and lives) as Africana women still leave us "unqualified" as *Africana* women. Acknowledging "theory" only from those in transmutation in an Eurocentric form, reduces theory to technique. If it is only legitimized when communicated in "academese," then we must be trained out of traditional, communal communication to do theory.

If style or technical language determines much of what is recognized as theory, vogueing is subjectless "objective" writing which claims to be without desires or interests.¹⁰ Although desire and interest are not obliterated by proclamation, under the apotheosis of academic thinking, rationalism as "theory" vanquishes desire. Its technocratic jargon and writing, which "explore" or "probe" the lives of Africana women, lend themselves, like all colonial interventions and invasions, to misrepresentation and falsification. The objectification of African American women through the "expert" voice of "trained" speakers, including the voices of African American women academics who attempt to "re-articulate" knowledge,¹¹ is often a distorting interference. Since academese as an alien language is not designed to respectfully or adequately communicate African experiences,¹² using it we may appropriate and disrespect our own voices and people.

Appropriation requires abstractions. When we are stripped, or strip ourselves, of our context in community, caricatures incompatible with theory or philosophy deepen our intellectual alienation. The categorization of Black women in bipolar stereotypes—the "Mammy-Sapphire" swing of suffering or angry victims, without the ashé or power as ancestors and living thinkers,¹³ is the prerequisite for relocation to some ghetto in an academic mind. Ghettoized in our own minds, and those of others, prevents a serious encounter with Africana women and blocks meeting ourselves as theorists. By demanding recognition for a community that theorizes, we can turn our extreme location into an advantage. The vantage point to being out on a ledge of institutional alienation is the ken of the view. Out there one can see the ways in which time, space, and people are strung up and strung out. Artificial timelines manipulate space and thought. In academic theory time is European time; space is that occupied by Europeans; great thinkers are their mythologized ancestors.

I find that people who routinely accept that European-Whites competently critique and teach African (American) thought may find it incongruous (or racial heresy) to accept that Africans-Blacks competently

analyze and teach, and therefore contribute to, European (American) thought. The complaints of White European American students who rebelliously argue when assigned the writings of people of color that they "thought this was suppose to be a course on 'theory or women's studies'" are logical in this context. Their grievances are based on unmet expectations set by the false advertising of departments and programs which reduce theory to Eurocentric thought and Women's Studies to White women's studies. Attempting to bring more realism to our program, I jettison the Eurocentric paradigm in teaching my section of "Feminist Theory," renaming the course "Womanist/Feminist theory" and teaching Native American, Africana, Latina, Asian and European (American) women thinkers. My language has also changed. I more often say "Theory" without the qualifiers "Womanist" or "Black Feminist" when referring to the work of African American women theorists. (I take a cue from White men who do not title their works "*White Masculinist Theory*"; White women who do not preface their writings with "*White Feminist Theory*;" and, African American men who do not identify their publications as "*Afrocentric Masculinist Theory*."¹⁴)

Attempts to recognize African contributions to understandings of philosophy and cosmology have focused on integration in spaces dominated by Europeans. Perhaps the most overworked decoy in academe's intellectual apartheid is curriculum "integration." Integration and "inclusivity" as new forms of segregation can act as a subterfuge for racist, (hetero)sexist and classist education. Curriculum integration, an easy home remedy to a racist canon, lends itself to the creation of more sophisticatedly segregated academic departments, programs, and courses. "Special interest" or "diversity" courses simultaneously integrate and segregate. They fail to transform disciplines which view racism as a problem of excess or indiscretion in the hegemony and not as the cornerstone of the hegemony itself. Disciplines seek to ameliorate exclusion through integration rather than struggle for new meanings and philosophies; the panacea becomes paradigmatic reform rather than a revolution in paradigms. Not the African community but academe determines the meaning, intent, and degree of "integration" of "Whites Only" disciplines; under these conditions, the reproduction of segregation is unsurprising.

In reform, the axis of the universe remains the same. Although academia bestows degrees and grants tenure, it does not necessarily produce philosophers and theorists. Eurocentric-academic theory is hardly an honorable participant in the race for theory. The purveyors

of philosophy and theory retain their prerogatives to introduce anonymous, interchangeable satellites as mirrors for their own reflections: Black women are viewed as cosmetic aides to those holding firmly to their place at the center of the mirror. What does it mean that "academic theory" presents African American women thinkers as generic satellites in White star-studded galaxies? What would it mean to revolutionize the teaching of theory in academe in order to present African American women thinkers as builders of the shared universe, within African cosmology?

Making Our Presence Known

Before I can even teach theory, given its current biological construction in academia, I am continuously challenged to "prove" that I am qualified. Comparing my work experiences with those of other African American women academics, I notice that despite our having been hired through a highly competitive process, we seem to be asked more routinely, almost reflexively, if we have Ph.Ds. We could attribute this, and have, to our 'diminutive' height, youngish appearance or casual attire. Yet I notice that White women about our height, unsuited, and under 60, seem not to be interrogated as frequently about their qualifications. Continuously asked my "qualifications" as a "theorist" I cited to the inquisitive or inquisition: my *training*—a degree in political philosophy; my *research*—a dissertation on a European theorist; or my *employment*—teaching theory courses in academe. These are prerequisites for institutional membership but not measurements of competency. I accept that nothing will qualify me to students and faculty who do not struggle with their racism, fear, and hostility towards African people, philosophy, and theorizing centered on liberation. For me, teaching theory courses on the praxis of African American women permits me to claim that I think. Connecting my teaching to community organizing allows me to say I theorize. Service in African liberation qualifies me.

These qualifications make me a suspicious character if not "unqualified" for academe. A hydra for teachers and students who do not set them, criteria established without our input are shrouds. The issue is not whether there should be standards and qualifications; there always are. The issue is who sets and will set them, and for whose benefit they function. The reward of transgressing conventional academic standards is reestablishing connections to community wisdom and practice.

The specter of failing to meet institutional standards and "qualifications" inhibits the search for new models of knowledge and teaching.

In teaching, I try to learn and share more about the history of social thought. Teaching about the origins of the "academy," "philosophy" and "theory" as predating the "Greek ancestors" of "Western civilization" broadens the scope of both the time and space in which theory takes place; it expands academia's concept of who theorizes. Changing the concept of time or the timeline changes the context for philosophy and theory.¹⁵ Philosophy extends beyond the appearance of Europeans (and their designated ancestors) in history; so theory extends beyond the spaces they occupy or rule. To restrict our discussions of the contributions of African cosmology and philosophy to the "contemporary" period implies that we have no "ancient" or "modern" history in philosophizing. Without a history philosophy is not indigenous to us as a people; and "contemporary" theorizing becomes disconnected from its tradition. That is why we must reinsert ourselves in time and history on the continuum, and confront academic disciplines attempting to erase us from that line. The ways in which I approach theory are changing.

Extending time to find other origins of theory, I encounter more comprehensive spaces and thoughts. Hypaetia, the (Egyptian or Greek) woman philosopher, sits with the "Ancient" philosophers of academic masculinist theory. The Kongo women kings theorize in a unique cosmology coexisting with the space occupied by Locke, and Rousseau and other philosophers of the European Enlightenment. Angela Davis and African revolutionary theorizing coexist with the European (American) liberalism of Rawls, Arendt, and Bentham in contemporary political theory. In "essential feminist writings," Ida B. Wells is taught alongside Mary Wollstonecraft and Susan B. Anthony; Virginia Woolf and Mary Daly are placed beside Assata Shakur and Audre Lorde.

The ways in which I teach theory are changing. Cultivating respectfulness in myself and seeking it in my students, I ask my classes: "Who are you? Do you know your personal and political relationship to the knowledge studied?" I find that autobiographical theorizing discourages appropriation and objectification, while encouraging students to identify themselves as potential theorists and embark in self-reflections that include critiques of racist, classist and (hetero)sexist assumptions (a "backlash" usually follows any sustained critique of entrenched, dominant biases). I urge students to carefully consider the claim by revolutionary African American women who write that the roles of

living thinkers are open to all and that they are not "exceptional" (those who participate in a legacy follow rather than deviate from the normative).

Students encounter the women's images and voices through video and audio tapes that supplement readings for discussions on women's contributions to and roles in liberation struggles. These images, along with exploring our relationships and responsibilities to writers, stories, and theories, pull us off the sidelines as "spectators" and consumers of Africana "performance" towards our own roles as actors. Contending with my own "consumerism," I find that progressive Africana activists give me more than subject matter for courses; they also provide instruction in philosophy and democratic pedagogy. I am pushed most as a teacher-student when wrestling with the implications of philosophy and theorizing in the autobiographies of revolutionary African American women. More than any other type of writing, this form prods me to confront my personal and political responsibilities to ancestors, youth, and future generations. Attempting to share what I learn, the internal obstacles appear. They emerge out of my physical and sometimes intellectual alienation from work for community liberation and the philosophers and theorists of the community. They coexist with the everpresent external obstacles of indifference and hostility towards Black liberation theorizing. Despite the internal and external obstacles, I begin to fear less being dismissively ignored by academics and fear more my own ignorance about and faltering ties to our ancestors' loving, radical traditions. Although it grates the academic norm, responsibility means that legitimacy and authority come from the humanity of my communities.¹⁶ If respect and recognition mean communicating our wisdom and humanity in struggle, regardless, then pedagogy will be the transport.

Talking Theory: Activism in Pedagogy

Pedagogy rooted in ethical concerns and an epistemology based on a four part process of experience, reflection, judgment, and action,¹⁷ organize my courses. Readings stimulate and challenge students to expand their experiential base. They then enter their reflections in journals, essay papers and compare their insights in small student work groups. Judging dominant norms, students design activities or projects to demystify and challenge economic and racial-sexual oppression, and evaluate their own ideologies. Through organizing, they obtain a

greater experimental base to reflect on philosophy and theorizing, cosmologies, freedom and liberation struggles. The last step in this epistemological framework is action. Ethical action expands experiences, stimulates self-reflections, and judging. A pedagogy that denies the validity of personal experiences, that make no space for self-reflection, that discourages judgment, and severs action from insight confuses fragmented thinking with knowledge. Guided by ethical concerns to think and organize to resist oppression, we walk closer to the place where humanist political thinkers stand. There, hopefully with a less distant and more substantial awareness of their theorizing, we begin to comprehend and critique.

To respectfully teach about theorizing by African American women activists requires such a pedagogy based on ethics and active commitment to community liberation. So, I reject the concept of education as value-neutral and use "extracurricular" activities as a lab component (for instance, the hands-on experience of "applied" knowledge or "labs" to supplement "book" knowledge is indispensable in disciplines such as chemistry or architecture). These activities, encouraging students to take an active rather than passive role in their self-development, advance critical analyses of: child abuse; sexual violence; adultism; racism; (hetero)sexism; and classism.

For example, in my senior seminar on "Women and the State," students wrote papers and organized educational forums for the campus and local community on relevant topics. Their educationals in the campus center, held on Tuesday afternoons in March during Women's History Month, were: "Women and Militarization," "Women and Occupation," and "Women Political Prisoners." "Women and Militarization" occurred around the time of the U.S. bombing of Iraq. Over 100 people attended this educational, which students organized as a tribunal or mock trial in which African American, Caribbean and Native American and European American women activists and teachers testified on U.S. crimes against humanity, specifically violence resulting from racism and sexism in U.S. domestic and foreign policies. The students performed-educated as poets, defense and prosecution lawyers, judge, and witnesses. They staged guerilla theatre to disrupt their mock trial: dressed in mourning garb, the "ghosts" of several women murdered by their male companions in domestic violence interrupted the proceedings, bitterly denouncing the court for ignoring their desperate petitions, as living women, to stop their batterers.

Although the majority of students in the "Women and the State" seminar stated that they found organizing their forum and attending

and critiquing the others as one of their most difficult and most rewarding educational experiences, interrelating doing and knowing for ethical-political action is not a popular practice in academe. White students have told me that they resent not the request to engage in activities outside the classroom (they do for other classes), but the request to act against racism, believing it unjust to require, as proper and necessary, that students (staff and faculty) confront adultism, classism, racism, and (hetero)sexism in their courses and themselves. (Other more liberal advocates of multiculturalism have argued that critiques of texts are the only *responsible action* in academic classes.)

I argue for activism as an indispensable component in learning. Action promotes consciousness of one's own political practice; such self-consciousness is a prerequisite to literacy. "Interest" in the lives of Black women and democratic struggles is superficial and the "knowledge" acquired specious if one remains illiterate in the language of community and commitment spoken by the women activists. Activism promotes literacy. It is usually the greatest and most difficult learning experience, particularly if it is connected to communities and issues broader than the parameters of academic life.

Theory and philosophy "born in struggle" carry extremely difficult lessons. Activism concretizing ethical ideals in action, allows us to better comprehend a form of thinking unfamiliar in abstract academic thought—theorizing under fire or under conditions of confrontation or repression. Thinking to stay alive and be free is the heart of liberation praxis. For half a millenium, Indigenous and African peoples in the Americas and Africa have theorized for their individual lives and the life of the community. Theorizing as a life and death endeavor rather than leisured, idle speculation, embodies revolutionary praxis. As faculty we may find ourselves in positions where living by our beliefs and theory carries the hazards of not receiving grants, promotion or tenure; students may lose scholarships and higher grades. We rarely though find ourselves in positions where living by our ideals carries the possibility that we may die for them. We generally never have to risk our lives to claim our ideals and freedom, as have radical thinkers and activists such as: Harriet Tubman; Anne Moody; Assata Shakur; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; and, Fred Hampton.¹⁸

Several years ago, while a visiting scholar at a midwestern university, I was able to learn more about how risk-taking and radical organizing test ideas, ideologies and commitments. During my semester tenure, the Ku Klux Klan based in its national headquarters in

Indiana decided to march and stage a rally in the local campus town. The general response against the march and rally centered on individual comments of fear and anger. There was little collective, organized response until one night, as part of a woman's film festival, a small number of students viewed William Greaves' video, "A Passion for Justice," on the life of Ida B. Wells. An African American woman senior facilitated the discussion session that followed the video during which students shared how they were impressed by Ida B. Wells' courageous and influential activism, which began at such a young age, their age. They were silent when asked about the relationship between their feelings of inspiration for the story of Miss Wells' resistance and their feelings of anger and fear about the upcoming Klan march. Exploring these issues later that night in their dorm rooms, students began strategy sessions: they decided to allow their admiration for Miss Wells to lead them to organize a counter-educational critiquing racism, homophobia, sexism, and antisemitism in response to the impending KKK march.

African American women students led the organizing and formed a coalition with European Americans, European Jewish Americans and gay and lesbian activists. Some of these African American women students had experienced the most violent racial/sexual assaults on campus. At an early organizing meeting, one African American senior spoke of being dragged off a catwalk into bushes as her White male assailant yelled "nigger bitch" while repeatedly punching her. As she struggled away she noticed White student spectators who made no effort to assist or intervene. The woman student stated that the university's investigation and handling of the attack were equally unresponsive.

Faculty criticisms and complaints about White dominated universities did not translate into support for the student initiated organizing. Most African American faculty and administrators, like their White counterparts, were reluctant to publicly support a student "speak-out" against racist, sexist, and homophobic violence critical of the university. University employees mirrored the divisions among African American students in which more cautious or conservative students dismissed student organizers as "radical" and ridiculed them for "over-reacting." Political differences among African American students, faculty and administration were exacerbated during the KKK organizing.

Fear of criticizing the administration or faculty, along with homophobia, sexism and caste elitism allowed faculty and more conservative African American students to distance themselves from student activists. Yet students and youth face the greatest dangers from racial-sexual

violence on campus and in society. Alongside community women and men, only two European American women and I as faculty actively organized with students educating against, in the wake of the Klan rally, increasing racist/antisemitic verbal abuse and physical violence on campus. The Klan rally highlighted faculty ambivalence and refusal to support student organizing and the university administration's unwillingness to publicly take an uncompromised stance against and responsible action for diminishing racist, antisemitic, homophobic, and sexual violence on campus.

It seemed that we faculty and administrators believed our class and caste status in academe granted us immunity from the violence assaulting many African American youth, women, and gay and lesbian students. My own inabilities, with others, to always speak and talk to community in the midst of organizing conflicts, were compounded by my impatience and frustration with the political rhetoric and passivity of nonactivists. The confusion and strains impressed on me the precarious balance of teaching and talking for justice and my own uncertainty and anger, with others, about the terrain of struggle and community.

Community

Individual changes in classroom teaching to deconstruct racist-heterosexist curricula and build community are marginal if not supported by the department or program and other instructors. Often the struggles for more accuracy and accountability in education are labeled and depoliticized as personal (personnel) whims of faculty rather than responsible action. I have found that personalizing my confrontations with eurocentric thinkers or academic careerists is a form of depoliticization that contributes to my own isolation and ineffectualness. Supporting progressive curricula and pedagogies demands political change. Yet, my experiences show that few are willing to engage in the type of activism and restructuring necessary to supplant tokenism.

I share Toni Morrison's observations in "Rootedness: The Ancestor As Foundation," applying her thoughts on writing to teaching, another art form:

If anything I do in the way of writing . . . isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—

which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted.¹⁹

Academics and students, if not always content, seem comparatively "safe" from the political-economic conditions destroying African communities and villages. Educational status and economic "stability" grant us space to move about the world as if our survival were guaranteed, despite the increasing impoverishment and death of Africans worldwide.²⁰ Privilege may reduce our primary preoccupation in academia to struggles for accreditation and legitimacy from the intellectual representatives of the "new" old world order.

I am paid to, and so I pay my bills and taxes to the military, by teaching "theory" in a White university's White Women's Studies program in a White suburb called "Amherst." On my better days, I think freely about a people loving and theorizing for liberation. I try to think in the traditions in which philosophy and theory are the tools of initiates and "slaves"²¹ to the community, rather than the techniques of academic employees; this is problematic in places where people talk and write about life and death in and to abstraction. Although at times afraid to forget and to always remember my indebtedness to the militant Black praxis that forced open the doors of White academia, I am grateful to the call to be in a tradition of midwifery to philosophizing and theorizing, a tradition that intends community and respect for African ancestors, the living, and future born.

Notes

1. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," reprinted in *Making Face, Making Soul; Haciendo Caras*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990), 336.
2. Native American writer Lee Maracle notes the circular logic of academic theory: "Theory: If it can't be shown, it can't be understood. Theory is a proposition, proven by demonstrable argument. Argument: Evidence, proof. Evidence: demonstrable testimony, demonstration. . . . Argument is defined as evidence; proof or evidence is defined by demonstration or proof; and theory is a proposition proven by demonstrable evidence. None of these words exist outside of their inter-connectedness. Each is defined by the other." Lee Maracle, *Oratory: Coming to Theory*. North Vancouver, B.C. Gallerie Women Artists' Monographs, Issue 1 (September 1990), 3.
3. European American feminist Elizabeth Spelman cites this quote from a journal

- issue on African Americans and philosophy in her work *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
4. Amin continues: "Eurocentrism is a specifically modern phenomenon, the roots of which go back only to the Renaissance, a phenomenon that did not flourish until the nineteenth century. In this sense, it constitutes one dimension of the culture and ideology of the modern capitalist world." Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), vii.
 5. Cornel West, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," *Prophesy Deliverance* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).
 6. The phrase "White solipsism" comes from White lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich's article "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979). Solipsism is the belief that only one's self is knowable or constitutes the world.
 7. Racist, classist, and (hetero)sexist thinking routinely garner the title of "philosophy" or universally true—even when Eurocentric studies decree a new universal truth that there is no "universal truth." Although Europeans and European thought were not and are not the center of the universe, "civilization," or "theory," what tends to accompany "de-centering" the European, as Barbara Christian notes in "The Race for Theory," is the claim that there is no center. That traditional African cosmology, or Native American cosmology, might contain a center is rarely raised in academic theory. The relativist claim of "no center," backed by the hegemony of White supremacy, is like the claims of being "colorblind" or "raceless" in a racist system. It is blindness by convenience to deny domination and struggles for equality.
 8. See Chapter 3, "African Philosophy, Theory, and 'Living Thinkers'" in this anthology.
 9. Generally in Women's Studies, White women choose the Black feminist/womanist scholars. Recently, I found myself in the odd position of comforting a White woman on her difficulty in securing a position as a professor in African American women's literature. All her interviews had been with European Americans who controlled the hiring process. White women decided which Black woman they would hire for their "Black Women's Studies" line, based on their definition of Black feminism; since they decided on me, I'm working. I try to define and shape a program that respects rather than objectifies African people. The WORCC proposal in the appendix is one such attempt. However, the Center for Teaching committee rejected it, reportedly as "controversial," and "something you would do anyway" without institutional support.
 10. Patricia Hill Collins describes the ideology of this worldview where "research methods generally require a distancing of the researcher as a 'subject' with full human subjectivity and objectifying the 'object' of study . . . the absence of emotions from the research process . . . ethics and values [as] inappropriate in the research process . . . adversarial debates . . . [as] the preferred method of ascertaining truth. . . ." See: Patricia Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33:6 and *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990, reprint Routledge).
 11. Patricia Hill Collins uncritically argues for such "rearticulation" in "Learning from

- the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33:6 and *Black Feminist Thought*.
12. "When alien voices attempt to convey the African center, everything is lost in translation." K. Kia Bunseki Fu Kiau in a talk at the Caribbean Cultural Center in New York, January 1991, spoke of four different levels of language: level 1 of everyday life, level 2 of the esoteric or philosophical traditions of a people, and level 3 of those who mediate and translate between both levels. The fourth level came with colonization and conquest. Level 4, alien language, is where Europeans interrogated African people on level 1, the non-initiated. Foreigners believed they had encountered a whole people and their cosmology or lack of cosmology by speaking only with those on the level of everyday life.
 13. For examples of *ashé* or power of African women see: *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba*, edited by Henry and Margaret Drewal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 74.
 14. Eurocentric masculinist theory centers on White men while Eurocentric feminist theory (responding to the "gender," not race/class/heterosexual bias of masculinist Eurocentrism) focuses on White women. This cohabitation reflects obedience to academic house rules: Eurocentric feminist theory courses are also taught within a White canon of "essential writings." The increasing role of European American women in teaching African American women writers may merely signal increasing appropriation. Without a paradigmatic shift from Eurocentrism, appropriation features colorized reruns: the paradigm of White middle class women's victimization in blackface. Without an African centered paradigm from which to teach writings by women of color critiquing racist feminism, the center remains "White," and the works remain criticism of the prevailing hegemony not theorizing from African philosophy.
 15. Academia's presentation of time and consequently the history of thought promotes the delusion that philosophy (and civilization) began with "the Greeks" rather than the African scholars who preceded and taught them, and the African civilizations which predate Athens. Voids in timelines manufacture artificial "origins" which, legitimizing European rule, deny the African ancestral lineage in European philosophy. "Ancient" becomes the 'sui generis' thinking of "Europeanized" Greeks; "Medieval" the European Christian Church, with a de-Africanized Augustine; "Modern" European Enlightenment philosophers; and "Contemporary" European (American) writers and thinkers. "Ancient," "Medieval," "Modern," and "Contemporary" as categories for time also become categories of space and "race," denoting geography and ethnicity. Theorists assigned in each category are invariably "White" men in masculinist theory (where Hannah Arendt qualifies as the "exceptional ("White") woman) and "White" women in feminist theory.
 16. Bernice Johnson Reagon argues this about the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., see "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See"; or, "By and By I'm Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load," *Journal for American History* (Vol. 78, No. 1, June 1991).
 17. Theologian Bernard Lonergan discusses in *INSIGHT: An Understanding of Human Knowing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) an epistemology similar to the African (Afrocentric) ethical paradigm in which knowledge exists for the sake of communal good and individual human liberation (which are not presented as oppositional). Experience, reflection, judgment, and action are part of the process

by which people (knowingly or unknowingly) learn. Action is indispensable to the learning process: you know how to ride a bicycle or drive a car not from merely reading books about bicycles or cars, but from riding or driving one as well (building furthers your knowledge). One knows how to live, learn and teach without patriarchal, White supremacist, or classist elitist assumptions by doing activities that confront and diminish racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism.

18. Prior to his assassination by the FBI and Chicago police in 1971, Fred Hampton prophesied: "I'm going to die for the people because I live for the people." Quoted in "A Nation of Law? (1968-71)," *Eyes on the Prize-Part II* which documents Hampton's political work for the African American community, the FBI's disruption of the Black liberation movement and its eventual assassination of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. This segment of *Eyes on the Prize, Part II* also covers the Attica uprising for prisoners' human rights and its violent repression by the New York State government.
19. Morrison, 344-45.
20. The U.S. dominates international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). These institutions have underdeveloped Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean so that we as a people are poorer in the 1990s than we were in the 1960s. According to UNICEF's 1988 report, *State of the World's Children*, the "Third World" is in debt to the U.S. and Western European nations/financial institutions for over \$1000 billion (U.S. currency). People in the most impoverished countries in the world pay to the West more in interest and capital than they receive in new aid and loans: each year African, Caribbean, and Latin American nations transfer \$20+ billion to historical colonizers. UNICEF estimates that over half a million young children died in 1988 because of these economic policies in which 14% of the world's population—U.S. and other "Western" elites—consumes 70% of its resources. While IMF austerity programs decimate lives and autonomy of regions, U.S./Western European based multinational or transnational corporations exacerbate dislocation, labor and sexual exploitation of women and children—the "docile" labor supply. In this economic crisis of contemporary colonialism, modern day vampirism of the Black World enriches foreign and native elites. At "home" the situation is not very different.

In the U.S. "austerity programs" against the poor take on a new dimension as the World Bank and IMF implement "development" projects for what remains of indigenous people's lands. African American people are poorer today than when we were a generation ago: the "poverty draft" provides "equal opportunity employment" in military "service" or prison industries. Here, two out of three adults in poverty are women; with women of color twice as likely to be poor than White women. Here, an estimated 33 million people live below the whimsically set "poverty line." Millions live on the line and over one million do not even "register" because they are homeless. Ten percent of the U.S. people own 83% of the wealth and resources while twenty million are jobless. In some cities, up to 80% of the 16-19 year old African American youth have "dropped out" of the labor force; 70-80% are driven out of high schools. The National Urban League's 14th annual "State of Black America" (1988) report quantifies the results of the dominant U.S. philosophy and theory in practice: from 1984-1986, the life expectancy for Whites increased (from 75.3 years to 75.4), while the life expectancy for African Americans

- decreased (from 69.7 to 69.4 years); an African American infant is twice as more likely to die in her/his first year than a White infant.
21. According to Bunseki Fukia, in Kongo philosophy the Nganga—the initiated elders and teachers—are "slaves" to the community (lecture, Caribbean Cultural Center, New York City, February 1991).