The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies

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The Black Woman; The Black Woman: An Anthology; The Black Woman in America; The Black Woman in American Society; The Black Woman Cross-Culturally; Black Women in America; Black Women in White America; Black Women in the Nineteenth Century; Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life; Black Women Writers; Black Women Writers at Work; Black Women Writing Autobiography; Black Women Writing the American Experience; Black Women Novelists; Black Women Novelists in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement; Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition; The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers; Ain't I a Woman?; Ar'n't I a Woman?

For reasons that may already be obvious, the books named above and numerous others like them have led me to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. Not me personally, of course, but me black woman object, Other. Within and around the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier. I am alternately pleased, puzzled, and perturbed—bewitched, bothered, and bewildered—by this, by the alterity that is perpetually thrust upon African American women, by the production of black women as infinitely deconstructable "othered" matter. Why are black women always

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already Other? I wonder. To myself, of course, I am not Other; to me it is the white women and men so intent on theorizing my difference who are the Other. Why are they so interested in me and people who look like me (metaphorically speaking)? Why have we—black women—become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation, the peasants under glass of intellectual inquiry in the 1990s?

The attention is not altogether unpleasant, especially after generations of neglect, but I am hardly alone in suspecting that the overwhelming interest in black women may have at least as much to do with the pluralism and perhaps even the primitivism of this particular postmodern moment as with the stunning quality of black women's accomplishments and the breadth of their contributions to American civilization. It is not news that by virtue of our race and gender, black women are not only the "second sex"—the Other, in postmodern parlance—but we are also the last race, the most oppressed, the most marginalized, the most deviant, the quintessential site of difference. And through the inverisionary properties of deconstruction, feminism, cultural studies, multiculturalism, and contemporary commodity culture, the last shall be first. Perhaps.

I say perhaps because we have experienced the problematic of such inversions before: the preoccupation with black women, with the blues, the black folk, the authentic, the real colored thing in the 1920s, for example, a preoccupation fueled at least in part by the primitivist proclivities of the historical moment. In the twenties, the fascination with the black female body, in particular, and the primitive sexual anatomy and appetite attributed to the African woman increased the degree to which the black female functioned as an erotic icon in the racial and sexual ideology of Western civilization.

Black feminist theorist bell hooks calls the contemporary version of this preoccupation with alterity "the commodification of Otherness" or "eating the Other." "Within commodity culture," she writes in Black Looks, "ethnocentrism becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture." Mass culture, then, in hooks's view, perpetuates the primitivistic notion "that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference" (1992, 21).

Where gender and racial difference meet in the bodies of black women, the result is the invention of an other Otherness, a hyperstereotypical Otherness. Mass culture, as hooks argues, produces, promotes, and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness through the exploitation of the black female body. In the 1990s, however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community. In the words of black male theorist Houston Baker, who is among those who have recently taken up African American

women (and taken on black feminist critics): "Afro-American women's expressivity and the analyses that it has promoted during the past two decades represent the most dramatically charged field for the convergence of matters of race, class, and gender today" (1991, 1–2). Of course, one of the dangers of standing at this intersection—particularly at such a suddenly busy, three-way intersection—is the likelihood of being run over by oncoming traffic.

Michele Wallace likens the traffic jam that has built up around Zora Neale Hurston, in particular, to a "rainbow coalition" of critics, who, "like groupies descending on Elvis Presley's estate," are engaged in "a mostly ill-mannered stampede to have some memento of the black woman" (1990, 174), who is, at least to some degree, a figure of their individual and collective critical imaginations.

Precisely the question I want to explore in this essay is what it means for black women academics to stand in the midst of the "dramatically charged field"—the traffic jam—that black feminist studies has become. Are we in the way of the critical stampede that accompanies what I am calling here "the occult of true black womanhood"? Are we in danger of being trampled by the "rainbow coalition" of critics—"black, white, male, female, artists and academics, historicists and deconstructionists"—that our own once isolated and isolating intellectual labors have attracted to the magnetic field of black feminist studies?

"Hurstonism" and the black feminist phenomenon

In her foreword to the 1978 University of Illinois Press reprint of Their Eyes Were Watching God, black poet, novelist, and critic Sherley Anne Williams tells of first encountering Zora Neale Hurston and Their Eyes while a graduate student enrolled in a two-semester survey of black poetry and prose. "Afro-American literature was still an exotic subject then," Williams writes, "rarely taught on any regular basis" (1978, vi). She goes on to describe how she and her classmates fought over the pitifully few copies of African American texts, long out of print, that they were able to beg, borrow, and otherwise procure from musty basements, rare book collections, and reserved reading rooms. When it finally became her turn to read Their Eyes Were Watching God, Williams says she found in the speech of Hurston's characters her own country self and like Alice Walker and numerous others, became Zora Neale's for life.

For many of us who came of intellectual age in the late sixties and early seventies, Sherley Anne Williams's "discovery" of Zora is an almost painfully familiar textual encounter of the first kind. While Hurston was not the first black woman writer I encountered or claimed as my own (that was Ann Petry), it was during this same period—1971, in fact—
that I, too, discovered Zora. I was introduced to her and to her work by my friend and fellow graduate student, another gifted black woman writer, Gayl Jones. When I began my teaching career a few years later at a college in upstate New York, Gayl was again generous enough to lend me her well-worn, oft-read copy of Their Eyes. Only a lingering fear of being prosecuted for copyright infringement prevents me from detailing how I went about sharing among the dozen or so students in my seminar, none of whom had heard of Hurston, the fruits that bloomed within the single, precious, tattered copy of Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Twenty years later, African American studies courses and black women writers such as Hurston are once again exotic subjects. They are exotic this time out, however, not because they are rarely taught or seldom read, but because in the midst of the present, multicultural moment, they have become politically correct, intellectually popular, and commercially precious sites of literary and historical inquiry. Long either altogether ignored as historical and literary subjects or badly misfigured as magnanimous mammies, man-eating matriarchs, or immoral Jezebels, black women—that is, certain black women—and their texts have been taken up by and reconfigured within the academy, elevated and invoked by the intellectual elite as well as the scholarly marginal. Currently in print in several editions, Their Eyes Were Watching God has become quasi-canonical, holding a place of honor on syllabi of mainstream history, social science, literature, and American studies courses, as well as of perhaps more marginalized disciplines such as African American studies and women’s studies. Much the same holds true for Alice Walker’s The Color Purple and Toni Morrison’s Beloved, each of which has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

It is important to note that black women critics and scholars have played a crucial role in bringing to the academic fore the works of “lost” writers such as Hurston and Nella Larsen and in opening up spaces within the academy both for the fiction of contemporary African American women writers and for the study of black and other women of color more generally. While I am usually suspicious of efforts to define benchmarks and signposts, there are nevertheless a number of important essays, anthologies, and monographs that I think can be rightly claimed as the founding texts of contemporary black feminist studies. Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology The Black Woman (1970), for example—which showcased the prose and poetry of writers such as Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Sherley Anne Williams—stands as a pivotal text along with critical essays and literary, historical, and sociological studies by Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Frances Beal, Joyce Ladner, Jeanne Noble, Darlene Clark Hine, Angela Davis, Frances Foster, Filomena Chioma Steady, Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, and Mary Helen Washington.

While keepers of (dominant) culture have given the lion’s share of credit for the development of black literary and cultural studies to male scholars such as Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, and Cornel West, Mary Helen Washington nevertheless has been a key player in efforts to define and institutionalize the fields of African American literature and black feminist studies for more than twenty years. Among my most precious personal possessions is a tattered copy of the August 1974 issue of Black World, which contains an article by Washington entitled “Their Fiction Becomes Our Reality: Black Women Image Makers.” In this article, one of the first pieces of black feminist criticism I “discovered” and learned from (and in others that began appearing in Black World in 1972), Washington read, reviewed, and critiqued the works of black women writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Ann Petry, and Toni Cade Bambara, as well as Walker, Marshall, and Morrison.

Much the same can and must be said of Barbara Christian and Barbara Smith, whose essays on African American women writers began appearing in print in the mid and latter 1970s. Christian’s first book, Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976 (1980), which brilliantly analyzed the work of black women writers from Frances Harper to Marshall, Morrison, and Walker, remains a foundational text—“the Bible in the field of black feminist criticism,” according to Michele Wallace (1990, 184). Nor have the more than fifteen years since its publication dulled the impact and significance of Barbara Smith’s pivotal essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” ([1977] 1985), a widely reprinted, often anthologized black lesbian feminist critical declaration that, as Cheryl Wall points out, gave name, number.


2 For whatever it may suggest about the crisis and the production of the black intellectual, it is interesting to note that the intellectual labors of Baker, Gates, and West have been chronicled and lauded in cover stories and feature articles in such publications as the New York Times, the Boston Globe, Newsweek, the Washington Post, and Time magazine. I recall seeing only one article on Mary Helen Washington in the “Learning” section of the Sunday Globe (although, of course, there may have been others). The article was dominated by a stunning picture of Washington, accompanied by a caption describing her as a scholar-teacher who “helps restore sight to the 'darkened eye' of American literary tradition.” Despite this very fitting and promising caption, the article went on to say remarkably little about Washington’s actual scholarship and its impact on American literary studies (see Wels 1988).
definition, and political persuasion to the perspective from which Bambara, Washington, and others had been writing (Wall 1989, 45). Smith's work in literary criticism and that of her sister Beverly Smith in the area of black women's health have played crucial roles in developing the fields of black feminist and black lesbian feminist studies.

Within the realm of literary studies alone, the names making up even a partial list of pioneering black feminist scholars are, as Houston Baker has said, "legion" (1991, 10): Deborah McDowell, Nellie McKay, Hortense Spillers, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Cheryl Wall, Valerie Smith, Mae Henderson, Gloria Wade-Gayles, Thadious Davis, Trudier Harris, Frances Smith Foster, Hazel Carby, Joyce Joyce, and Claudia Tate, as well as Christian, Washington, Smith, and many many others. Both as an inspiration to aspiring young black women writers and as an editor at Random House in the 1970s, Toni Morrison, too, has played a particularly dramatic role in opening up spaces for and directing critical attention toward African American women.

While I, as a beneficiary of their research and writing, am anxious to give credit where credit is long overdue, this essay is not intended as a review of the literature they have generated. Rather, I would like to examine critically some of the implications and consequences of the current explosion of interest in black women as literary and historical subjects. Among the issues I hope to explore are the ways in which this interest—which seems to me to have reached occult status—increasingly marginalizes both the black women critics and scholars who excavated the fields in question and their black feminist "daughters" who would further develop those fields.

What does it mean, for example, that many prestigious university presses and influential literary publications such as the New York Times Book Review regularly rely not on these seasoned black women scholars but on male intellectuals—black and white—to read, evaluate, and review the book manuscripts of young black women just entering the profession? What does it mean for the black female professorate that departments often ask powerful senior black male scholars to referee the tenure and promotion cases of the same black women scholars who have challenged or affronted these men in some way? What does it mean for the field in general and for junior African Americanists in particular that senior scholars, who are not trained in African American studies and whose career-building work often has excluded (or at least not included) black women, are now teaching courses in and publishing texts about African American literature and generating supposedly "new scholarship" on black women writers? What does it mean for the future of black feminist studies that a large portion of the growing body of scholarship on black women is now being written by white feminists and by men whose work frequently achieves greater critical and commercial success than that of the black female scholars who carved out a field in which few "others" were then interested?

My questions are by no means new; nor do I claim to have any particularly insightful answers. I only know that as an African Americanist who has been studying the literature and history of black women for almost thirty years and teaching it for more than twenty, I have a burning need to try to work through on paper my own ambivalence, antipathy, and, at times, animosity over the new-found enthusiasm for these fields that I readily—perhaps too readily—think of as my own hard-won territory. I feel a little like the parent who tells the child she is about to reprimand that "this hurts me more than it hurts you." But lest anyone think that this is an easily authored Portnoy's complaint in blackface—yet another black womanist indictment of white feminists who can do no right and men who can do only wrong—I want to make explicit my own dis-ease with the antagonism to which I have admitted and by which I am myself somewhat baffled.

Elsewhere I have argued against territoriality, against racial, cultural, and gender essentialism, against treating African American studies as the private property of what Gayatri Spivak calls "black blacks" (Spivak 1989). Yet questions of turf and territoriality, appropriation and co-optation persist within my own black feminist consciousness, despite my best efforts to intellectualize them away. Again, this is not a new dilemma. The modern, academic version of the ageless argument over who owns the sacred text of me and mine is at least as old as the work of white anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits dating back to the 1920s and reaching a controversial peak in 1941 with the publication of The Myth of the Negro Past, a study of African cultural retentions scorned by many black intellectuals (Herskovits 1928). It was in the twenties, however, that
white scholars began to loom large in the realm of black historiography and literary criticism, often receiving within the academy a kind of attention and credibility that the pioneering work of many black historians and literary critics had not enjoyed. Black historian Darlene Clark Hine noted in 1980 that "most of the highly-acclaimed historical works were, with few exceptions, written by white scholars." In fact, in her estimation, the legitimization of black history as a field proved a "bonanza for the [white] professional historians already in positions [as university professors and/or recognized scholars] to capitalize from the movement" (Hine 1980, 115, as quoted in Meier and Rudwick 1986, 294).

One hundred thirty years ago, former slave Harriet Jacobs was able to publish her life's story only with the authenticating stamp of the well-known white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child as editor and copyright holder. "I have signed and sealed the contract with Thayer & Eldridge, in my name, and told them to take out the copyright in my name," Child wrote in a letter to Jacobs in 1860. "Under the circumstances your name could not be used, you know" (Jacobs 1861). The circumstances to which Child alluded (but did not name) were of course the conditions of slavery under which Jacobs had lived for most of her life and from which she had not completely escaped. Now, as then, it often seems to take the interest and involvement of white scholars to legitimize and institutionalize African American history and literature or such "minority discourses" as postcoloniality and multiculturalism.


Black feminist critic Gloria Wade-Gayles has identified Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* (1970) as "the first book that pulled together black women's views on black womanhood" and Jeanne Noble's *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters* (1978) as the "first history of black women in America written by a black woman" (Wade-Gayles 1984, 41–2). Yet, despite the recovery and reconnaissance missions of Bambara, Noble, Joyce Ladner, and other black women intellectuals who did groundbreaking work in the seventies, it is white feminist historian Gerda Lerner whom the academy recognizes as the pioneer in reconstructing the history of African American women.

With the 1972 publication of her documentary anthology *Black Women in White America*, Lerner became by many reckonings the first historian to produce a book-length study devoted to African American women. Her goal, as she outlined in her preface, was to call attention to such "(unused sources) as black women's own records of their experiences and "to bring another forgotten aspect of the black past to life" (xviii). In drawing on such first-person accounts as diaries, narratives, testimonies, and organizational records and reports, Lerner en-

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deavored in her volume, she says, "to let black women speak for themselves" (xx).

While the notion of letting someone speak for herself is surely problematic, I want to note as well that Lerner was by no means the first to draw on what she implies were unexamined resources. Black artists, activists, and intellectuals had made use of these kinds of resources since the nineteenth century. Former slave William Wells Brown (1853), for one, drew on such sources in the many novels, narratives, and histories he published between 1847 and his death in 1884. Although written in a vein admittedly different from Lerner's work, Mrs. N. F. Mossell's *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, first published in 1894, represents an early effort on the part of an African American woman to acknowledge the accomplishments and contributions of her black sisters (1894). Black activist, educator, and "race woman" Anna Julia Cooper wrote of the "long dull pain" of the "open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Women of America" in *A Voice from the South*, published in 1892. In fact, the longevity of the insider/outsider debate is reflected in Cooper's one-hundred-year-old pronouncement: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me'" ([1892] 1988, 31). Their own travels, joys, sorrows, and the testimonies and plaintive cries of other African American women, poor women, working women were the imperatives that propelled much of the political activism among black clubwomen at the turn of the century.

Nor should we ignore the intellectual labors of black literary scholar Charles Nichols, whose masterwork *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (1963) has directed two generations of researchers interested in slavery to a significant source: the "forgotten testimony of its victims" (ix). In fact, the methodology Lerner employed in *Black Women in White America* is one perfected by Nichols.

To take up a more contemporary example, I might point out that for decades black writers, critics, and scholars have attempted to delineate the tremendous impact African American culture has had on the mainstream American literary tradition. Their efforts, however, have received little attention from the academy. But when a white scholar recently asked, "Was Huckleberry Finn Black?" the academy, the publishing industry, and the media sat up and took notice. I am referring, of course,

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*Lerner does mention Nichols briefly in the bibliographical essay at the end of Black Women in White America. Nichols's book, she writes, "offers an excellent synthesis of the literature of slave narratives and evaluates their authenticity" (1972, 620).*
to the hoopla over Shelley Fisher Fishkin's book *Was Huck Black?* (1993). As much as a year before it appeared in bookstores, Fishkin's study was lauded in such influential publications as the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In fact, according to the *London Times*, more than fifty news items on the book appeared across the country, sporting such headlines as: “Scholar Concludes That Young Black Was Model for Huck Finn's Voice; Huck Finn Speaks 'Black,' Scholar Says; and Theory Might Warm Foes to Twain's Novel” (Fender 1993, 27). I quote from one such article that appeared in the *Chronicle*: “Ms. Fishkin's book, *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, is likely to have a major impact, not just on the way scholars interpret the mainstay of the American literary canon, but also on the way scholars define that canon. By calling attention to the way multicultural voices have influenced mainstream literature, it suggests that traditional views of the dichotomy between majority and minority cultures may be flawed. In so doing, the book gives the term multiculturalism a new meaning” (Winkler 1992, A6).

I do not mean to make little or light of Shelley Fishkin's research and conclusions: hers is important and provocative work. What I am intrigued by, however, is the response from the white intellectual establishment. Why is the conclusion that “we need to pay more attention to African-American culture, even when we study the canon” suddenly being greeted as news? Haven't black scholars long argued the reflexive nature of cultural appropriation and the interrelatedness of so-called minor and major traditions? Speaking at a socialist conference in 1917, James Weldon Johnson, whom David Levering Lewis calls the “dean of Afro-American letters,” reportedly shocked his audience by declaring that “the only things artistic in America that have sprouted from American soil, permeated American life, and been universally acknowledged as distinctively American” were the creations of the Afro-American” (Lewis 1984). No African Americanist I know has been surprised at being told at this late date what many of us have argued for a long time: that Twain, like many major white American writers, drew canon fodder from the “black experiences” that are a fundamental, if often unacknowledged, part of American culture.

These and numerous other examples suggest to me a kind of color line and intellectual passing within and around the academy: black culture is more easily intellectualized (and canonized) when transferred from the danger of lived black experience to the safety of white metaphor, when you can have that “signifying black difference” without the difference of significant blackness. Fishkin's work, like Lerner's, is undeniably important, but it does not stand alone as revolutionary. “Sociable Jimmy,” the young black boy on whose vernacular speech Twain may have based Huck's colorful language, may never have gotten to speak for himself in print, but black women had been speaking for themselves and on behalf of each other long before Gerda Lerner endeavored “to let” them do so.

As I have suggested, the question of who speaks for me, who can write my sacred text, is as emotionally and politically charged as it is enduring and controversial. Asked about the explosion of interest in the lives and literature of black women among male scholars and white feminists, Barbara Christian responded in part: “It is galling to me that after black women critics of the 1970s plowed the neglected field of Afro-American women’s literature when such an act was academically dangerous, that some male and white feminist scholars now seem to be reaping the harvest and are major commentators on this literature in influential, though not necessarily feminist journals such as *The New York Review of Books*. Historical amnesia seems to be as much a feature of intellectual life as other aspects of American society” (Christian et al. 1990, 61).

Historical amnesia may displace her at any time, but for this moment anyway, the black woman writer has become a bonanza. Her near phenomenal popularity as subject matter has spawned a wealth of critical scholarship and has spontaneously generated scores of scholars determined to claim her material and cultural production—what Houston Baker calls “Afro-American women's expressivity”—as their intellectual discourse. But as Barbara Christian's remarks imply, black women's expressivity is not merely discourse; it has become lucrative in the intellectual marketplace, cultural commerce. What for many began as a search for our mothers' gardens, to appropriate Alice Walker's metaphor (1974), has become for some a Random House harvest worth millions in book sales and prestigious university professorships. Sensitive as the issue is, it must be said at some point and even at the risk of hurt feelings that the explosion of interest in the black female subject is at least in some measure about economics—about jobs. White feminist scholar Elizabeth Abel has acknowledged as much. “This new attentiveness [to texts by women of color] has been overdetermined,” she argues, “by the sheer brilliance and power of this writing and its escalating status in the literary marketplace and, consequently, the academy; [and] by white feminist restlessness with an already well-mined white female literary tradition” (1993, 478). For many scholars trained in these well-mined fields, the shift to African American studies has yielded more prominent positions at more prestigious institutions.

But is this, as it seems to be for Barbara Christian, necessarily a bitter harvest? We—“we” being here African American women scholars—have complained long and loud about exclusion, about the degree to which white feminists and male critics have ignored the work of black women. Can we now legitimately complain that they are taking up (and taking
over?) this important work? And what do such complaints tell us about ourselves and our relationship to what many of us continue to speak of as our literature?

While, as I have acknowledged, I, too, am troubled, even galleyed by what at times feels like the appropriation and co-option of black women by white feminists and by men, what I ultimately want to get at in this article is not simply about property rights, about racial or gender territoriality. It is by no means my intention to claim Hurston, Morrison, Walker, et al. as the private property of black women readers who, like Sherley Anne Williams, see themselves in their characters. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that rather than liberating and valorizing black female voices, the celebration of African American women’s literature and history as the discursively familiar, as a “truth” to which black women scholars have privileged access rooted in common experience, both deflits and demeans those discourses. For, however inadvertently, it restricts this work to a narrow orbit in which it can be readily validated only by those black and female for whom it reproduces what they already know.  

Undeniably critical contributions to the study of black women and their literature and history have been made by scholars who are neither black nor female. The name of William L. Andrews comes to mind immediately, as does that of Robert Hemenway (Hemenway 1977; Andrews 1986). That we have increased access to the autobiographical writings of nineteenth-century African American women is due in part to Andrews’s effort. That Hurston’s work is now so readily accessible is due in no small measure not only to the efforts of black feminist writer Alice Walker, but also to those of white male scholar Robert Hemenway. Through the research and publishing efforts of white feminist scholar Jean Fagan Yellin and black male theorist Henry Louis Gates, to cite two other examples, we now have authentication of and access to two fundamental texts from the nineteenth century: Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself ([1861] 1987) and Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig ([1859] 1983). Moreover, since 1988 the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, of which Gates is general editor, has made available to critics and scholars dozens of previously lost texts. The recent work of white feminist scholar Elizabeth Ammons also represents a positive turn in literary studies. In its intercultural readings of works by African, Asian, Native, Jewish, and white American women, her book Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century (1992) represents a model we all would do well to follow.

Surely this is great work and good news. Why, then, am I so many other black feminist scholars left wrestling with such enduring questions about co-option and exploitation? Why are we haunted by a growing sense that we are witnessing (and perhaps even have inspired in some way) the commodification of the same black womanhood we have championed? It is a mistake, I think, to define this persistent (but perhaps inherently irresolvable) debate over who can read black female texts as strictly or even perhaps primarially racial or cultural or gendered: black/white, male/female, insider/outsider, our literature/your theory, my familiar/their foreign. The most important questions, I have begun to suspect, may not be about the essentialism and territoriality, the biology, sociology, or even the ideology about which we hear so much but, rather, about professionalism and disciplinarity; about cultural literacy and intellectual competence; about taking ourselves seriously and insisting that we be taken seriously not as objectified subjects in someone else’s histories—as native informants—but as critics and as scholars reading and writing our own literature and history.

Disciplinary matters: When demeanor demeans

So I have arrived at what for me is at the heart of what’s the matter. Much of the newfound interest in African American women that seems to honor the field of black feminist studies actually demeans it by treating it not like a discipline with a history and a body of rigorous scholarship and distinguished scholars underpinning it, but like an anybody-can-play pick-up game performed on a wide-open, untrammeled field. Often the object of the game seems to be to reinvent the intellectual wheel: to boldly go where in fact others have gone before, to flood the field with supposedly new “new scholarship” that evinces little or no sense of the discipline’s genealogy. Moreover, many of the rules that the academy generally invokes in doing its institutional business—in making appointments, assigning courses, and advancing faculty—are suddenly suspended when what is at stake is not the valorized, traditional disciplines of Western civilization but the more marginal, if extremely popular, fields within African American studies.

7 White deconstructivist Barbara Johnson has called Henry Louis Gates on his repeated use of the term “our own.” Johnson notes that in a single discussion “Gates uses the expression ‘our own’ no fewer than nineteen times.” She goes on to query the meaning behind his ambiguous phrase: “Does Gates mean all black people (whatever that might mean)? All Afro-Americans? All scholars of Afro-American literature? All black men? All scholars trained in literary theory who are now interested in the black vernacular?” See Gates 1989 and Johnson 1989.

8 For those of us tempted to make common (black female) experience the essence of critical interpretation or to view black women’s fiction as expressive realism, Belsey’s words may be prohibitively instructive: “The claim that a literary form reflects the world is simply tautologous,” she writes. “What is intelligible as realism is the conventional and therefore familiar. . . . It is intelligible as ‘realistic’ precisely because it reproduces what we already seem to know” (1980, 47).
Among those elements considered when English departments hire Medievalists, Victorianists, Americanists, and so on, at least in my experience in the academy, are school(s) attended, the nature of one's graduate training, the subject of one's dissertation, and not only what one has published but where one has published as well. Were the articles refereed? Were they published in reputable academic journals? Are the journals discipline-specific, edited and juried by experts in the candidate's field, scholars who know whereof they read? I have seen these valorized criteria relaxed time and time again, however, when these same traditionally trained, nonblack scholars are being hired not in the fields in which they were educated but in African American studies. Interestingly enough, the same loosening of standards does not readily occur when black scholars—particularly young black scholars—apply for positions as generalists in American or world literature. The fact that the educational system is such that it is still largely impossible to specialize in African American literature without first being trained in the European and Anglo-American canons does not keep the powers that be from questioning the preparedness of blacks who apply for jobs as generalists. A dissertation on Toni Morrison or C. L. R. James or W. E. B. Du Bois does not necessarily qualify one as an Americanist, but a thesis on Chaucer or the Brontës or Byron is not an impediment to an appointment as an African Americanist.

Indeed, the question of who is authorized to teach African American discourse is riddled with ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions. Black scholars readily and properly trained and credentialized in traditional fields—medieval studies, for example—are often assumed or expected to be ready, willing, and able to teach black studies courses. African American studies programs and department are not supposed to be intellectual ghettos populated exclusively by black scholars, particularly when white scholars want to enter such programs, but the field of African American studies often is treated like a black ghetto—like the one right and proper place for black intellectuals—when black scholars dare to step out of it, dare to be Medievalists or classicists or British Victorianists.

Moreover, while many of our white colleagues and administrators may theorize African American and black feminist studies as open fields, as acquirable tastes (“You don’t have to be one to teach one,” as someone put it), this intellectual position often is not lived up to in institutional practice. For when these same individuals want someone to provide a black reading of their work or black representation on a committee or black resources for their students or information about a particular black author or details about an event in black history, more times than not it is to black faculty that they turn, and not to the white Victorianists they have hired as African Americanists and have authorized to teach courses in black literature and history.

So here we have another paradox of critical demeanor: the difference between authority and authenticity. Black scholars on predominantly or overwhelmingly white campuses are rarely authorized simply as scholars. Rather, our racial difference is an authenticating stamp that, as Indira Karamcheti has argued, often casts us in the role of Caliban in the classroom and on the campus. Speaking of minority scholars in general, Karamcheti writes:

We are sometimes seen, it seems to me, as traveling icons of culture, both traditional (as long as we’re over there) and nontraditional (when we’re right here), unbearably ancient in our folk wisdom and childlike in our infantile need for the sophistication of the West. We are flesh and blood information retrieval systems, native informants, who demonstrate and act our difference, often with an imperfectly concealed political agenda. We are the local and the regional opposed to the universality of the West, nature to its culture, instinct to its intellect, body to its brain. We are, in fact, encaused in the personal and visible facts of our visible selves, walking exemplars of ethnicity and of race. [1994]

Walking exemplars of ethnicity and race. It seems to me that this is particularly true for black women scholars on white college campuses where they experience both a hypervisibility and a superisolation by virtue of their racial and gender difference. Unfortunately, icons are not granted tenure automatically; when their canonical year rolls around, all too often these same black women faculty members who have been drawn on as exemplars and used up as icons will find themselves chewed up and spit out because they did not publish. (Consider the startling number of brilliant black women scholars who have produced only one book or no book.) Sympathetic white colleagues lament their black colleagues’ departures from the university: “Why didn’t she just say ‘no’?” they ask each other, rarely remembering the many times they implored her to just say “yes,” the numerous occasions on which they sent her students with questions only she could answer or problems only she could solve, or the many instances in which they treated her not like a colleague but like their personal research assistant or native informant.

Given the occult of true black womanhood, to be (not so) young, female, and black on today’s college campuses is difficult, to be sure. But more troubling still is the fact that commodified, Calibanized black women intellectuals, whose authority as academicians often has been questioned at every turn in their careers, are not supposed to resist, or even to notice, the double standard that propels others forward even as it keeps them back. For the most part, however, black women in the academy not only have resisted, they have refused to suffer in silence, only
complaints are by now old news. Many ears, once sympathetic to “the black woman’s plight,” her “double jeopardy,” her “exceptional burdens,” have been frozen by the many winters of our discontent. Our grievances have begun to be heard only as “anti-intellectual identity politics” and “proprietary claims.” What Houston Baker describes as our “black feminist manifestos” — our “admonitions, injunctions, and cautions to those who wish to share the open road” (1991, 11) — reveal us to be, even to our most supportive colleagues, small-minded, mean-spirited, and downright petty.

Of course, my point is that for many of us, for many black women scholars, questioning the race, ethnicity, culture, and credentials of those the academy authorizes to write our histories and to teach and interpret our literature is anything but petty. Rather, it is a concern that rises from the deepest recesses of who we are in relation to where we live and work. Black women have pioneered a field that even after more than twenty years remains marginalized within the academy, regardless of how popular both the field and its black women practitioners are with students. Our at once precarious and overdetermined positions in the academy and our intimate knowledge of social, intellectual, and academic history prompt us not simply to guard our turf, as often accused, but also to discipline our field, to preserve its integrity and our own.

I have emphasized the pronoun our in order to problematize the admitted possessiveness of our disciplinary concerns. For no matter how compelling — no matter how historically resonant — the sense of personal stake that permeates the scholarship by black women about black women just may be an aspect of the insider/outsider problematic for which African American women academics have to take responsibility. It may be time for us to interrogate in new and increasingly clinical ways our proprietary relationship to the field many of us continue to think of as our own.

Such internal review presents its own problematic, however. To claim privileged access to the lives and literature of African American women through what we hold to be the shared experiences of our black female bodies is to cooperate with our own commodification, to buy from and sell back to the dominant culture its constitution of our always already essentialized identity. On the other hand, to relinquish claim to the experiences of the black body and to confirm and affirm its study purely as discourse, simply as a field of inquiry equally open to all, is to collaborate with our own objectification. We become objects of study where we are authorized to be the story but have no special claim to decoding that story. We can be, but someone else gets to tell us what we mean.

This conundrum operates, of course, in realms beyond the either/or options I have established here. But how to find the middle ground, that happier medium? How do we negotiate an intellectually charged space for experience in a way that is not totalizing and essentializing — a space that acknowledges the constructedness of and the differences within our lived experiences while at the same time attending to the inclining, rather than the declining significance of race, class, culture, and gender?

I once was blind, but now I see — you

By and large, it is only those who enjoy the privileges of white skin who can hold matters of race at arm’s length. White feminist theorist Jane Gallop, for instance, can say that “race only posed itself as an urgent issue to me in the last couple of years” (Gallop, Hirsch, and Miller 1990, 363), but race always has been an urgent issue for Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Smith — indeed for most, if not all, black feminist critics. Gallop can say that she did not feel the need to discuss race until the focus of her work shifted from French poststructuralist theory to American feminist literary criticism. But Gayatri Spivak and other Third World women know only too well the fallacies and consequences of treating race as something only other (nonwhite) people own and racism as a problem particular to the United States. As Spivak writes in In Other Worlds: “In the matter of race-sensitive analysis, the chief problem of American feminist criticism is its identification of racism as such with the constitution of racism in America. Thus, today I see the object of investigation to be not only the history of ‘Third World Women’ or their testimony but also the production, through the great European theories, often by way of literature, of the colonial object” (1988, 81).

The colonial object is furthered not only by the canonical literature of the West, as Spivak suggests, but also by a would-be oppositional feminist criticism whose practitioners continue to see whiteness as so natural, normative, and unproblematic that racial identity is a property only of the nonwhite. Unless the object of study happens to be the Other, race is placed under erasure as something outside immediate consideration, at once extratextual and extraterrestrial. Despite decades of painful debate, denial, defensiveness, and color-consciousness-raising, “as a woman” in mainstream feminist discourse all too often continues to mean “as a white woman.” White feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman calls this enduring, thoroughly internalized myopia the “Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism” (1988, 13). Indeed, for women of color who are often

* Echoing the complaint that women of color have leveled for some time (at least since Sojourner Truth’s public query, “Ain’t I a woman,” first asked more than 140 years ago), Spelman argues that holding their own experiences to be normative, many white feminists historically have given little more than lip service to the significance of race and class in the lives of women.
asked to prove their feminism by placing their gender before their race, the exclusionary ethnocentrism of seemingly innocent constructions such as “women and minorities” is at once as hollow and as loaded as the Greeks’ wooden horse.

But there is a larger and somewhat more convoluted point I want to get at here, and maybe I can use Jane Gallop’s words to make it for me. In the same conversation referred to above, Gallop confesses that African American women have become for her what French men used to be: the people she feels inadequate in relation to and tries hardest to please in her writing. This fear of black feminists “is not just idiosyncratic,” Gallop believes—not just hers alone—but a shared anxiety among white women academics. She traces her own awareness of this anxiety to what she calls a “non-encounter” with black feminist critic Deborah McDowell, who teaches at the University of Virginia where Gallop once gave a talk. “I had hoped Deborah McDowell would come to my talk,” she says; “she was there, she was the one person in the audience that I was really hoping to please” (Gallo, Hirsch, and Miller 1990, 363–64). Gallop goes on to explain that as part of her lecture she read from the manuscript that became Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory (1992), after which someone in the audience asked if she was including any black feminist critical anthologies in her study. “I answered no and tried to justify it, but my justifications rang false in my ears,” she admits. She continues:

Some weeks later a friend of mine showed me a letter from McDowell which mentioned my talk and said that I was just doing the same old thing, citing that I was not talking about any books edited by black women. I was obsessed over McDowell’s comment until I decided to add a chapter on Pryse and Spillers’s Conjuring. I had already vowed not to add any more chapters out of fear that I would never finish the book. As powerful as my fear of not finishing is, it was not as strong as my wish for McDowell’s approval. For McDowell, whom I do not know, read black feminist critic. [Gallop, Hirsch, and Miller 1990, 363]

Gallop ends her commentary on what might be called “the influence of anxiety” by noting that McDowell (“read black feminist critic”) has come to occupy the place of Lacan in her psyche in much the same way that “emphasis on race has replaced for [her] something like French vs. American feminism” (364).

It is interesting to me that while she clearly desired McDowell’s approval, like the white child who insults her mammy one moment and demands a hug from her the next, Gallop seemed to expect that approval without having to do the thing most likely to win it: include McDowell and other black women scholars in the category of feminist theorists or treat black feminist critics as colleagues to be respected for the quality of their scholarship rather than as monsters to be feared for the quantity of their difference.

Gallo’s confessional narrative—and McDowell’s nonspeaking part in it—is problematic on so many levels that it is difficult to unpack and isolate its multiple fractures. Among other things, her remarks seem to me to exoticize, eroticize, anormalize, and masculinize (if not demonize) Deborah McDowell and the whole category of “black feminist critic” for which she is made to stand. Just what are the implications of conflating white French men and black American women as thorns in the side of white feminists, as Father Law? Gallop’s transference is all the more vexed because she and her collaborators define “the men”—“them”—as “the enemy” throughout their conversation. In fact, as Nancy K. Miller puts it at one point, where feminist critique and French male theorists meet, the result is a “David and Goliath thing, with little Jane Gallop from Duluth taking out her slingshot to use on the great man” (Gallo, Hirsch, and Miller 1990, 358).

Not-so-little (academically speaking) Jane Gallop wields words like a slingshot; but McDowell, daunting as her scholarly accomplishments are, is no Goliath. There is a very different power relation in play. McDowell, whom I believe Gallop means in some way to honor, is actually demeaned by a narrative that casts her (and, by virtue of Gallop’s own symbolic action, “the black feminist critic”) somewhere between monster and mammy: demanding, demeaning, impossible to please, but at the same time possessing irresistible custodial power and erotic allure as the larger than life (racialized) Other.

I must rush to insert that mammy is my metaphor, not Gallop’s. In fact there is nothing in Gallop’s commentary that defines McDowell as anything other than “black feminist critic”—nothing that describes her work or that explains why she looms so large in Gallop’s psyche while she is so small in her text. McDowell, the black feminist critic, is never anything other than the Other in “Critical Feminist Criticism.” Race enters the conversation between these three white feminists only through the referenced bodies of objectified black women and only in those moments when the speakers tally their own and each other’s sins of omission against women of color and their irritation at being chastised or, as they say, “trashed” for those exclusions.

Spurred by McDowell’s criticism, Jane Gallop did indeed go on to add the Pryse and Spillers anthology Conjuring (1985) to her study of academic feminist theory, with quite interesting results. Provocative if tentative, Gallop’s critique is at its most incisive where it attends to the
tensions between the different organizing principles set out in the coeditors' individually authored introduction and afterword. Her critique is, for me anyway, most engaging where it claims and attempts to explain that Conjuring comes with its own deconstruction.

As Gallop reads it, Marjorie Pryse's introduction argues for a continuum of black women writers—a single, unified tradition rooted in and passing on what Pryse describes as the magic, folk wisdom, and “ancient power” of black women. Hortense Spillers's afterward, on the other hand, foregrounds cross-currents and discontinuities—differences within a tradition that is itself always in flux. Gallop concludes that Pryse frames and Spillers reframes. While Spillers's reframing turns the reader's expectations inside out, Pryse's introductory framing, according to Gallop, "corresponds to and evokes in the reader, at least in the white female academic, a fantasy which orients our reading of black women. I want the conjure woman; I want some ancient power that stands beyond the reaches of white male culture. I want black women as the idealized and exoticized alternative to European high culture. I want some pure outside and am fool enough to think I might find it in a volume published by Indiana University Press, with full scholarly apparatus" (1992, 169).

Again, a difficult passage to unpack, made even more so by the author's subsequent admission that she was disappointed that the book was "so 'academic' " and that she attributed its particularly erudite essays, with their classical allusions, to critics she imagined to be white. Surely Gallop does not mean what she seems to me to say here. Is she really admitting in print that she expected a critical anthology subtitled Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition—a book edited by two university professors, one of whom has long been regarded as one of the deans of black feminist criticism—to be other than scholarly, literate, and intellectually sophisticated?

To be fair, I think Gallop's tone is meant to be ironic, to point out—and perhaps even to poke fun at—the essentializing fantasies of "the white female academic" reader who desires the Other to be other, who brings to the text of the Other a different set of assumptions, who in effect expects to leave high theory behind when she goes slumming in low culture. Hers is a dangerous strategy, but one that seems to be popular among white readers of "black texts," who feel compelled to supplement their critiques with exposures of their former racism (and/or sexism) in a kind of I-once-was-blind-but-now-I-see-way. (It worked for the composer of "Amazing Grace," a reformed slave trader.) I will have more to say about this strategy in a moment, but for now I want to linger over what is for me as much a critique of "the white female academic" reader as of Conjuring.

Gallop in terms perhaps a bit too subtle for the subject is telling us that she, as a white woman reader, wanted to find in this black book the exotic black female Other, the "new delight," the "spice," to liven up the dull dish of Western culture she as an academic usually consumes. "Since I am a white academic," she writes, "what sort of fantasy not only renders those attributes contemptible but, from an imagined identification with some righteous outside, allows me to cast them as aspersions on others?" (1992, 169). In this instance, anyway, Gallop's anamalizing and exoticizing movements are not entirely unself-conscious, as they seemed to be in "criticizing feminist criticism." As her self-reflective answer suggests, her essay is underpinned by an implicit critique of the primitivist assumptions and expectations that "the white female academic" (I would be more generous and say some white female academics) brings to the reading of texts by and/or about black women.

Even more interesting, however, is Gallop's contention that Pryse's introduction invokes and evokes such desires in the reader, especially the white reader. She says that reading Conjuring for a second time, even knowing that Spillers's corrective essay lay ahead, she still nearly gave herself over to the introduction's romantic vision of the black female folk. "In this chapter I wanted to transmit this illusory take on the anthology," Gallop writes, "because I consider this illusion central to our reading of black women. We must confront our wish to find this ancient power, this pure outside of academic culture, before we deconstruct or correct our illusion" (170; my emphasis). In other words, the reader needs to absorb Pryse's framing before Spillers's reframing can take effect.

I am not quite sure how this follows: Why we need this critical felix culpa, this happy fall into what Gallop describes as the folk fantasies of Pryse before we can be rescued by the refined vision of Spillers? But perhaps my failure to follow Gallop's logic fully here stems from the fact that her "we" and "our" are at least as problematic as the ones I used earlier. I am not a part of her "we," and she is not a part of mine. Pryse's introduction did not evoke in me as a reader the kind of desires Gallop evidently assumes it evokes in her universal "we." While I cannot appropriate her "we," her larger point about the opposing strategies of Pryse's introduction and Spillers's afterward is one I want to take up and to politicize.

What happens if we add to Gallop's notion of the framing/reframing, idealizing/realizing, "good cop/bad cop" routine of the coeditors the fact that Marjorie Pryse is white and Hortense Spillers black? What does it mean, then, that Spillers both brings up the rear and has the last word and, according to Gallop, "deconstructs or corrects" not only Pryse's romantic vision of a black female folk but the primitivist expectations
of the "white female academic"? Can one correct where there has been no error? Perhaps because she does not quite dare to play critical hardball with those whom she seems to take to be two black feminist critics, Gallop bends over backward to soft-pedal away the very ideological disjuncture she has so astutely identified. If the coeditors are simply playing out a well-rehearsed, mutually agreed upon routine, as Gallop ultimately concludes, why has Pryse positioned herself as the essentializing, idealizing white woman academic and left the real, corrective black feminist criticism to Spillers?

Gallop's reading of editorial matters in Conjuring unwittingly plays into my hand and punctuates my principal point about the dangers of a critical demeanor that demeans its subject in the very act of analyzing it. It is, of course, no better for me to use Gallop (or Pryse) as a metonym for white feminist critics than it is for Gallop to so use Deborah McDowell. Yet the wide-eyed wonderful illusions Gallop attributes to Pryse's introduction and the closed-eyed myopia of her own remarks in "Criticalizing Feminist Criticism" demonstrate precisely why it remains so difficult for some black feminist scholars to entrust the texts of their familiar to the critical caretaking of white women (and men) for whom black women are newly discovered foreign bodies, always already Other.

Critical apologia: The Driving Miss Daisy crazy syndrome

Yet. Still. And but. If a Ph.D. in British literature is not a title deed to the African American text, neither is black skin. Romantic fantasies of an authentic, cohesive, magical, ancient, all-knowing black female folk are certainly not unique to white academics who would read black women. Some might argue that what is at issue is not simply the color or culture of the scholar but the kind, quality, and cultural competence of the scholarship. Black historian Carter Woodson reportedly welcomed the contributions of white scholars, "so long as they were the products of rigorous scholarship and were not contaminated by the venom of racial [and, I would add, gender] bias" (quoted by Meier and Rudwick 1986, 289). Unfortunately, however, such biases are ideologically inscribed and institutionally reproduced and as such are not easily elided—not even by the most liberal, the most sensitive, the most well-intentioned among us. I think, for example, of Adrienne Rich.

I had long been a fan of Rich's poetry, but I was rather late in coming to her prose. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1986), originally published in 1976, was more than a dozen years old before I gave myself the pleasure of reading it. For once, however, my timing could not have been better, for I "discovered" this essential book at a critical moment in my life and in the development of my feminism: on the eve of my fortieth birthday, as I wrestled with the likelihood of never having a child. Rich's brilliant analysis of motherhood as an instrument of patriarchy helped me come to terms with the constructedness of what I had been reared to believe were natural maternal instincts without which I was no woman. But for all that Rich's book gave me, it also took something away; and what it snatched from me, ironically and perhaps a little unfairly, has come to mean almost as much to me as what it gave.

For a moment in the penultimate chapter of this passionate and painful critique of motherhood, Rich turns her remarks toward the black woman who helped raise her. To this woman, who remains nameless, Rich assigns the designation "my Black mother." "My Black mother was 'mine,'" she writes, "only for four years, during which she fed me, dressed me, played with me, watched over me, sang to me, cared for me tenderly and intimately" ([1976] 1986, 254). Rich goes on to describe poetically the physical presence of her Black mother, from whom she "learned—nonverbally—a great deal about the possibilities of dignity in a degrading situation" (254; my emphasis). Unaware of the degrading situation she creates with her words, she continues: "When I began writing this chapter I began to remember my Black mother again: her calm, realistic vision of things, her physical grace and pride, her beautiful soft voice. For years, she had drifted out of reach, in my searches backward through time, exactly as the double silence of sexism and racism intended her to do. She was meant to be utterly annihilated" (254–55).

To the double silences of sexism and racism Rich adds a third: the silence (and the blindness) of feminism. Like Jane Gallop, who I am sure meant to praise Deborah McDowell, Adrienne Rich no doubt means to honor the woman who cared for her as a child. But the poetry of her prose should not disguise the paternal arrogance of her words or mask the annihilating effect of her claim on the being she resurrects and recreates as "my Black mother." Silent and nameless in Rich's book, "my Black mother" has no identity of her own and, in fact, does not exist beyond the care and nurture she gave exclusively to the young Adrienne.

"Childless herself, she was a mother," Rich writes of her objectified subject. Her claim to "my Black mother" and her attempt to thrust motherhood upon a childless black woman domestic worker are all the more ironic because of what she claims for all women in the introduction to the anniversary edition of Of Woman Born: "The claim to personhood; the claim to share justly in the products of our labor, not to be used merely as an instrument, a role, a womb, a pair of hands or a back or a set of fingers; to participate fully in the decisions of our workplace, our community; to speak for ourselves, in our own right" (xxviii). Even in the midst of her own extended critique of the mystification of motherhood
and the objectification of women as mothers, Rich has both mystified and objectified someone she can see only in the possessive case as "my Black mother." "My Black mother" is a role, a pair of hands; her function is to instruct the white child "nonverbally" in the ways of the world, even as she cannot speak "in [her] own right."  

The kind of transformative move Rich makes in invoking the silent racial, maternalized Other is in no way unique to her prose. The child may be father of the man in poetry, but frequently when white scholars reminisce about blacks from their past it is black mammy (metaphorically speaking, even where the mammy figure is a man) who mothers the ignorant white infant into enlightenment. Often as the youthful, sometimes guilty witness to or cause of the silent martyrdom of the older Other, the privileged white person inherits a wisdom, an agelessness, perhaps even a racelessness that entitles him or her to the raw materials of another's life and culture but, of course, not to the Other's condition.

Such transformative moves often occur in the forewords, afterwords, rationales, even apologies white scholars affix to their would-be scholarly readings of the black Other—discussions that meethink just may protest too much, perhaps suggesting a somewhat uneasy relationship between author and objectified subject. These prefaces acknowledge the "outsider" status of the authors—their privileged positions as white women or as men—even as they insist on the rightness of their entry into and the significance of their impact on the fields of black literature and history.

Gerda Lerner offers such a rationale in her preface to Black Women in White America: "Black people at this moment in history need above all to define themselves autonomously and to interpret their past, their present and their future" (1972, xviii). Having called upon the black "physician" to heal her/himself, Lerner then goes on to explain her presence in the operating room: "Certainly, historians who are members of the culture, or subculture, about which they write will bring a special quality to their material. Their understanding and interpretation is apt to be different from that of the outsider. On the other hand, scholars from outside a culture have frequently had a more challenging vision than those closely involved in and bound by their own culture. Both angles of vision are complementary in arriving at the truth about the past and in finding out 'what actually happened'" (xix; my emphasis). A more challenging vision? Why does the perspective of the white scholar reading "the black experience" represent a more challenging vision?

Lerner is not alone in prefacing her work with such a self-serving claim. For reasons that I hope will become clear, I am reminded of "Who You For?"—the opening chapter of John Callahan's study In the African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction (1989). In this chapter, Callahan takes us on a sentimental journey through his Irish-American youth, which was colored not only by his being likened to niggers—"Do you know the definition of an Irishman?" the eight-year-old Callahan was asked by a much bigger Italian boy. "A Nigger turned inside-out" (5)—but also by the black male guardians and protectors who "taught [him] a great deal about the hard work of becoming a man" (9). The teaching tools used by one of these guardians—Bill Jackson, the chauffeur for the insurance company for which Callahan worked while in college—include a "prolonged silent challenge" after Callahan called him a black bastard (9; my emphasis) and his "trickster's way" of teaching Callahan certain lessons.

Like Adrienne Rich, Callahan describes his black guide as "silent," even as he credits the chauffeur with teaching him many things "essential to [his] own evolving voice and story" (10). Indeed Bill Jackson, the stereotypical black trickster, remains silent as he is employed by Callahan to claim not only Callahan's own Irish-American voice but also entitlement to African-American fictions of voice, fictions that in the author's words "connect and reconnect generations of Americans—African-American, yes and preeminently, but all others too, Irish-Americans like me, for instance—with those past and present oral traditions behind our evolving spoken and written voices" (21).

Here again a critical posture that means to celebrate a literature to my mind actually demeans it by leveling and universalizing it. Callahan's introduction suggests that we are all brothers not only under the skin but under the book jacket as well. The white scholar understands "the African American experience" not in its own right, not on its own terms, but because he can make it like his own. With his voice, he can translate another's silence into his speech. He speaks through and for the Other. Bill Jackson's silence is telling in this translatival move, but so too is his profession. It is altogether fitting and proper that Jackson is a chauffeur, for indeed Callahan's introduction and Jackson's role in it invoke for me what I call the Driving Miss Daisy syndrome: an intellectual slight of hand that transforms power and race relations to make best friends out of driver and driven, master and slave, boss and servant, white boy and black man.

When Callahan overhears the company vice-president lumping together Irish and African Americans as "contemptible, expendable lower
caste,” he wished for the craft, strength, skill, and smarts of a black football player he admired from a distance to help him speak up for himself (though apparently not for the niggers with whom he is compared). “My fate linked to African-Americans by that Yankee bank officer,” Callahan writes, “I became more alert and sympathetic to black Americans my own age and younger who, though cursed, spat upon, and beaten, put their lives and voices on the line to uphold the law of the land and integrate public schools in the South” (8).

I feel as if I am supposed to applaud this declaration of allegiance, empathy, and understanding, but instead the claim of fellow feeling and universality—of linked fates and shared voice—makes me profoundly angry and mars my reading of what is actually a very fine book. Ultimately, Callahan’s personal narrative, like Rich’s, takes symbolic wealth from the martyred, romanticized black body but retains the luxury of refusing, erasing, or ignoring its material poverty. Twenty-five years later, John Callahan is a well-respected university professor while, as he tells us in his introduction, Roy Fitch—the protective black mailroom manager under whom he once worked—“looks after” a building near the “plebeian end” of the city green (xi). Intent as he is on using Fitch to tell his story, Callahan does not comment on or I suspect even see the historical irony of their relative positions. Nor does he grasp the ironic implications of his own storytelling. “Don't climb no mountain on my back,” he recalls Fitch saying to him years before in response to his awkward attempt to apologize for yet another racial slur. Had Callahan understood the signifying significance of Fitch’s word—were he as good at interpreting speech as silence—he could not possibly have written the introduction he did.

However troubling Rich’s and Callahan’s apologias may be to me as a black woman reader, white British Victorianist Missy Dehn Kubitschek acknowledges an indebtedness to the latter for the inspiration behind the personal commentary that opens her own study of black women writers. “My admiration for ‘Who You For?’” she writes in the preface to Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History, “led me to consider voicing my own simultaneously social and psychic travels as a prelude to this study of African-American women’s novels” (1991, xii).

Following Callahan’s lead, Kubitschek opens her study with what she calls “A Personal Preface,” in which she offers a first-hand account (complete with family history) of how she as a white woman British Victorianist came to write a book about African American women novelists. Hers is a long story, but, briefly told, one of the principal players in her disciplinary conversion was her grandmother, a long-time armchair racist, who “changed her mind about race” after watching a television program about the “dangerous urban black ghetto” of East St. Louis. Mediated through the medium of television, urban blacks became objects of pity for Mrs. Dehn rather than fear. The possibilities of Grandmother Dehn’s “impossible” change of heart at such an advanced age were “seismic” for Kubitschek, who was a graduate student at the time and who found in her grandmother’s conversion the seeds of her own (xviii).

But other transformative encounters lay ahead for Kubitschek in her graduate student years—experiences that not only helped her get over her family’s racism but over her own as well. Arriving early and alone for work one morning in the basement office of the English department building, Kubitschek was terrified first by a male voice and then by the sudden appearance of a black man. Reading her horror writ large across her face, the man, a construction worker apparently also early on site for the task of renovating the building, “quickly” and “quietly” explained that he just wanted to use the phone. “Of course, I had been afraid before I had seen that he was black,” Kubitschek writes. “Rape is always a threat to women, always a possibility” (xxi). But seeing his black skin heightened her fear, she admits, and revealed her racism. Because she had recently read Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home,” she knew, she says, the historical implications of her reaction. “Race” ceased to be something that had constructed other people, especially blacks,” as she began to understand herself as a racial as well as gendered being.

Rape is always a threat to women, particularly to a woman alone with a man. Black man, white man, green man from Mars, I darn well would have been afraid in Kubitschek’s shoes, too. Her fear feels far more legitimate to me than the white liberal guilt that I suspect leads her to call that fear racism and to apologize for it in her preface to a book that is supposed to be about African American women writers. Through yet another troubling slight of text, Kubitschek’s articulated awareness of her former racism becomes the authorizing agent behind her strange metamorphosis from British Victorianist to African Americanist.

I know I am misbehaving. I know I should be more patient, more sisterly, more respectful of other people’s discoveries. I know my bad attitude comes from what in this instance might be called the arrogance of “black privilege”: after all, I—whose earliest childhood memories include finding a snake in our mailbox shortly after we moved into an all-white neighborhood and being called “nigger” on my first day at an all-white elementary school—did not learn my racial consciousness from reading Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” as an adult. But I mean my criticism as a kindness. Perhaps if I can approximate in words—however haltingly—what is so inexplicably problematic and profoundly offensive about these Driving-Miss-Daisy/some-of-my-best-friends-are-black/I.once-was-a-racist confessions, I will do the field and all those
who want to work in it a genuine favor. Perhaps if I can begin to delineate the difference between critical analysis that honors the field and guilty conscience rhetoric that demeans it, I can contribute something positive to the future production of scholarship on African American women. Unfortunately, the words do not come easily and the heart of what's the matter is a difficult place to get to. How do you tell people who do not get it in the first instance that it is only out of the arrogance of white privilege and/or male prerogative that they assume that it is an honor for a black woman to be proclaimed their black mother or their black friend or their black guardian or their black conscience?

It would be a mistake, however, for me to imply that these demeaning gestures are solely the product of white privilege and racial difference. For my money, the occult of true black womanhood has generated fewer more offensive renderings of African American women writers and critics than that offered by black literary theorist Houston Baker in *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (1991). Having largely ignored black women as cultural producers throughout his long and distinguished career, Baker suddenly takes them up in *Workings*. And like Missy Dehn Kubitschek, for whom the writing of African American women is a kind of survival kit, Baker tells us in his conclusion that the shared horror of a friend's rape led him to seek solace in the "expressive resistances of Afro-American women's talking books." The writings of black women authors like Hurston, Morrison, and Shange helped teach him and his friend to move beyond being victim to being survivor. "The texts of Afro-American women writers," Baker says, "became mine and my friend's harrowing but sustaining path to a new, common, and, we thought, empowering discourse and commitment. To 'victim,' in my friend's semantics, was added the title and entitlement 'survivor.' Are we not all only that? Victim/Survivors?" (208–9).

Both Kubitschek and Baker seem unaware of the ways in which their survival kit claims to the black texts they critique potentially reinscribe African American women writers and their characters as magnuminous mammoses who not only endure like Faulkner's Dilsey but whose primary function is to teach others to do the same as well. While Baker is certainly entitled to tell his story, using his friend's rape to claim entitlelement to the texts of black women writers—to authorize his entry into a field he has virtually ignored—makes for a story that I, for one, resent being asked to read as part of his critical discourse. For me, this maneuver compromises the integrity of his intellectual project; it makes the feminist concept that the personal is political a kind of bad joke. Like the some-of-my-best-friends-are-black tone of Kubitschek's preface, Callahan's introduction, and Rich's chapter, Baker's conclusion makes me distrust not his cultural competence, perhaps, but his gender sensibility—his ability to handle with care the sacred text of me and mine.

But I was made suspicious of *Workings of the Spirit* long before I got to its conclusion. For, like Lerner, Kubitschek, and Callahan, Baker also has included an introduction that calls attention to himself as outsider. He begins his study by acknowledging the prior claim and what he calls the "justifiable 'cautious anxieties'" of black feminist critics such as Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, and Mary Helen Washington, who long ago mined the "provinces of Afro-American women's expressivity" that he is just now entering. A "blackmale" scholar "will find cause to mind his steps in a demanding territory," he asserts, seemingly unaware of the step he misses with his province/metropole metaphor. Baker's language here works linguistically to confirm him in the very role he wants most to avoid—that of colonizing, come-lately "blackmale" critic. His diction is a small example of what I found to be a big problem with *Workings of the Spirit*: the hierarchical relation between what he inevitably treats as master (male) and minor (female) narrative traditions, even in this book dedicated to exploring black female expressivity. Rather than building on the work of black women scholars who excavated the field he is just now entering, Baker, for the most part, either ignores or dismisses what he implies is their primarily historical (as opposed to theoretical) feminist criticism in favor of his own masculinist theorizing and the black male writers and white male theorists he champions.

In *Workings of the Spirit*, our mothers' gardens are populated by what Baker terms phenomenological white men such as Gaston Bachelard along with the phenomenal black women—Hurston, Morrison, and Shange—who are the book's announced subjects. Indeed, Baker's study of black women writers marginalizes its female objectified subjects as male writers, critics, theorists, and male experience prevail as the text's principal referents. In *Workings*’ third chapter, for example, to even get to Baker's reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, one must first wade through thirty pages on Richard Wright. The attention to Wright (and other male artists and intellectuals) is justified, Baker argues, because "classic Afro-American male texts" provide a touchstone from which

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11 In the final moments of her personal preface, we learn that the lessons of Grandma Dehn and the black construction worker notwithstanding, it was actually the survival strategies embodied in black literature that ultimately led Kubitschek to the work of African American women writers. "The stories that constitute African-American literature say that oppression kills and that people survive oppression," she tells us. "Wanting to know more about survival brought me here" (1991, xxiii).
“to proceed by distinctions” in exploring the provinces of black female expressivity.

Baker’s posterior positioning of Morrison within a chapter supposedly devoted to her work intersects the problematic I have been working with in this article. Like much of the new “new scholarship” that has come out of the occult of true black womanhood, Baker’s book fails to live up to its own postmodern, deconstructive principles. It achieves neither inversion nor subversion; black women writers and the black feminist critics who read them remain fetishized bodies juxtaposed against analytical white or superior male minds. As objects of investigation in studies like Baker’s, black women are constructed in terms of their difference from or (in the name of sisterhood) similarity to the spectator, whether the spectator is a black male theorist or a white feminist critic. In other words, the black female Other is made only more Other by the male theorist or by the “white female academic” (to use Jane Gallop’s phrase) who views the objectified subject from a position of unrelinquished authority.

This failure of inversion is particularly alarming in Baker’s case because of the enormous power he wields in the academy and the publishing industry. That Workings of the Spirit was published as part of a series Baker edits under the University of Chicago imprint suggests just how absolutely absolute power authorizes and reproduces itself. For black feminist studies, the ramifications of this power dynamic are potentially devastating: black feminist critics can be de-authorized with a roll of the presses, even as black women are deployed in a decidedly masculinist project that claims to “enter into dialogue” with them.

Baker is, of course, free to disagree with black women scholars (as we frequently do with each other), but his failure to take seriously their critical insights ultimately undermines his effort to enter into what he acknowledges is an already established dialogue. His privileging of male subjects in this book supposedly about black women writers becomes an act of silencing and makes his text the victim of its own intentional phalacy. By “intentional phalacy,” I mean the gap between Baker’s stated wish to avoid appropriating and objectifying the work and images of African American women through a “blackmale” gaze and the degree to which his text fosters rather than avoids such appropriations.

His essential and, I think, essentializing metaphors—black women as “departed daughters” and “spirit workers”—taken together with the uncontextualized photographs of black women interspersed throughout his book, raise questions about the gaze, about specularization and objectification, that Baker, despite his desire not to “colonize” the female subject, does not address or, I suspect, even see. This is both ironic and unfortunate, since Mae Henderson—one of the black feminist critics Baker faintly praises for her “fine theorizing”—called his attention to the problematic of the gaze generated by his work in a critique of an earlier essay of his that was the prototype for Workings of the Spirit. The danger, she warned, “is not only that of essentializing but of reinforcing the most conventional constructs of (black) femininity.” Henderson was troubled in particular by the “specularity of [Baker’s] rather spectacular theory” of black female spirituality. She cautioned him to rethink his treatment of black women in terms that would not objectify and idealize them (1989, 159).

While the words of praise from Henderson excerpted on Workings’s back cover imply her endorsement of Baker’s finished project, she in fact has offered the author both an elegantly incisive critique and an eloquently pointed admonition. Her cautionary tale has been little heeded, however; Workings of the Spirit, I would argue, continues the idealization and specularization of black women that its prototypical essay began. The book’s complementary phototext seems to me, in fact, to evoke precisely what Henderson identified as “the male activity of scopophilia.” Largely unremarked except for occasional captioned quotations from Baker’s written word, the images of black women interspersed throughout the text objectify graphically those whom the book objectifies linguistically. But in another example of Baker’s strategic deployment of women, this objectification is made okay by the author’s claim that the phototext is the handiwork not of senior “blackmale” theorist Houston Baker but of junior female scholars Elizabeth Alexander and Patricia Redmond. This, in fact, is Baker’s final point, his “last word”:

The phototext is the artistry of two young scholars. Their complementary text is a rich enhancement of the present work, and I cannot thank Elizabeth Alexander and Patricia Redmond enough for their collaboration. It seems to me that the intertextuality represented by their effort makes the present work more engaging than it would otherwise have been. My initial idea was that such a text would comprise a type of countercurrent of signification, soliciting always my own words, qualifying their “maleness.” What emerged from the labors of Redmond and Alexander, however, is a visualization of an Afro-American women’s poetics. Eyes and events engage the reader/viewer in a solicitous order of discourse that asks: “Who reads here?” [212]

If these photos indeed could ask such a question, I suspect that their answer would be, “A man.” Baker means for the photographs to speak for themselves of “the space, place, and time of Afro-American women” (213), but it is unclear how they are to do so placed unproblematically in the midst of what is—despite his claims about the collaborative efforts of
Alexander and Redmond—his project. Whose project the phototext is becomes even clearer when we know that at the time the book was compiled Alexander and Redmond were graduate students to whom Baker assigned the task of assembling a complementary photo essay. The image that Alexander and Redmond presented to Baker as the “paring shot” of his book is of a young black woman, her mouth open wide as if in a scream. I wonder what it means that the black woman depicted in midscream is literally, physically, clinically mute.

Toward a conclusion

I am not quite certain what to make of the ground I have covered in this article or where to go from here. More bewitched, bothered, and bewildered than ever by my own problematic, I find myself oddly drawn to (gulp) William Faulkner. The griefs of great literature, Faulkner suggested in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, must grieve on universal bones. I realize that I have heard this before—and not just from Faulkner. The Self recognition spontaneously generated by the literature of the ennobled Other is the essence of Callahan's professed link to African American "fictions of voice" and the medium of Baker's and Kubitschek's claimed connection to the texts of black women. And they are not alone in this kind of association with the ennobled Other. In the words of three white feminist academics who claim to identify closely with the explicit depiction of physical and psychic abuse in the fiction of black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones: "We, as white feminists, are drawn to black women's visions because they concretize and make vivid a system of oppression." Indeed, they continue, "it has not been unusual for white women writers to seek to understand their oppression through reference to the atrocities experienced by other groups" (Sharpe, Mascia-Lees, and Cohen 1990, 146).

For these feminists, as for Baker and Kubitschek, the lure of black women's fiction is, at least in part, its capacity to teach others how to endure and prevail, how to understand and rise above not necessarily the pain of black women but their own.

Is this usage of black women's texts a bad thing? If Faulkner is right—if it is the writer's duty to help humankind endure by reminding us of our capacity for courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice and survival—black women writers have done the job particularly well. The griefs of African American women indeed seem to grieve on universal bones—"to concretize and make vivid a system of oppression." But it also seems (and herein lies the rub) that in order to grieve "universally," to be "concrete," to have "larger meaning," the flesh on these bones ultimately always must be white or male.

This, then, is the final paradox and the ultimate failure of the evidence of experience: to be valid—to be true—black womanhood must be legible as white or male; the texts of black women must be readable as maps, indexes to someone else's experience, subject to a seemingly endless process of translation and transference. Under the cult of true black womanhood, the colored body, as Cherrie Moraga has argued, is "thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap" (1981, xv), to make connections—connections that in this instance enable scholars working in exhausted fields to cross over into the promised land of the academy.

Both black women writers and the black feminist critics who have brought them from the depths of obscurity into the ranks of the academy have been such bridges. The trouble is that, as Moraga points out, bridges get walked on over and over and over again. This sense of being a bridge—of being walked on and passed over, of being used up and burnt out, of having to "publish while perishing," as some have described their situations—seems to be a part of the human condition of many black women scholars. While neither the academy nor mainstream feminism has paid much attention to the crisis of black female intellectuals, the issue is much on the minds of black feminist scholars, particularly in the wake of the Thomas/Hill hearings, the critique of professional women and family values, and the loss of Audre Lorde and Sylvia Boone in a single year. So serious are these issues that the state and fate of black women in and around the university were the subjects of a national conference held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in January 1994. Entitled "Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name, 1894–1994," this conference, the first of its kind, drew together nearly two thousand black women from institutions across the country. The conference organizers have said that they were overwhelmed by the response to their call for papers: they were instantly bombarded by hundreds of abstracts, letters, faxes, and phone calls from black women describing the hypervisibility, superisolated, emotional quarantine, and psychic violence of their precarious positions in academia.

I do not mean to imply that all black women scholars see themselves as what Hurston called "tragically colored," but I think that it is safe to say that these testimonies from across the country represent a plaintive cry from black women academics who see themselves and their sisters consumed by exhaustion, depression, loneliness, and a higher incidence of such killing diseases as hypertension, lupus, cancer, diabetes, and obesity. But it also seems to me that Jane Gallop's anxieties about African American women, Nancy K. Miller's fear that there is no position from which a middle-class white woman can speak about race without being offensive, and Houston Baker's desire for dialogue with black women scholars also represent plaintive cries. Clearly both white women and
women and men of color experience the pain and disappointment of failed community.

As much as I would like to end on a positive note, I have little faith that our generation of scholars—black and nonblack, male and female—will succeed in solving the problems I have taken up in this article. We are too set in our ways, too alternately defensive and offensive, too much the products of the white patriarchal society that has reared us and the white Eurocentric educational system that has trained us. If ever there comes a day when white scholars are forced by the systems that educate them to know as much about “the Other” as scholars of color are required to know about so-called dominant cultures, perhaps black women will no longer be treated as consumable commodities.

Until that day, I see a glimmer of hope shining in the bright eyes of my students who seem to me better equipped than we to explore the intersection of racial and gender difference. I was impressed by the way young women—black and white—and one lone white man in a seminar I offered on black feminist critical theory were able to grapple less with each other and more with issues, to disagree without being disagreeable, and to learn from and with each other. I wonder if there is a lesson for us older (but not necessarily wiser) academics in their interaction. I wonder what it would mean for feminist scholarship in general if “woman” were truly an all-inclusive category, if “as a woman” ceased to mean “as a white woman.” I wonder what it would mean for women’s studies, for black studies, for American studies, if women of color, white women, and men were truly able to work together to produce the best of all possible scholarship.

While the editorial scheme of Conjuring may employ different, even contradictory notions of text and tradition, as Jane Gallop suggests, perhaps the strategy of black and white women working together on intellectual projects is one we should embrace. I do not mean to suggest that we can or should police each other, but I wonder about the possibilities of what my colleague Sharon Holland calls “complementary theorizing.” I wonder what shape Gallop’s conversation with Nancy K. Miller and Marianne Hirsch might have taken were women of color talked with rather than about. I wonder what kind of book Workings of the Spirit might have been were it truly a collaborative effort with black women or even with one black woman—perhaps the woman with whom Baker says he first discovered the healing powers of African American women’s fiction. I have never met Adrienne Rich, but if we had been friends or colleagues, if I had had the honor of reading Of Woman Born in manuscript, perhaps I could have given back to her some of what her book gave me by pointing out to her (rather than to the readers of Signs) the problems of “my Black mother.” However idle they may appear, for me these speculations about what might have been offer a measure of hope about what yet might be.

References


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