

‘This is no Time to Gaze’¹: Black Feminist Discourse and our Politics of (re)Presentation

Keshia N. Abraham

Come share with me sister feminist
Let us dance in the movement
Let my blackness catch your feminism
Let your oppression peek at mine
After all
I ain't the right kind of feminist
I'm just woman

(Cheryl West)

Preface

In: Black Women Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject (1994). Carole Boyce Davies asks questions which to some extent frame the methodology of this paper, or collection of ideas. If we recognise theories as 'frames of intelligibility' then it seems plausible that these frames can, should and do take on multiple forms. Boyce Davies (1994:35) asks:

How do we theorize, who are the theorists and what is theory? Is theory a hegemonic discourse which imposes a new hierarchy? Is it important to pursue the specificity of Black female identity theoretically? What happens to the readership when the language of theory is deployed? what about the discussions that surround feminism and deconstruction or feminism and postmodernism? Are they competing, allies, the 'master's tools'?

¹ The title derives from Garnett Silk's song, 'Babylon Be Still' (1995).

Taking up these and other questions surrounding the ways in which we speak to one another across various voids, this text should be seen as attempting to bring together different voices speaking on similar ideas while making room for the differences they speak to.

In this present moment of multinationalism and transnational black movements of resistance amidst various manifestations of transition, there are theories colliding all over the place. Black women are located within multiple discourses which combine as points of critique within Black feminist discussions, very loosely defined. Whether we are discussing the shortcomings of totalising or exclusionary 'feminist' discourses or trying to come up with modes and means of articulating our disparate needs and desires for any type of collectivity, we are faced with possibilities of division, confusion, misnaming, not to mention silencing on multiple level. The difficulties this particular paper addresses concern the ways in which some black women's discourses are made to stand in for the whole of us and have often unwantingly served to name or define our actions, intentions and modes of expression. We talk about our 'blackness' or our 'consciousness' in ways which are necessarily celebratory, however what are we saying when we look at each other across the vast spaces which dis/connect us and don't see the differences our locations necessarily inhabit?² We celebrate that which binds us and theorize on those elements which continuously suggest connection, relation, and fortunately, insurgence. I am looking for a way to get at what we get out of the exchange of glances. Are we caught up in a 'gaze', are we rolling our eyes, do we stare? How do we look at each other? Who's looking, back? What happens next? To me, there is a contextual relativity too deeply embedded in our contemporary neo-colonial situations to ignore the politics of gazing.

Before delving too far into the larger questions I would like to think through, I feel I must qualify the terms which have already recurred often enough to be disturbing to me and which may be causing a degree of confusion or uncomfortability which is unintentional. Where I have written 'Black feminist' it is with the intention that these two terms not be taken singularly or as mutually exclusive because one without the other has historically, in a variety of places, stood in for something (someone) which does not apply to the field I am referring to. Naturally I am aware of the problematics of both the terms black and feminist, however hopefully throughout the course of this paper, it will become clear that this problem of naming is one which I am deeply concerned with and as yet cannot seem to

² Dis/connect is used here in the sense of its dual meaning in Afra-U S. vernacular—to 'dis', as in to dis-respect, dis-credit, dis-tort.

rectify. For my purposes, the term Black feminist/womanist³ is used in reference to a theoretical grounding put forth by women of African descent located throughout and within the African diaspora reflecting and 'theorizing'⁴ on their existences as women marked in particular ways by race, class, gender and obviously, their intersections. To quote Audre Lorde (1984):

This is what Black feminism is all about; articulating ourselves, our needs, our resistances as women, and as women within our particular environments. We don't exist in abstract.

Trying to position black feminist/womanist discourses within discussions of subjectivity, I want to get at a way of viewing the positioning of the theories being produced by Black women located in the U.S. *vis a vis* the sites for theory being suggested by women located elsewhere. In many ways this is an attempt to locate myself more firmly within the academic background which has up to this point basically shaped my understanding of Black womanist/feminist literary studies. How is that that which has taken on the name of Black feminist discourse gets positioned by women writing throughout Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Canada? By the same token how are Black women who exist in spaces outside that which has been to some degree defined by Black U.S. women positioned *vis a vis* black feminist discourses? In the contemporary space many black women are seizing their rights to voice and claiming liberatory, resistant, revolutionary, ways of theorizing our existences. We are coming to a point of acknowledgement and recognition of each other and the politics inherent in how we relate to one another. In fact, in both writing and action we have recognised that 'this is no time to gaze'.

³ Various definitions of 'womanist' have been written by scholars such as Alice Walker and Cleonora Hudson-Weems. As so many definitions of feminism have been put down internationally, I turn to Ruth Meena (1992:5) who writes: 'Invariably, all scholars engaged in gender/woman studies are committed to changing oppressive gender relations. They are therefore feminists'.

⁴ In a variety of ways I am avidly against monolithic or exclusionary uses of the notion of theory while at the same time, the problems I have with the naming of what we are to consider the theoretical are similar to the problems of trying to articulate that which is seen as feminist. Carole Boyce Davies (1994:5) explains that 'the terms that we use to name ourselves ... carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions. Each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation. Each therefore must be used provisionally; each must be subject to new analyses, new questions and new understandings if we are to unlock some of the narrow terms on the discourses in which we are inscribed'. For now let's consider them as being used under erasure.

This line, 'this is no time to gaze', from the late Garnett Silk's song, 'Babylon Be Still', sounds to me like a direct call to action. Personally, as a conscious Black woman listening to this call, surrounded by mass discourse on the battles being fought on numerous fronts by Black people variously located, I cannot help but feel the need to find some way of actively placing myself on the line. In addition to recognising the challenge that other African descended women have taken up in the very act of writing their lives in the face of murderous odds, I think about the necessity for black women to find points of connection throughout the world. As a young black woman, born and raised for the most part in the United States, but who has travelled, or migrated to some extent, back and forth to Europe, Southern Africa, and the Caribbean, my concern about the level of activism that exists in the U.S. amongst Black women has escalated in the face of our international contemporary situations. When I look around me, at other women, living/existing in various spaces/countries, I see long histories of organised, political struggle—women acting out with other women.

'THIS IS NO TIME TO GAZE'!: So Why and How Do We Do It?

While there seems to have been a concentration on the feminist scholarship by Black women from the United States, when in the process of defining either Black feminist literature or theory, it has been argued that there are Black women theorizing all over the place (see Boyce Davies 1994). I believe that it is in a variety of discursive modes that black women's creative theory seizes spaces which unite us across our conditions and the particulars of our existences. I want to look at the ways in which Black U.S. women, by being placed in the centre of Black feminist discourse can, 're-enact the 'gaze' on each other, whether through classist, cultural, sexist, or imperialist lenses. 'This is no time to gaze'. What are we suggesting we should do instead? 'No time for gazing'. We can no longer afford to spend our time gazing at one another, in awe or confusion, but must instead, find ways of linking up in action. What are the sites of theoretical resistance in this instance?

'This is no time for gazing'. In this highly unstable political moment we are living in all over the place, there must be a recognition of the necessity for shifts to the radical in what, how and why we theorise. Contemporary theory being written by black women placed within and without the U.S. are engaging and working through multiple theoretical locations. What I am wondering is what are the spaces that Black women, globally, are claiming (or not) and how? In the process of trying to find out how we might link up with one another, politically, ideologically, and actively, I think that certain things have generally been taken for granted. We

know for example, that we connect at least on the grounds of oppressions wielded by colonialism and patriarchy as well as in our resilience and insistence on survival. And while some of us may challenge these constructs in popular discourse, and others in the space that has been claimed as the theoretical, I want to know how and when the line between gazing and acting gets recognised and crossed.

For my own purposes I am trying to work through these issues to better understand my own subject position and the loaded category of Black U.S. feminism that I automatically enter into. My awareness is not enough to combat the associations which for some automatically come with this identity I embody. Naturally I challenge the structures placed on me in an attempt to touch and be touched by Black people throughout the world. I must constantly ask myself, what the problems and significance are of moving throughout the world in pursuit of a higher, more complicated and well balanced understanding of how Black women internationally relate and possibly intersect. This paper should be taken as an attempt at working through some of my reflections and expressions on the subject of international black womanist/feminist discourses, hopefully engaging on a variety of fronts which implicate long standing historical issues. I will deal primarily with late twentieth century manifestations of Black 'womanism'.

on being 'the only' black/woman

1. maybe it was my naiveté that made me think that no one would stare as I went in for the first day of Italian 320. Granted, most of the students connected to the language because of family ties and looking at me they certainly didn't see me as a sister, in that sense. Being black, female, and clearly comfortable with being so, what was I doing there anyway?

*2. In Zimbabwe, at the University, there was a frustration lingering in the back of my mind that made being in a classroom seem as foreign to me as sadza, and as uncomfortable as trying to explain why I can't tell you who my people are in the way I want to be able to. This particular frustration which was nourished daily by glimpses of the expressions all over my professor's face and in the eyes of some of my classmates, all Black males, made my voice run away in fear, my tongue bow down and refuse to move, my arm refuse to raise and my chest to pound uncontrollably. Arriving at this place, after having been groomed for three years by the traditions and ideologies of Spelman's cult of true black womanhood I knew that if I wanted to I could force myself to speak as I had before in Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Detroit. The freeze that came over me lasted for as long as it took to cover what was considered the introductory texts named as 'real' Zimbabwean novels. Among the required novels was Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*, which would remain the one consideration of a feminist novel or a woman novelist. Absent of course were any Black women despite the fact the course was entitled: 'Zimbabwean Literature', not 'Zimbabwean literature, except that written by Zimbabwean women'. When surprisingly, the professor turned his gaze fully on me for*

the first time in the term, actually looking me full in the face with a sardonic smile not quite reaching his eyes, I couldn't help wondering what it was he might possibly want me to contribute to the discussion. After weeks of referring to me sarcastically as the 'American -woman-in-the-back-of-the-room', I thought I would have the chance to locate myself as an equal with those who surrounded me in the class. Writing now, after several months of reflection, I have come to terms with the diatribe I gave on why I can't see myself identifying with the European woman protagonist in Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. Naturally there are degrees of foreignness which are felt differently by each newcomer, but there are also patterns, dare I say systems, of separation that so profoundly shape our views of that which is strange or different to us and that which is naturally familiar, there was nothing I could do at first but pause and take a deep breath when my professor suggested that this was a novel which should appeal to me because the protagonist was an outsider like myself. Before standing up and walking out against the levels of opposition I no longer felt like dealing with, I took my time and looked around to see if I had any support and then proceeded to try and explain the harsh realities of dis/location and dis/connection which constantly smacked me in the face while trying to find ways to articulate my sameness to people who read the 'American' identity first, to people who focused first on my 'femaleness' as if I were not aware of how subtle sexism can be, and to people who were blinded by the incongruous combination of my Blackness factored into these two other identity constructs and my location, in this particular classroom—at the University, in Zimbabwe no less. I tried to make it clear that it was not just being from a different place that separated me from the men in that class or from the male spaces of power coupled with their deeply embedded gender codes, but my particular Black womanness. It was neither arbitrary nor unconditional. The issues at hand were layered on top of each other in such a way that made it impossible for me to forget at any time that for many of my classmates I would remain in their minds as 'the American woman', while I was clear to continuously point out the fact that I was not 'American' but 'African-American', and despite or in lieu of their absence I was also 'the only Black woman' in this class, which unfortunately implied a certain level of silence. The empty spaces where African women should have been, spoke volumes and in their absence I felt so small and so unsure if the battle to give voice that I thought I was fighting out of necessity, was really real. After all, I'm sure some people still believe that by virtue of being from elsewhere I, with my American passport, belong closer to Doris Lessing than to Tsitsi Dangarembga.

3. Why is it that the rest of the women in the women's discussion group I decided to participate in constantly look towards me whenever topics of race come up or whenever we decide to look at works by women of colour. Granted I am the only Black woman in the group but when did I ever agree to be 'the' spokeswoman for the race?

Coming out of situations where I was left unsure if, when, and how I should speak or allow myself to voice an opinion, I often wondered about the extent to which my views have been shaped by other women. Are we speaking in chorus or individually? By looking into various modes of black feminist discourse, I want to think through ways in which we replicate the gaze with each other. This is not being suggested with the intentions of prescribing a singular, monolithic, construction of what black feminism should look like, but rather, an attempt to think through the ways in which Black

women engage each other. As variously hued and dramatically textured as we are as a people, I want to suggest ways of recognising our multiplicity through collaboration. Beginning with a discussion on the literary criticism which occupies and to some degree influences the ways in which Black feminist theories are conceptualised, I want to read through a variety of approaches. Looking into materialist based, Marxist and cultural feminisms being written by Black women as well as those texts which deal with gender construction and resistance to representations, my intention is to challenge subjective relationships between Black women and the theory they are writing.

But the obvious question here seems to be how to have the discussion in such a way as not to replicate the gaze or to suggest that all of this is really just an oppositional discourse. Political, yes and certainly oppositional when necessary, the theoretical space of Black feminist discourse is marked as resistant in the sense that the very presence of the writing stands as a challenge to some factors which collectively have sought to keep our words from us and our voices unheard. Invoking the words of Audre Lorde (1984), for 'those of us who were never meant to survive', the act of writing is challenging, but recognising that we share this space of challenge as black and women, the choice is often to write our lives for each other so that we can look into each other, pick up the strands, gather together, and implement some forms of radical change whether that change is manifested only at the level of the conceptual or fully real/ised.

Looking at the literary texts being written by Black U.S. women who take their characters 'back to Africa' from different points West, it seems as if the major commonality is our inability to survive once we have re-crossed the sea. In numerous texts, the Black woman from foreign remains foreign to cultures, to other women and to some extent to herself. Is this part of the politics of migration from which we cannot escape or are we saying that return or communication is riddled with impossibilities? From novel to autobiography most of the texts which come to mind when I think of Black women in the Diaspora writing about trying to live in Africa, have their characters become so isolated, they have no choice but to either become totally marginalised or to re-cross the ocean, stepping back across the void. Caribbean women novelists, Miriam Warner-Vieyra (1987) and Maryse Condé (1982 & 1988) both create characters who in a sense go mad because of their foreignness in Africa and U.S. writers Marita Golden (1990) and Ntozake Shange (1994) also present Black women in conditions of trauma, to some extent influenced by their position as Black women migrating through the diaspora. If this is what we are saying in our creative work, how do we link ourselves with African women in our theory? Do we merely just gaze?

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Dilemma of A Ghost* (1985) picks up similar questions in the relationship and experiences of her African American prota-

gonist who re/turns to live in Africa with her new African husband. Aidoo also seems to be writing out the tension and difficulty of survival for a Black woman to re/turn to Africa. On this literary strain I do see recent novels by Black women trying to come to grips with the conditions of our Westerness in very radical ways. While I mentioned Shange's *Liliane* as a novel by a Black U.S. woman in which the black female protagonist is dealing with her experiences as a diasporic subject through psychological treatment, Shange's attention to the particulars, the nuances in our existence are presented in a very unique way and suggest new ways of thinking through our identities.

I found Jean-Rene eating souvlaki at the fast-food place next to the Moulin Rouge. I was flirting with some Brazilians from the Folies Bergeres. I'd just left Lisbon, and Angola was on all our minds.

In my last paintings, before I left New York, I superimposed AK-47s over foetal transparencies under Frehmo banners *La Luta Continua* was the name of the show' (Shange 1994: 16)

Liliane insisted, as she had to, she was an intellectual. The girl truly believed certain thoughts, even certain gestures, were impossible in certain languages. She was driven, by some power I never understood, to learn every language, slave language, any person in the Western Hemisphere ever spoke. She felt incomplete in English, a little better in Spanish, totally joyous in French, and pious in Portuguese. When she discovered Gullah and papiamentu, she was beside herself. I kept tellin' her wasn't no protection from folks hatin' the way we looked in any slave owner's language but she had to believe there was a way to talk herself outta five hundred years of disdain, five hundred years of dying cause there is no word in any one of those damn languages when we are simply alive and not enveloped by scorn, contempt, or pity. There's no word for us. I kept tellin' her. No words, but what we say to each other that nobody can interpret (Shange 1994: 66).

Working out similar issues, Erna Brodber's second novel *Myal*, presents an innovative way of critiquing our new world existences, taking into account a variety of African inspired cultural forms which all must necessarily be aligned in order for us to remain whole. Each of these protagonists, Liliane and Brodber's Ellen, must go through psychological traumas involving their inter-diaspora migration in order to return home and get treated. I think that to some extent while Liliane goes through psychological counselling which is not necessarily within the black cultural forms, it is significant that her therapist be able to understand the cultures out of which she speaks. Ellen, Brodber's protagonist in *Myal*, must go through cultural rebirth influenced by her entire community and which has resonances in a variety of cultural locations. Myalism is in this sense a communal experience, shaped in the New World as a way to retain any residuals possible from our realities throughout Africa. Paule Marshall's (1983) protagonist in *Praisesong for the Widow* goes through a similar

process of trauma, illness, and rebirth via African based cultural manifestations, reshaped and specific to the existence of Black people relocated in the West—United States and the Caribbean.⁵ I am looking at these newer literary forms as sites of refiguring the ways African women are viewed and how the processes of re-connection are supported⁶. Turning to the scene of Black feminist theories how do we look at each other?

Checking Ourselves, or, Feelin' the Vibe, Recognising, then Questioning

In her essay, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', Chandra Mohanty (1984) critiques the positioning of 'third world women' within feminist theory and I think that to some degree the questions she raises are applicable to the ways I am looking at the tensions between Black U.S. theory and Black women located elsewhere⁷. She writes:

What happens when this assumption of 'woman as an oppressed group' is situated in the context of Western feminist writing about third world women? It is

⁵ See Abena Busia's (1988) discussion of *Praisesong for the Widow*.

⁶ Since this essay was written I have had the privilege of reading Nozipo Maraire's (1996) novel, *Zenzele* which I think takes this discussion in a new and very compelling direction. One of the vignettes in this Zimbabwean novel centres around the young African American woman struggling to locate her father from whom she had been separated for most of her life. She travels throughout the African continent, basically from Cairo to the Cape. In each place she goes, she is told great stories of the activist work her father is engaged in although each time, just as she arrives in Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Uganda, Botswana, South Africa, she has just missed him. What I find particularly interesting about this story of 'Sister Africa' is that while carrying out this search, she becomes learned in various African languages and cultures, becomes a forthright political activist in her own right and is unquestionably committed to the liberation of Africa. She is taken in and even the language used to describe the affection the narrator feels for her makes this character seem an example of the reality of a woman of African descent returning to Africa to live a vibrant, significant and meaningful life. Further, there is great significance in that this novel is one of very few which portrays a positive African American woman surviving in Africa and working towards positive, community based change. (On this note, see also Bessie Head's (1990) 'The Woman from America' in her collection, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*)

⁷ I feel I must point out that each time this phrase, 'Black U.S. women and Black women located elsewhere' comes up, I cringe. I am avidly seeking another way to express this difference in location, but as of yet, I have not found another way of getting this across.

here that I locate the colonialist move. By contrasting the representation of women in the third world with what I referred to earlier as Western feminisms' self-presentation in the same context, we see how Western feminisms alone become the true 'subjects' of this counterhistory. Third world women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status (Mohanty 1984:71).

By quoting Mohanty in this way, I am trying to see how we superimpose 'feminism' on conditions/situations which actually may be addressing that or challenging it to some degree. Several Black women located in a variety of spaces outside of the U.S. have commented on this positioning of white women's feminism and its neo-colonialist relationship to black women and their work.

In addition to criticising the whitewashing of feminism, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar also offer critique of the versions of Black U.S. feminism acting as stand ins for all Black women's discourses. They use this moment to call Black British women to action—there is no time to gaze. While they do make reference to the tendency for Black U.S. women to concern their writing with documenting individual and collective histories, they continually look to the history of Black women in the U.S. to cite examples for their discussions. If these were the only sources available at the time to factually locate the historical situations of Black women in the West, I have to wonder who is writing the history of Black British women? Black women in the United States have not, if at all rarely, embraced or included the actual differences and particular issues being dealt with by Black British women (or Black women in Europe in general)⁸.

Buchi Emecheta writes that she does not consider herself to be a feminist because to her feminism is a white woman's thing. She writes that if she must claim this identity she would use feminism with a small 'f' or under erasure. Additionally, Clenora Hudson-Weems, in her advocating of 'Africana womanism' explains that it is not feminism in the sense of a white women's movement that she is speaking out of, but rather one informed by various West African cultural formations and traditions.

For us 'this is no time to gaze', we are a people with histories of active rebellion and women who have embodied legacies of struggle for generations. So in challenging contemporary struggles, there must be some form of active engagement. Within feminist/black feminist discourse where is that space Black women occupy?

⁸ I would also add that very little attention has been paid to Black Canadian women scholars by Black women in the U.S. although there has always been fluid migration between these two countries. Similar patterns of re-location apply to Caribbean populations in the U.S. and in Canada

In recognising 'dis/place, the space in between' (Phillips 1992) literature and criticism or the creative and the theoretical, black women, internationally, are posing challenges to all of the binaries which would allow the possibility of reading, too deeply from the outside. Basically, making the gaze no longer a comfortable position and challenging each other as critiques are launched at our own spectatorship, we appear to be deadlocked in a staring match. Is the aim to see who looks away first? Who's gaze is impenetrable?

Writing theory from the inside out, contemporary Black women are filling up the voids and claiming theory as a creative space and the creative as inherently theoretical. Having shifted or refigured the audience and therefore the centre, several contemporary texts discuss ways of cultural informing from the inside. To me this is the site in which we all enter and can easily contribute to thinking about our connections or ways of sharing our experiences of struggle, celebrations of life, and hope for continued (re)memory.

Taking an approach similar to that used by Tensa Turner in her critical text *Arise, Ye Mighty People!* (1994), Carolyn Cooper is also concerned with bringing the 'interests of those at the bottom, of black women', to light. Like Turner, Cooper (1995:3) discusses how the interests of women are 'being articulated through a wide range of struggles and are finding expression through virtually all types of media'. Both of these critical writers are concerned with returning the gaze or focus to some extent, in an attempt to call attention to mis(s)read discourses, transgressive methodologies deeply embedded in culture, and the politics of these movements in contemporary popular moments. By claiming the space of writing from the 'bottoms up' a whole host of ways of transgressing are called up. From 'the bottoms' as the folk discourse, yardie livin', to the 'bottoms' of Nanny⁹, or that posturing that we embody through the butterfly, the bottoms are sites of transgression in the sense of claiming spaces and postures which were not supposed to be seen. I am speaking here about what Carolyn Cooper (1992) has termed 'slackness politics' in her reading of Jamaican popular culture. What such discourse shouts is that you can go ahead and look if you want to but understand that we are determining how much we let you see and that we on the inside know what really lies within and beyond that which is seen. Our body politics and modes of embodying slackness as culture repositioned testify to our recognition that 'this is no time to gaze'.

⁹ There are numerous tales and legends which surround the maroon (grand)mother Nanny. One of the most well known is that of Nanny showing her 'bottom'/back-side to the colonial officers who attempted to shoot her. The bullet lodged itself in her backside and she continued to fight on behalf of the maroons for liberation with the bullet firmly lodged.

Now, what does all this mean when we search each other out across the voids? 'This is no time to gaze; no time for gazing ...'.

Journal—some bits and pieces

Day 1: I was standing at the door afraid to go in. It wasn't that I was actually afraid of anything or anyone in there, I think it was just the fear of trying to figure out how I would be seen when I walked in. After the long plane ride during which I flipped through the photo album my mother made for me, I thought about how my new family would look, would they look like people back home, would we be able to communicate easily. Remembering my first days of living with the Dossetto's in Italy, another country I had decided to live in before knowing the language well, I was worried that my interpretations of the written Shona phrases in the introductory language books would be way off the right pronunciation. Cautiously and a bit nervously I adjusted the waistband of my ankle-length skirt and put on a smile as I opened the door and walked into the room of Zimbabwean host parents on cue. For the next eight weeks I was to be their daughter. We greeted each other and as I carefully knelt in front of my new parents and crossed my hands in salutation, I wondered if they knew before hand that their new daughter, unlike previous years as host parents, would be a black woman.

Day 5: Each morning before my walk to school I wake up around 5:30 to the sounds of everyone else getting their day underway. While amai is in the fields, and her water is on the fire for the second round of baths and breakfasts I leap out of bed and sweep the house and the front yard. On Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, I am careful to remember to polish the floors when I've finished. After I finally bathe I go to the kitchen to join amai for tea, by which time she has gathered firewood for the morning, seen all of the children off to school, prepared Baba's mid-morning meal that he takes with him, drawn water, checked on the maize and separated the laundry, careful to make sure to remind her eldest son to bring home some bread at the end of the day. We sip our tea and in our broken Shonlgish way of speaking to each other talk about what my mother in the States does for a living. Walking to school I think to myself that I know next to nothing about what being a woman really means.

Day 10: I talked to my mother in the States today. She's been worried because on the news she saw some mention of the increasing rate of Aids spreading though Nigeria. I try to calm her down by explaining the enormous size of Africa, but it is to no avail. Although I think I should tell her how unlikely it is that I will 'catch the Aids' any quicker here than if I were at home going to school or working, I bite my tongue and tell her that I'll write again soon. I know she's just worried about her baby being so far away, but sometimes I feel caught in a conundrum of expectations for which I'm never too sure I am equipped. Each brief conversation with my mother reminds me that for her to reach a point where she will no longer worry will no doubt take twice as much time as my convincing her that I am really all right and can take care of myself. When she asks how my host mother is I don't know how to respond because while amai is fine I want to tell my mother how much my hands hurt because

I tried to help ama hand wash the clothes, how my feet don't feel like mine after I tried to walk on the hot ground without my shoes as she sometimes does, and how my back hurts from trying to make sadza, and doing it wrong.

Day 26: The time is drawing nearer to when I will have to leave. I have been trying to find a way of writing about all that I've seen and learned here. Writing seems to be the way I need to process all of this, but how do I write about pieces of my life filtered through the realities of people I now consider family?

Day 45: I have been living in Kwekwe, in a high density township for three days now and life here is so different from what I had gotten accustomed to on the rural lands. The same basic cultural rules apply but the difference in the effects of the economy are forcing me to look at the ways in which Black women have to negotiate their identities in order to claim any kind of authority within the narrow spaces that have been allocated. One of the women I live with asked me to come to her shop today because she wanted to have the chance for us to talk, away from her kids and her husband. We sat on milk crates and between sips of Coke and the occasional customer come for a loaf of bread or maybe a pattie, she told me her story, without interruption. She said in a conversational tone as matter of fact as counting out change¹⁰.

that man we live with, my husband, raped me when I was thirteen years old and my mother had sent me to him because she knew he owned several stores and might have a job for me. I told no one at first because he was such a big man, already at twenty-seven, and as I was unattached they would have said I asked him to. When I fell pregnant during the sixth week of his repeated assaults on my body, I knew it was best that I married him. I don't regret it now because then, at my age, a girl of thirteen with a baby, I would have been known as a prostitute and it (I) would have killed my mother who had hoped I would make enough money to be able to take care of myself. How could I willingly be like a prostitute or knowingly kill my own mother?

As a Black woman trying to find ways of engaging the work being done by African women writers, I think that some of the difficulty lies in the availability and accessibility of those texts which are being put forth by Black women variously located in relation to academia, culture, labour. The effects of not having access to the material cannot be taken as spaces unclaimed. From any of the sites we exist in this seems to be a difficult problem to negotiate. Whether located in the States or in various places in Africa, England or the Caribbean, there is a chain of information which links up in particular ways to further the lack of access to and by particular women vis a vis their locations. Basically, Black women located in the States lament not having access to many Black women writers from Africa without

¹⁰ This is the story as she told it to me. I am still waiting to hear from her to know if I have her full approval to cite her as the author of this narrative.

necessarily critiquing the politics of publishing which effect how and what we read that which we can¹¹.

This is no time to gaze. Black women's theory has often spoken as a call to action. Awa Thiam (1986:14) asks in *Black Sisters, Speak Out*:

What is the use of writing about Black women, if in doing so we do not learn what they are in reality? It is up to these women themselves to set the record straight

Challenging what has been referred to as 'feminist' issues, she lays out the methodology of her book clearly from the very beginning.

Anyone who is expecting a feminist diatribe should not read on. Black women from Africa are talking here. They express themselves simply as they reveal their problems (Thiam 1986:15)

Many critiques have been launched at white feminism and its movements as being detached from the life realities of black women, variously placed. As mentioned earlier, the seizing of the discourse and to some extent naming of it as well, as a position occupyable only by white, middle-class women has made some black women theorists leery of allying themselves with the term or category (see also Carby 1982). When Thiam (1986) separates her project from that of 'feminists', with the recognition that 'feminism is on trial', what are the implications or possibilities for connecting with Black women who have (re)claimed that space?

In her essay, 'Feminism: a Transformational Politic', bell hooks raises the issue that there is great significance in understanding that domination is something we are all capable of and insists that we recognise that we must all resist the oppressor within. Her focus is on shaping feminism in such a way as to instil a sense of positivity and a complication of our existences as being more than just women, but women with various races, ethnicities, classes, and sexualities. What I want to know is if in our differences she is accounting for the differences in our geographical and therefore cultural

¹¹ A few Black U S women have touched on this recently. These would include Carole Boyce Davies (1994) and Barbara Christian (1987). I think that this is something which must be actively challenged and reformed. Several feminist presses and magazines are sought to address these issues but at the same time, it is not just ensuring that the work is published but where and for whom? Then once distributed, who has access to the materials or even access to the knowledge that they exist. This is all a simplified argument because to really get into the politics of publishing, I think I'd have to go all the way back to the level of defining that which we consider texts. Do the same politics apply to the manufacturing and distribution of music or graphic arts for example?

locations in that her prescription for what feminism needs to consider may not speak to the needs of all women, particularly Black women. On the grounds that for some Black women, the category of feminism is dubious at best, hooks' insistence that we all embrace it and her belief that we must all share a common understanding of what feminism is, scares me. Her recognition that 'if women do not share a "common oppression"', that which joins us can become elusive, reminds me of Alice Walker's definition of 'womanist'.

I keep trying to detach my present day reading of Alice Walker's (1993) definition and way of looking at Black women in relation to feminism from the project she undertakes in *Warrior Marks* but in that text I feel her gestures towards African women are missionary, paternalistic, and neo-colonial. In the same way that her definition of womanism makes little space for women, specifically Black women, who find themselves, elsewhere doing other work, her encounter with cliterodectomy as an effort to bring forth the existences of African women without consulting them suggests objectification and as such oppression. If the category of feminism does not fit Black women for all of the reasons these theorists have described, and given the various critiques launched at Alice Walker's positioning of Black women in relation to feminism as merely a deeper shade of the same thing, how and on what grounds can we actually come together?

In another essay, 'Feminist Theory: a Radical Agenda', bell hooks points again to the exclusion of the thoughts and works by women of colour within feminist discourses, and the elitism of feminism. She closes the doors on radical theorizing and in doing so I have to wonder if she is not separating herself from other forms of discourse in which Black women are engaging or thinking through our realities. As I read some of the contemporary theory there is an effort to rethink what we are referring to when we speak of 'Black feminist theory' and as I mentioned earlier this shift to active modes of communicating, writing and testifying on active spaces of discourse repositions us and our words. To that extent, it is the spaces of activism which are bursting at the seams with the insurgent voices, 'noises', of Black women, globally. When in action, who has time to gaze?

This is no time to gaze,
no, no, no
no time to gaze
play Rasta songs all the day long
and you'll be strong
to carry on (Garnet Silk 1995)

Having sighted up Rastafari, re/turned the gaze of white mainstream feminisms, and in effect moved beyond monolithic constructions surrounding

how we speak to each other, contemporary Black woman theorists are shattering the panoptic lens which has tried to ensnare us throughout his/story. As an example of Black feminist thought which attempts to embrace Black women, however dispersed, several texts have recently been published which look to Rastafari as a site of (feminist!) transgression. In addition to Makeda Silvera's 'Open Letter to the Daughters of Rastafari', Terisa Turner's collection, *Arise, Ye Mighty People* seems to mark the opening of a discursive space previously existing, however virtually unrecognised.

Open Letter to Terisa Turner

Dear Sistren,

Reading this collection of essays was like watching something seemingly elusive, come to fruition. For a long time I had been in search of an easily accessible, contemporarily written, text on Rastafari which complicates women's roles and participation from within. While excited and anxious about reading, discussing and working with this text, I am also nervous and slightly uncomfortable because it involves so much for me. The silencing that has kept a book like this one from coming to popular attention earlier, has influenced the way that I think about trying to have a conversation on certain issues in certain spaces. I have come to see discussions about Rastafari as moments of insurrection. Private, not in manifestation, but in how we think together about ourselves. It was a shock to my system to be looking through a friend's bookshelf and get caught up in the power of the red, gold, and green. I stood there mesmerised and transfixed by what looked, on the outside like what I have been searching for, at least on some level. When I opened the book, I think it took me a solid twenty minutes to process my shock, amazement and happiness over seeing chapter after chapter on Rastafari and other popular struggles, but realising the concentration on women made me put the book down, grab the phone and place an order for it.

what [does] it mean to be African-American as opposed to African, what [does] it mean to be Africans in the United States as opposed to Africans at home, what [does] it mean to be Africans who had been to Africa and for whom Africa was the field of study What ha[s] been our various experiences? (Busia & James 1993:287)

Abena Busia (1993:287) writes in this section entitled, 'After/words ...' 'and this is what we've decided to tell you after everything we've shared...', that 'we have different forms of identity'. Which is to say that as we speak out of a variety of locations which connect us to each other and to ourselves, we must in celebrating our ability to come together, acknowledge that which sets us apart from each other.

Without contextualising our existences and in some way qualifying the possibilities of differences in what is being struggled against and how, can we really say it's not still a question of gazing? The recognition of the

perilous politics of the gaze have been written about or alluded to, so now, how is it that this acknowledgement of our lack of political or revolutionary 'time to gaze', is manifested? Quoting Amos and Parmar (1984:16) again: 'The choice to demonstrate "peacefully" or take non-direct action has never been available to us'. Further,

we have to look at the crucial question of how we organize in order that we address ourselves to the totality of our oppression. For us there is no choice (Amos & Parmar 1984:18).

At First We May Gaze Back, But Then There Is Action

The notion of resistance, however, is itself not unambiguous. It too can mean and has meant historically—rather diverse things, translating into different practices and strategies that must be developed each in its concrete sociohistorical situation. Resistance has been armed or unarmed, for instance (though never disarmed, if it was really resistance). It can be socially organized in group action or lived subjectively as a personal commitment, and often it is both. But by the very nature of power and of the mechanisms that harness power to institutions, rather than individuals, resistance tends to be cast as op-position, tends to be seen as locked in an opposite position, or what the media calls our 'opposing view-point' (de Lauretis 1986:3).

Mary DeShazer's *A Poetics of Resistance* makes use of much of the discourse on resistance. She links

Third World resistance discourse, which has often omitted women and/or eschewed feminism as a relevant area of inquiry, with U.S. feminist theory, which could benefit from closer attention to cross-cultural perspectives and of a poetics of resistance (DeShazer 1994:6).

She cites the work of South African theorist Zoe Wicomb who is thinking through the ways in which

progressive—and I would add, of feminist—political discourse is to recognize that race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nation can best be seen in dialectical rather than hierarchical relationship with one another (DeShazer 1994 4).

Thus, DeShazer's methodology is clear in her comparative approach to looking at literary texts written by South African, El Salvadoran, and African American women writers. By making use of such a comparison through which to theoretically locate this discourse of the poetics of resistance, I believe that DeShazer's analyses of the relationships between these variously placed women opens up spaces not just for comparisons of existences and

how they write themselves, but also for thinking through ways of seeing poetics in spaces of transgression. She presents women who, in the very act of writing are claiming their right to that identity we were taught to despise, attesting to their survival, and are locating those noises—hearing them loudly, making them heard, and allowing them to reverberate.

In 'What's Home Got to Do With It', Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty discuss the challenge women of colour have made to the category of feminism and their placement within it. They question the possibility of finding a 'home' within feminism 'based on absolute divisions between various sexual, racial or ethnic identities'. Some critics, they write, 'situate themselves on the fence, in relation to tensions between feminism, racism and anti-semitism'. In their discussion of the tension felt surrounding the reality of 'not being home' they write of the

realization that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and *resistance*, the repression of differences even within oneself (Martin & Mohanty 1986)

Claiming these repressed histories, or I would argue, these herstories, as the spaces of insurgence, the 'noises' are loud, rebellious, and clearly unsilenceable.

Carolyn Cooper (1992:x) distinguishes what she calls the 'noises in the blood' as

the non-verbal elements of production and performance melody, rhythm, the body in dance and the dance-hall itself as a space of spectacle and display

Using Jamaican folk culture/popular discourses, she offers '(mis)readings of Culture' (Cooper 1992:16) in such a way as to shift the spaces, texts and forms of theorizing, rebelling or acting out. To some degree the factors which influenced Martin and Mohanty's positioning of these spaces which are inherently transgressive as repressed within our homes, are also factors for how Cooper reads the tense relationship between C/culture and Slackness. The problem I have here is the oppositional relationship she draws between folk/oral cultures, or what we call culture in the yardie sense and that which is written or which speaks out of more (conservative) ideologies. If the political manifestations of culture are coming through the spaces which are already coded as marginal or separate from the oral, 'formal' modes of discourse, are we not merely turning the gaze, our gaze, back on an/other mode of signification?

Cooper does position slackness politics as not being concerned with

those gazing at us in the sense of her allusion to the self-contained pleasures involved in wainin' by self. But even there, in those moments of full absorption in the dance-hall, when the music is pulsating through your body so intensely that you can't help but close your eyes and let your body move, you eventually feel the vibe of men drawing nearer, eyes penetrating your energy from around the room as your sensuality is seized from you, unwillingly. There is always a politics of gazing or being seen which can usurp our moments of personal gratification, whether in the dance-hall, hanging on the stoop or engaging with other Black women at a conference.

Himmani Banjeri (1993:xxix) writes in her introduction to the Canadian critical anthology, *Returning the Gaze*, an acknowledgement that

we [women of colour] are engaged in politics, linking theories with practices, examining ideologies through our lives, and our lives through revolutionary ideas. We are not going shopping in the market of cultural differences and relative freedoms.

This statement reflects the agency that is part of the acknowledgement that this is not the time for simply idealising or accepting distorted levels of access to recognition and any thing less will not be stood for. Paule Marshall says in an interview with Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, 'we are in the process of re-creating ourselves all over the world and it's a fascinating task' (Boyce Davies 1995:22). Additionally, in the introduction to *Moving Beyond Boundaries: Black Women's Diasporas, Vol 2*, Carole Boyce Davies (1995:13) writes that her text

sees black women's experiences as existing in a variety of dispersed locations, all engaged in the process of re-creating our worlds as they write new and positively transformed worlds into existence

There is great excitement in hearing women celebrating this process of insurgent, resistant, re-creation as part of something that Black women have been doing all along. As a student just beginning to attempt to work through ways of reading our lives, engaging with other Black women and their texts, I feel like there are these intonations which once sounded to me like whispers, but now are heard all around me in the conversational tone of the heated kitchen talk with my mother, or the exuberant voices of my girls around the table on a night of playin' Spades. They come to me in many languages, sometimes all at once, some of them immediately recognisable, others heard just as loudly but in languages which challenge me to make the effort to understand reality in their terms. These are the sounds of women challenging the ways they have been gazed at, looked back, talked back, acted out.

This paper has been an attempt at rowdiness
it was supposed to be loud
full of voices
making noise
hailing each other up
embracing
moving through
with force
too occupied with resistance
to be worried about
what we look like
but rather
how we are
looking
and what we see
when we look
out into the blackness
NO
this is certainly
no time to gaze.

Conclusion: or a Forward Migration

Drawing on the words of a few women from around the globe who have come before me, I have tried to put together some critical thoughts and questions on various issues within contemporary 'Black Feminist' theories with the hopes of seeing a way forward. Since the first (second and third) revision of this text, I have been fortunate to have had access to several texts which clarify, alter and expand many of the questions and ideas engaged here. In addition to several texts on the subjectivity of the author, new directions in feminist theorising in southern Africa as well as several dated pieces which contextualise feminisms in an African frame, these ideas have been affected (positively) by grassroots struggle and community activism.

University of Binghamton

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