

# Does blackness still matter? Black Feminist Literary Criticism Revisited

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## Abstract

*In the last few years, scholars within the field of Black studies have sought to assess the current state of the field, addressing its objectives, shifting paradigms as well as the political stakes of their own theorizing. On both sides of the Atlantic, debates have taken place giving rise to new observations of blackness, new trajectories in research, and new perspectives on knowledge production. This essay seeks to contribute to this debate by examining, retrospectively, the ways in which black feminist literary critics, ever conscious of the political stakes of their theorizing, have engaged in and grappled with the issue of race and/or “blackness.”*

*Keywords: black feminist criticism, blackness, Christian, ideology, Joyce, McDowell, poststructuralism, practice, race, Smith, Spillers, theory*

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## Introduction

[I]n the world of avant-garde literary studies, today, it is possible to think that black women, above all others, perhaps, should be in the vanguard of one of the most exciting areas of literary criticism and theory in the United States.

(Baker)

What is the future of Black studies? Can we do away with race as an organizing category, as Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature* (2011) seems to suggest? In the last few years, scholars within the field of Black studies have sought to assess the current state of the field, addressing its objectives, shifting paradigms as well as the political stakes of their own theorizing.<sup>1</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, debates have taken place giving rise to new observations of blackness, new trajectories in research, and new perspectives on knowledge production. One of the most interesting debates has centered on the oppositional theories of post-racialism and Afro-pessimism, both of which highlight the issue of race. While for post-racialists this category seems no longer needed or is dated at best, for Afro-pessimists it is essential for understanding the structural dehumanization of the Black.<sup>2</sup> This essay seeks to contribute to this debate by examining, retrospectively, the ways in which black feminist (literary) critics, ever conscious of the political stakes of their theorizing, have engaged in and grappled with the issue of race and/or blackness. Divided into three parts, the essay examines the origins and early development of black feminist criticism, analyzes its internal conflict concerning the use of theoretical language threatening to depoliticize and/or undermine blackness, and assesses ways of engaging race and/or blackness in the current trends in black feminist criticism.

### Part I: Origins and Development of Black Feminist Criticism

The Black feminist critic would be constantly aware of the political implications of her work.

(B. Smith)

Born in the 1970s, largely as a response to white/male criticism rendering black women's literary work invisible and/or marginal, black feminist literary criticism, at its inception, had three major goals: to challenge stereotypical literary representations of black women; to propose new ways of reading black women's texts; and to excavate forgotten and out-of-print literary works by black women.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the need to make black women's existence and experience in America recognized, its overall project was to develop a body of theory whose insights could be used in the study of black women's art. Pioneering in this endeavor was the essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) by Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the black feminist political organization Combahee River Collective (1974)<sup>4</sup>

Smith saw a direct connection between "the politics of black women's lives" and black women's "situation as artists" whose creativity had, historically, been stunted by "the political, economic, and social restrictions of slavery and racism."<sup>5</sup> In her formulation,

black feminist criticism was both a cultural and political enterprise; it emerged directly from the politics of black women's lives and black women's struggle for justice. Therefore, for Smith, the emergent black feminist criticism would naturally "owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use" (11). This envisioned reciprocity or mutually beneficial relationship between literary criticism and political activism underlines both the roots and political dimensions of black feminist criticism: black women's efforts to eradicate racism (i.e., white supremacy) and sexism (i.e., patriarchy) in America.

Emphasizing that the black feminist critic must be "constantly aware of the political implications of her work" (11), Smith called for a new critical perspective sensitive to black women's literature, attentive to interlocking factors of race, class, and gender in black women's lives. Arguing that black women writers "constitute an identifiable tradition" and that "thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually [they] manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share" (10), she urged black feminist critics to explore these "commonalities." To Smith, it was unquestionable that the black feminist critic remains true to *her* identity and does "not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought to [...] Black women's art" (11, emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup>

Echoing one of the tenets of the Black Art Movement proposing that black literature should be judged by the standards derived from black, not mainstream, culture, Smith outlined several areas key to defining black feminist criticism's boundaries: the question of authority (who has the right to produce black feminist criticism), textual terrain (what is the subject of black feminist criticism), and methodology (what methods/approaches are appropriate for black feminist critics). Her claims for black women's exclusive authority over the production of black feminist criticism, their exclusive interest in the literary tradition of black women writers, and, finally, their rejection of white/male critical theories became the heart of ensuing debates among black feminist critics.

In "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1980), Deborah McDowell criticized Smith's rendition of black feminist literary criticism as ahistorical and essentialist, "lack[ing in] definitional precision and supportive detail" (7). Questioning Smith's claim that black women share a common language and that the incorporation of certain activities, such as rootworking or midwifery, is a unique feature of black women's writing, she urged black critics to move away from the focus on "common approaches" to a more fruitful and, in her words, necessary exploration of contexts of textual production and reception. This contextual approach to black women's literature, however, she insisted, "must not ignore the importance of rigorous textual analysis" (12), which could unravel the artistic sophistication of black women's literature and help create a more substantial theoretical body of black feminist criticism.

McDowell's critique marked a time in which black literature as well as black feminist criticism became institutionalized, i.e., established as part of academic enquiry. This victorious move into the academy "began to yield a body of academically sophisticated work [...] no longer directly grounded in overt political struggle," in some ways shifting the focus on the social/political to the more linguistic/literary (Griffin 491). Yet, as Farah Jasmine Griffin points out, black feminist critics "never lost sight of the political implications

of their work” (491); they recognized that even “the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men – mostly white but some black” (Washington qtd. in Griffin 491). In other words, for black feminist critics, “[t]he academy became yet another location, another site in the centuries-long battle against white supremacy and patriarchy” (Griffin 491). Within this context, the conscious (re)construction of a black women’s literary tradition on the part of black feminist critics was, essentially, part of the struggle for power, just as were their efforts to develop a larger body of black feminist criticism that could not be dismissed as a mere “identity politics-based criticism” – a frequent accusation leveled at black critics. This context also explains McDowell’s anxiety about Smith’s reciprocal link between black feminist theory and political action, yoking political ideology with aesthetic judgment.

While not entirely dismissing the possibility of the *political* use of feminist criticism, McDowell disagreed with what she saw as the overly restrictive boundaries of black feminist criticism in Smith’s work. Arguing for more inclusive parameters, McDowell challenged all areas that Smith articulated as key to black feminist criticism. First, she rejected race and gender as the sole defining criteria for the black feminist critic, suggesting that black feminist criticism could be practiced by men and women alike, both white and black. Second, she challenged the idea of an exclusive textual terrain of black feminist criticism, calling for an exploration of “parallels between black male and female writers” instead of the critics’ stubborn focus on black women’s literature and/or the treatment of black women by black males in black men’s literature (15). Last but not least, she maintained that black feminist critics must abandon their distrust of Western theories and “determine the extent to which their criticism intersects with that of white feminist critics” (11), and, possibly, “embrace other modes of critical inquiry” (15).

Interestingly, more than a decade later, McDowell admitted having gone too far in her “attempt to formulate a definition [of black feminist criticism] so inclusive in its scope that it nearly gutted black feminist thinking of any distinctiveness and explanatory power as a critical category” (17) and acknowledged her error of having faulted Smith “for allowing ideology to inform critical analysis” (23). Her acknowledgment was largely influenced by her academic experience of racial “fetishization” and the disapproving views of other black feminist critics, namely that of Hazel V. Carby, who was quick to point out in “The Woman’s Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory” (1987) that “black feminist theory is emptied of its feminist content if the perspective of the critic doesn’t matter” (13). In line with her argument, McDowell went on to explain in “*The Changing Same*”: *Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995) that to “detach ‘blackness’ from feminism [...] is to lend tacit support to a standard of ‘neutrality,’ [...] to become an invisible black” in a race-neutral world (McDowell 21). Given the circumstances of a continuing existence of racial hierarchies in America, such a move would be foolish; in other words, she concluded, there was no place for black criticism without ideology as yet (23). Her remarks, further elaborated in “Transferences: Black Feminist Discourse: The ‘Practice’ of ‘Theory’” (1995), an essay published in the same year as her reassessment of Smith,<sup>7</sup> can be read as an insightful coda to an internal conflict within black literary criticism, which has become to be known as “male theory versus female practice” or the “‘race’ debate.”

## Part II: The “‘Race’ Debate” or “Male Theory versus Female Practice”

Inevitably a hierarchy has now developed between what is called theoretical criticism and practical criticism. (Christian)

In 1987, the winter issue of the literary journal *New Literary History* brought to the light a heated debate among black critics over the use of poststructuralist theory. The debate was triggered by Joyce A. Joyce’s essay “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism,” in which Joyce, highlighting the inappropriateness of the use of Western male/white European critical theories in analyses of black literature, accused two leading black intellectuals and critics, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr., of denying “blackness or race as an important element of literary analysis of Black literature” (292). Arguing that the black critic “takes his or her cues from the literary work itself as well as from the historical context of which that work is a part” and thus his or her consciousness is “predetermined by culture and color” (293), she charged that “it is insidious for the Black literary critic to adopt any kind of strategy that diminishes or [...] negates his blackness” (294).

Essentially, Joyce was concerned with black critics’ use of poststructuralist theory, in particular their “adopt[ion of] a linguistic system and an accompanying worldview that communicate to a small, isolated audience” (294). In Joyce’s words, the poststructuralist language was “distant and sterile,” estranging the critics not only from “the realities of the sensual, communicative function of language” (294) but also from the job of the black critic who must be responsible to his or her readership. In her view, not dissimilar from that of Barbara Smith, the black critic should “serve [...] as an intermediary [...] between Black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them” (293). Hence race and blackness can never be for the black critic (both male and female) just an arbitrary function of language that poststructuralist theory sees as a mere “system of codes or as mere play” (295).

Predictably, Joyce’s views on the inappropriateness of the use of Western critical theories in analyses of black literature met with strong reactions from both Gates and Baker who defended this “inter-racial” critical engagement as one that enriches the understanding of black texts. In particular, in “What’s Love Got to Do With It?: Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom,” Gates noted that despite what he perceived as a resistance to theory on the part of Joyce, “the challenge of the critic of black literature in the 1980s” was “not to shy away from [Western] literary theory; rather, to translate it into the black idiom” (11). In “In Dubious Battle,” Baker seconded that poststructuralist critics “ha[d] seized initiative by formulating suggestive theories of Afro-American expressive culture that bring their work into harmony not with a mainstream, nor with an academic majority [...] but with an avant garde in contemporary world literary study” (20). Moreover, he maintained that black poststructuralist critics were bringing “a desirable expansiveness, diversity, originality, and [...] complexity [to] the Afro-American critical and theoretical arsenal” (18) *in contrast to black women critics* who tended to espouse “a new black conservatism” (21). Baker’s overtly gendered response, combined with Joyce’s accusation of two *male* intellectuals (although her essay was not otherwise gender-specific) and Gates’s

reference to Joyce's resistance to theory, helped to create a false schism among black literary critics referred to as "male theory versus female practice." The schism – suggesting that only male critics employ and/or develop theory while female critics merely engage in practical criticism – was further solidified with the publication of Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory," which occurred in the same year as the Joyce-Gates-Baker debate.

Essentially, Christian argued that literary criticism, in general, had become marred by a perturbing "movement to exalt [poststructuralist] theory" (17). According to Christian, in the academic world, "a hierarchy has now developed between what is called theoretical criticism and practical criticism" (17), resulting in critics' rush to embrace theory. This "race for theory," however, had a detrimental effect on black criticism and black critics for whom, she argued, literature was not "an occasion for discourse" but "necessary nourishment":

The race for theory, with its linguistic jargon, its emphasis on quoting its prophets, its tendency toward "Biblical" exegesis, its refusal to mention specific works of creative writers, far less contemporary ones, its preoccupation with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations, its gross generalizations about culture, has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature, while others have developed intense writing blocks and are puzzled by the incomprehensibility of the language set adrift in literary circles. (13)

Christian found it alarming that black women critics who had not been silenced were often "influenced, even coopted into speaking a language [...] in terms alien to and opposed to [black people's] needs and orientation" (12), displacing the organic ways of reading black literary texts, i.e., ways derived from and conscious of black culture, history, literature, and politics.<sup>8</sup> Like Joyce, she saw a danger in the proliferation of a largely European male poststructuralist critical theory, which threatened to de-politicize and/or undermine black authenticity. In her view, black critics had no need to use what she saw as an essentializing, ideological category in service of the white male hegemony, trying to reinvent the wheel:<sup>9</sup>

[P]eople of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. ... My folk, in other words, have always been a *race* for theory – though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative. In my own work I try to illuminate and explain these hieroglyphs, which is, I think, an activity quite different from the creating of the hieroglyphs themselves." (12, emphasis mine)

An eloquent statement about the distinct ways of black theorizing in which race is inextricably bound to people ("my folk") of which the critic is part and whose words the critic tries to illuminate – this aspect of Christian's critique of the use of poststructuralist theory has often been neglected. Yet Christian reiterates the point in "The Highs and the Lows of Black Feminist Criticism" (1990), making it explicitly gendered: "It is often in the poem,

the story, the play, rather than in Western philosophical theorizing that *feminist* thought/feeling evolves, challenges and renews itself” (54). In doing so, she not only challenges the charge that women are incapable of theorizing, implicit in the myth of “male theory versus female practice,” but also, and perhaps most importantly, explains why Western theorizing is inappropriate for black women. To Christian, Western theory serves to “homogenize the world”; it fixes black women “in boxes and categories through jargon, theory, abstraction” (54), preventing them from seeing “connections between emotion/known language of women’s literature, the many-voiced sounds of [their] own language and the re-visioning [the black women] seek” (55). In other words, Western critical theory contributes to the “multiple jeopardy” of black women by undermining that which is inextricably bound with them (black female authenticity), to the point that their voices “no longer sound like women’s voices to anyone” (56).

### Part III: Transformation(s) of Black Feminist Literary Criticism

Indeed, by the mid-1990s black feminist literary studies was one of the most intellectually exciting and fruitful developments in American literary criticism. (Griffin)

While the debate over the use of poststructuralist theory has never been quite resolved among black critics, it has contributed to a rich diversification within the field of black feminist criticism.<sup>10</sup> If Christian and Joyce felt concerned about the negative consequences of the black critics’ use of Western theory, taking to heart Audre Lorde’s cautionary argument that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,”<sup>11</sup> the majority of black feminist critics have exploited the possibilities of using “the master’s tools” to produce sophisticated readings of and/or theories about black women’s literature while maintaining race and/or blackness as their key element. In “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition” (1989), for example, Gwendolyn Mae Henderson combined Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theories of dialogics and dialectics with black idiom to propose a new theory of interpretation of black women’s literature based on the black woman’s “simultaneity of discourse.”<sup>12</sup> While not quite “dismantling the master’s house,” her reading of black women writers as “the modern day apostles, empowered by experience” recuperated the black vernacular to highlight the specificity of black women’s experience.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the best example of attacking “the master’s house” could be seen in Hortense J. Spillers’ essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), which uses and simultaneously subverts Western psychoanalysis to explore black subjectivity. Articulating a theory of black female gender construction, Spillers argued that “in the historic outline of dominance, the respective [Lacanian] subject-positions of ‘female’ and ‘male’ adhere to no symbolic integrity” (58); they lose differentiation and validity within captivity through “a theft of the body,” becoming “sensuality,” “the object,” “the other” and “powerlessness” (58). Exposing the ways in which slavery marked black women’s bodies, she demonstrated that this institution ruptured the black family both physically and psychically; and that “the traumatic marks on the body of the slave constitute

‘an American grammar’ that is transferred across generations within African American culture” (Keizer 159).

Spillers’ exploration of the diacritical relation of psychoanalysis to race has proved to be a fruitful direction for black feminism.<sup>14</sup> With her emphasis on the black “interior,” Spillers “rescued the psychoanalytic [approach] from the depoliticized, ahistorical realm,” transforming it into a tool for accessing a more complex black subjectivity (Griffin 496). In doing so, she rebutted Joyce’s and Christian’s fears, reversing the role of the agent: instead of allowing a Western theory to de-politicize blackness, she used blackness to politicize the Western theory. In addition, her formulation of the American grammar of suffering, with its delineation of the structural dehumanization of blacks and their denied agency has provided a theoretical framework useful not only for literary studies but also for other fields, such as history and cultural studies.<sup>15</sup>

As black feminist criticism was gaining momentum in academia, there were several attempts to redefine the field. Hazel Carby was the first to recognize “contradictory impulses” in the growing scholarship of black feminist criticism, arguing that black feminist criticism “be regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions” (15). The contradictions within the field of black feminist criticism involved primarily the three areas outlined by Barbara Smith back in 1977 – the question of the identity of the black feminist critic, the question of the textual terrain of black feminist criticism (especially with regard to the literary tradition of black women), and the question of methodology (already discussed above). Most if not all of the contradictions were caused by the import of poststructuralist theory, namely deconstruction.

Deconstruction questioned the concept of fixed, coherent identity, hence also the concept of literary tradition – the very concept that black women critics were asserting to confirm the black women writers’ (and their own) existence. While the critics recognized that the creation of “an identifiable literary tradition” of black women, as Smith had defined it, was a construct, they disagreed on the issue of whether or not to abandon it. Some, like Carby, argued against it and encouraged a move away from the “reliance on shared experience” (16); others were less dismissive, insisting that black women must first reclaim their collective identity before they can critique it. In “‘The Darkened Eye Restored:’ Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women,” for example, heeding Spillers’s idea of “cross-currents” and “discontinuities,” Mary Helen Washington suggested that we learn to read the black women’s literary tradition “in new ways” (xxv). Carole Boyle Davies saw a possible solution in “cross-cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspectives” that would help “redefine identity away from exclusion and marginality” (4). Arguing for a geographically broad conception of black feminist criticism that would avoid the limitation of being “almost wholly located in African-American women’s experiences,” she proposed in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) that “Black women’s writing [...] should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (4).

While Davies remained locked in the pursuit of *black* women’s writing (her new category basically meant including *black* women from Diaspora), Toni Morrison was attempting to expand American literary scholarship by shifting its attention to the study of literature written by whites. Suggesting that literature written by white American canonical

authors may prove a fruitful territory for exploration of what she called “the Africanist presence,” in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), she began to examine inscriptions of race in white literary production. Her investigation, implicitly challenging black critics to give up their exclusive textual terrain and to explore *(the) other(s)* texts, provided a brand new impetus for black feminist criticism. It shifted its focus on “what can black feminist theory claim as its own” to pondering a different set of questions: “[W]hat can black feminist theory give to its ‘other’? What does black feminist theory have to offer to that which is not its own?” (DuCille 33).

Last but not least, informed by both the poststructuralist critique of essentialism and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s term of intersectionality,<sup>16</sup> Valerie Smith challenged not only the textual terrain of black feminist criticism but also the very assumption of a biologically grounded positionality of the black feminist critic. In *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (1998) she argued that “Black feminism is not a biologically grounded positionality” but one that “provides strategies to reading simultaneity,” i.e., intersecting constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality in cultural expression (xv). Her words, reminiscent of her earlier definition of black feminist criticism as “a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood) and class in modes of cultural expression” (“Black Feminist Theory” 39), have opened up the way for a broader, more inclusive, concept of black feminist criticism while laying foundations for more expansive black feminist approaches.<sup>17</sup> Yet they have also left a nagging question hanging in the air: if black feminist criticism is not a biologically grounded positionality, i.e., the black feminist critic does not have to be a black person, if the cultural expression under critical consideration does not have to be authored by a black person and if the methodology used by the black feminist critic can be a white Western theory, does blackness still matter for the black feminist critic?

### **Coda: Does Blackness Still Matter?**

[T]he most recent generation of scholarship, while seemingly opening up black concerns [...], has, like its post-1960s counterpart, “frequently limited [its analyses] to one oversimplified explanation – racism.” (Warren)

There is no doubt that since its inception, black feminist criticism has undergone profound transformations. Inspired by Barbara Smith’s call for a politically responsible criticism attentive to interlocking factors of race, class, and gender in black women’s lives, it entered the academy in the late 1970s to challenge its existing hegemony. Over the course of the years, it has succeeded in moving black women’s literature from the margins to the literary canon, academic curricula, and publishing houses, making it more visible and recognized. Black women’s fiction, in turn, provided the ground for the critics’ theoretical analyses of and approaches to black women’s multiple oppression, which not only constitute, to use Robert J. Patterson’s words, “the ur-defining analytical framework” of the field

of black feminist criticism (90) but have also come to inform and influence the scholarship of fields outside of literary study.

Despite the fact that many of Barbara Smith's premises have been challenged, the core tenet of black feminist criticism has remained intact: black feminist criticism has never severed its link to politics. As has been demonstrated throughout this essay, race (and blackness as an essential part of it) has always been important to black feminist analyses, which have constantly highlighted its intersection with class, gender, and other factors affecting black women's lives. It is precisely this reading "with an eye toward equality and justice" (Griffin 502) that is still of value in today's world where race continues to matter. As Griffin poignantly summarizes it: "Given the misogyny of some of today's contemporary black popular culture as well as the impact of U.S. imperialism on the lives of women of color and poor women globally, the insights of black feminist criticism offer a mode of analysis worth heeding, for black feminist criticism provides a strategy of reading but it also informs a politics that measures a society and its culture by the place that the poorest women and girls occupy within it" (502).

Thus despite the recent trend to embrace diasporic, transatlantic or global frames that tend to erode the distinctiveness of American blackness (and seem to dilute the critical enterprise originally meant to promote it), as long as the idea of a post-racial, color-blind American society in which racism no longer exists continues to circulate in American society,<sup>18</sup> there will be a need for black feminist criticism. The new challenge that lies ahead of black feminist literary critics, however, is to learn to navigate through the conflicting narratives surrounding the ever-problematic issue of authentic blackness. So perhaps the real question we should be asking is not "Does blackness still matter for the black feminist critic?" but "What makes black feminist literary criticism black?" As this essay has, hopefully, demonstrated, the answer to this question is: "aplenty."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the most recent and important venues bringing together large numbers of scholars interested in the future of Black studies are, for example, the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR) conference (Atlanta, March 2013), the WISE conference on The African American Experience Since 1992 (Hull, September 2013) and the forthcoming conference on The Futures of Black Studies – Historicity, Objectives and Methodologies (Bremen, April 2014). My list of issues pertaining to the future of Black studies reflects both the Atlanta and Hull conference sessions and keynote lectures, and the Bremen conference call for papers.

<sup>2</sup> On post-racialism see, for example, Lawrence Bobo's "Somewhere between Jim Crow and Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today" (*Daedalus*, vol. 140, no. 2, Spring 2011, 11–31), Ytasha L. Womack's *Post Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010) or Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman, 2010). On Afro-pessimism see, for example, Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" (*InTensions*, no. 5, Fall/Winter 2011, online, 47 pages), Frank B. Wilderson's *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Cambridge:

South End Press, 2008) or Saidiya V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjugation: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Instrumental in this process, which continued throughout the 1980s, were, for example, Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), Mari Evans' *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), Marjorie Pryse's and Hortense Spillers' *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Mary Helen Washington's *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) as well as her earlier volume *Black Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), and Joanne M. Braxton's *Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). Two milestones in this endeavor were also the founding of *The Black Women Writers* series (Beacon Press) by Deborah McDowell and the publication of *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper I use the terms black feminist theory and black feminist criticism interchangeably, both of them referring to the critical theorizing essays by black feminists.

<sup>5</sup> Smith here paraphrases the words of Alice Walker from her landmark essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974), which can be considered the first critical attempt to reconstruct a literary tradition of black women. The essay can be found in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1984), 231–243.

<sup>6</sup> Smith also urged black women to pay more attention to black lesbian texts. In the second part of her essay, she tried to define lesbian literature and offered a lesbian reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

<sup>7</sup> The essay is included under the title of "Black Feminist Thinking: The 'Practice' of 'Theory'" in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* ed. by Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 557–579.

<sup>8</sup> Arlene R. Keizer reads the controversy over practice versus theory as "the fight to determine how African American literary studies would be institutionalized in historically white colleges and universities" (161). In her essay "Black Feminist Criticism", included in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154–168, she argues that "[t]he establishment of African American Studies programmes [sic] was influenced heavily by the cultural force of the Black Power and the Black Arts movements, but as these movements waned and were critiqued from within, many new questions about the field had to be answered," among them "[w]hat critical models would (or should) be used to discuss African American literary texts?" (161).

<sup>9</sup> Christian speaks of a new academic *hegemony* in which only a few select individuals versed in a particular language *control* the destiny of others "since theory has become a commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions – worse, whether we are heard at all" (11). These comments, explicitly framing the debate about male theory versus female practice in the context of the institutionalization of African American literary studies and the hiring of black faculty members, attest to the above-mentioned argument that for black feminist critics, "[t]he academy became yet another location, another site in the centuries-long battle against white supremacy and patriarchy" (Griffin 491).

<sup>10</sup> It has also generated further discussion on the topic of theory versus practice. See, for example, Michael Awkward's "Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism,"

Joyce A. Joyce's "'Who the Cap Fit': Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr." and Sandra Adell's "The Crisis in Black American Literary Criticism and the Postmodern Cures of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," all of which can be found in Winston Napier's *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pages 331–338, 319–330, 523–539, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> The expression comes from Audre Lorde's seminal essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in which Lorde criticized racism within white feminism. It can be found, for example, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color*. Eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 98–101.

<sup>12</sup> Likening black women to the disciples of Pentecost, she argued that black women, as gendered and racial subjects having to interact on different levels with black men, white men and white women, speak in tongues, addressing both "the notion of commonality and universalism" as well as "the sense of difference and diversity" (36).

<sup>13</sup> In some ways, Henderson followed in the footsteps of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr., who had combined black idiom with Western theory in their seminal works *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Among the black feminist scholars who took up the challenge of applying psychoanalysis to black literature were, for example, Claudia Tate with her *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ann DuCille with her *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Mae G. Henderson with her essay "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," published in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. by Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 62–86. Spillers's interdisciplinary approach also influenced black feminist critics to combine literary studies with other areas of interest. Some of the key interdisciplinary black feminist texts are Karla Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), offering valuable insights into the field of cultural studies; Valerie Smith's *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), making contributions to cultural and queer studies; and bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), offering illuminating essays on film and culture.

<sup>15</sup> For works combining psychoanalysis and black cultural studies or history, see, for example, Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjugation: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Sharon Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), and Elizabeth Alexander's *The Black Interior* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> See Kimberlé Crenshaw's essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (July 1995), 1241–99.

<sup>17</sup> These new feminist approaches are found, for example, in the writing of the black male feminists David Ikard and Michael Awkward, who offer insightful readings of intraracial gender conflicts. See, for example, David Ikard's *Breaking the Silence Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007) and Michael Awkward's *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1995), which contains his seminal essay “A Black Man’s Place(s) in Black Feminist Criticism.” On the question of positionality, see also Cheryl Wall’s insightful essay “Taking Positions and Changing Words” in her *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989, 1–15).

<sup>18</sup> For excellent examples of such claims and of some writers’ fictional fantasies of a post-racial American future see, for example, Coleman Hutchinson’s insightful lecture “Three Poems and a Critique of Postracialism” given at Emory University, Atlanta, GA, on November 1, 2012, its full text to be found at <http://southernspaces.org/2012/three-poems-and-critique-postracialism>.

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