

Book Review

Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice (1998) by Patricia Hill Collins

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Black women in the United States seem to be facing a new politics of containment honed at this intersection of fixity and change. While continuing to be organized around the exclusionary practices attached to racial segregation, the new politics simultaneously uses increasingly sophisticated strategies of surveillance. Relying on the visibility of African-American women to generate the invisibility of exclusionary practices of racial segregation, this new politics produces remarkably consistent Black female disadvantage while claiming to do the opposite.

—Patricia Hill Collins

The ability of Black feminist thought to make useful contributions to contemporary freedom struggles hinges on its ability to develop new forms of visionary pragmatism. Within these new politics of containment that confront African-American women, visionary pragmatism in turn hinges on developing greater complexity with Black women's knowledge. In this regard, remaining situated is essential. Visions can be conjured up in the theoretical imagination, yet pragmatic actions require being responsive to the injustices of everyday life.

—Patricia Hill Collins

In her most recent book, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Patricia Hill Collins illuminates the politics be-

hind black women's presence in the public eye. Collins argues that

[c]hanging racial politics in the 1980s and 1990s dramatically reconfigured the valuation and meaning of public generally and of the social welfare state as the quintessential public institution. When African-American women, among others, gained power within the government sector of the public sphere, the sector was increasingly abandoned by individuals and groups with power. Privatization now seems ubiquitous in the United States. . . . In this context public is reconfigured as anything of poor quality, marked by a lack of control and privacy. (p. 33)

This new politics of containment does not rely on the old methods of spatial segregation as much as on "surveillance tactics that fix Black women in the public eye. What we now seem to have is a curious reversal: practices of racial segregation that foster black women's subordination seem increasingly hidden and invisible, whereas poverty and other effects of racial segregation on Black women become increasingly subject to public scrutiny" (p. 35). Surveillance is also used to control middle-class black women for whom affirmative action and antidiscrimination law have made it possible to enter integrated workspaces as "outsiders-within."

Where segregation used to keep Black women out of the classroom and boardroom, surveillance now becomes an important

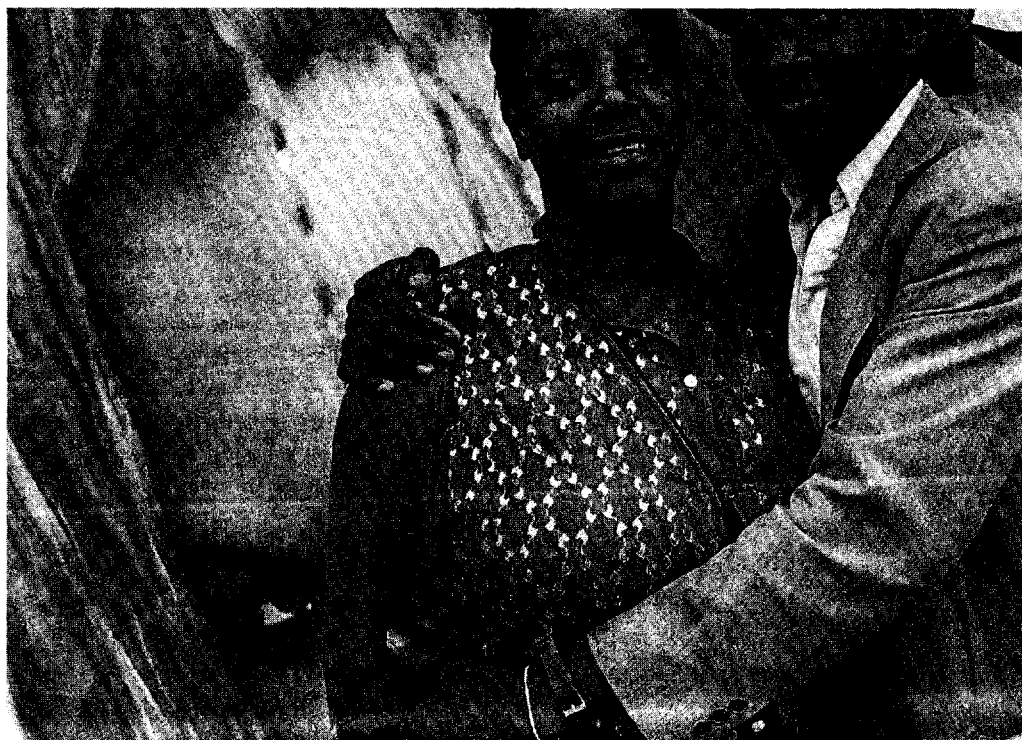


Photo by Philippe Cheng.

mechanism of control. As is the case for poor Black women, surveillance operates via strategies of everyday racism whereby individual women feel that they are being “watched” in their desegregated work environments. Surveillance also functions via media representations that depict the success of selected high-achieving Black women. Surveillance seems designed to produce a particular effect—Black women remain visible yet silenced; their bodies become written by other texts, yet they remain powerless to speak for themselves. (p. 38)

According to Collins, middle-class black women who want to stay in these spaces must work hard to make certain they are not confused with poor black women, while at the same paying close attention to the appropriate text as they are showcased as the

“Black Lady Overachiever” and contrasted with the “Welfare Queen”: “Taken together, the visibility of poor Black women and the visibility of the newly arrived Black professional woman both obscure the workings of institutional power” (p. 42). For Collins, the challenge of black feminist thought, as critical social theory, is to address these *new* politics of containment and empower black women to resist these same *old* power arrangements.

During many discussions with relatives, friends, colleagues and students where we try to understand the plight of black women as we move into the twenty-first century, I find it difficult to explain why some of us seem to be “moving on up,” yet 31 percent of us are still under the poverty line. Collins’s insightful discussion of the new politics of containment helps me to clarify this most vexing

issue. Yet I would have liked her to have provided a more complete discussion of the new politics of containment as it pertains to the majority of black women—working-class women. One aspect of their containment is, of course, their public invisibility, but I would have liked her to have elaborated the ways this silencing affects their everyday life and the meaning of increasing privatization in their lives.

The first part of this three-part book addresses the politics of containment, and the last section of this part, in particular, displays the intellectual rigor and sophistication that

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have come to characterize some of her best work. Collins argues that black women's simply coming to voice, in the current political climate, is not enough to assure that they will produce oppositional knowledge as they have in the past. There are two types of oppositional knowledge that have been produced by

black women: "[T]he authority of individual lived Black female experience offered an effective challenge to elite discourses claiming the authority of science," and "the collective secret knowledge generated by groups on either side of power that are shared in private when the other side's seems absent" is the second of these (p. 49). For her, the individual's breaking silence under the new politics of containment has less oppositional power than it has had in the past because individual voices are used to stand for authentic members of the group to which every other member of the group must be compared. Once, an individual black woman came to voice by telling her own story. Now her story

can only be told in a "narrow box of authenticity," which, in the current market-driven climate, becomes another commodity devoid of oppositional content. It may even serve the needs of the state or provide careers for those who would choose to benefit from black women's narratives. Breaking silence alone is not enough to combat the politics of containment.

Collins's systematic comparison of the collective black women's standpoints known as black feminism and womanism is the most lucid description of both standpoints that I have seen, because she situates both standpoints in relationship to each other and to versions of what she characterizes as white feminism. After doing so, Collins doesn't ask the reader to once and for all decide what black women's intellectual tradition should be called. Rather, she thinks we should concern ourselves with "maintaining dialogues among Black women that are attentive to *both* heterogeneity among African-American women *and* shared concerns arising from a common social location in the U.S. market and power relations; and second, using this continually evolving knowledge to engage other critical social theories" (p. 73). Again, as in her earlier work *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins encourages us to remember that black feminism must be grounded in the everyday life of black women and not simply become another intellectual fad circulating among academic elites.

The second part of this book is less satisfying, as Collins seems to revisit much well-traveled ground. She provides a discourse analysis of sociology, postmodernism, and Afrocentrism designed to discover what, if anything, these discourses can offer black feminist theory and to see whether "a fighting words paradigm can ever constitute sufficient grounds for constructing critical social theory" (p. 94). She takes a comprehensive look at each critical social theory "internally,

according to its structure, organization and thematic content; according to its ideas and their relationship to the social structure and finally at the relationship between the ideas of the theorist and her interpretive community of readers" (p. 92).

Collins finds that black women can use the legitimating function of positivist social science to develop fighting words that can be used in academic settings to counter many of the falsehoods characteristic of social science. And she finds that postmodernism's focus on difference provides analytical tools for black women as they struggle in academia. But neither by itself constitutes the kind of critical social theory she believes is necessary at this particular historical moment to assure social justice. These "fighting words" are not connected to everyday people.

She notes that Afrocentrism "simultaneously represents and shapes Black political aspirations for freedom and justice" by putting black people at the center of its concerns, much the same way some black feminism puts black women at the center of its concerns. Moreover, this Afrocentrism is tied to the concerns of many everyday African Americans. Thus, like black feminism, it holds the promise of being truly oppositional. But despite its trenchant critique of scientific racism, Afrocentrism turns a blind eye toward the sexist bias of that same science. Afrocentrism may "resist" and "react" to the premises of racial scholarship, yet it remains "trapped" in its premises concerning gender. Thus, although Afrocentrism assumes a "fighting words" posture in regard to institutionalized racism, on a deeper level the nature of its critique inadvertently supports the intellectual framework that legitimates hierarchical power relations.

Moving beyond critique in the third part of the book, Collins outlines the epistemological criteria necessary for critical social theory designed to address the new politics of

containment. First, it must speak the truth about the reality of people's lives, which means we must devise new ways to validate truth that take into consideration existing power relationships. Second, it must have a visionary as well as pragmatic approach that addresses the notions of freedom and resistance in such a way that people are moved to action. She argues that the black women in her working-class neighborhood had a "visionary pragmatism" to help them develop a critical social theory situated in their sense of what was right and wrong that served them in their community work. Now her neighborhood has changed, and black women's experiences have changed.

Nevertheless, Collins thinks that black women's experience "generated by differences of age, sexual orientation, region of the country, urban or rural residence, color, hair texture, and the like theoretically can all be accommodated within the concept of shared standpoint" (p. 224). We all may not share the same experience, but she believes that we can share a standpoint because we share a distinctive history in the United States. Rather than submerging our complexity and looking for authentic black women, she would have us come to understand that black women situated at the intersections of race, economic class, gender, and other hierarchical structures can construct relationships among themselves and between themselves and other groups, always being careful not to replicate the same hierarchy within the group and between groups that characterize the American power structure. By using the spiritual traditions of our foremothers and our particular history of concern for justice, in addition to the best from other critical social theories, she hopes that black feminism will be able to transform itself in such a way as to respond to the current political situation and make meaningful contributions to the current freedom struggles.