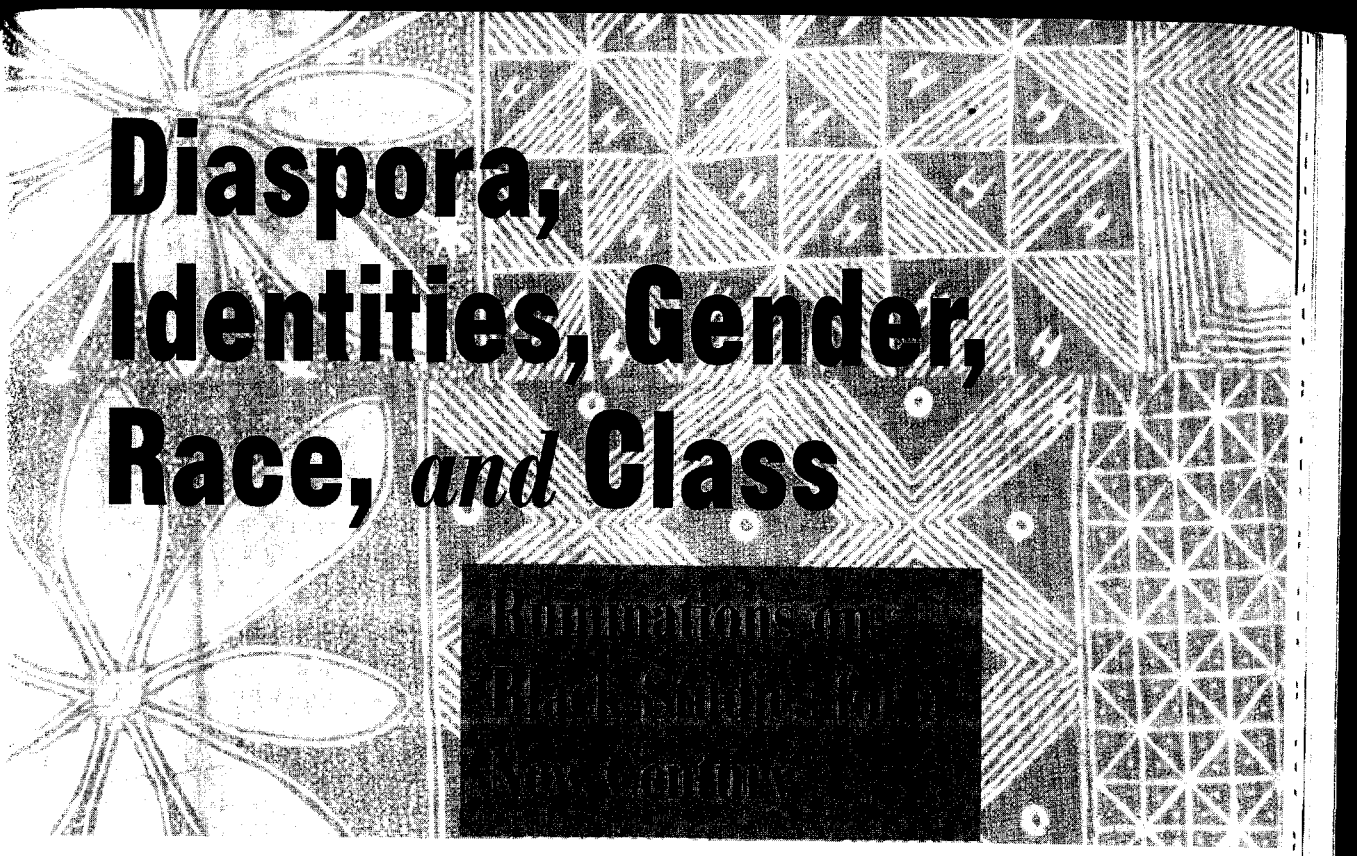


Diaspora, Identities, Gender, Race, *and* Class

Ruminations on Black Studies for a New Century

Rose M. Brewer

I have been thinking about two ways of framing my remarks for this essay. I think of these two issues because recently I had the pleasure of hearing Hortense Spillers at a conference on African American studies held at Macalester College. Her opening observations on the field of black studies involved a threefold conceptual delineation. The two most prominent of these frameworks are black studies scholarship ensconced in Eurocentric disciplinary traditions and black studies scholarship centered in Afrocentrism. Writings in the Eurocentric tradition are infused with the humanities, social sciences, education, and so forth. Although evoking the study of black people, scholars in this genre are shaped by disciplinary norms. Indeed, sometimes the Eurocentric assumptions are nearly invisible to the analyst but are shaping nonetheless. The second dominant frame renders visible an Afrocentric frame. Writers in this tradition have been prominent in the public representation of the field. A third emerging framework is black feminism. Black feminist writers are crafting a paradigm in which gender is rendered visible and is deeply intersectional with race and class. As noted by Spillers, this perspective, unfortunately, is still too often marginal to the field. It is, however, the perspective I would like to imagine at the center of black studies for a new century and something I will say more about later in this essay.

Spillers's observations seem accurate to me, but it also strikes me that these perspectives should be thought about in the context of a political, economic, and social set of realities undergirding black studies. This is contested terrain, but essentially theories are rooted in the politics of black studies. On this

political ground are the discursive and representational components and broad-scale structural shifts involving a changing political economy. This includes the academy. These political realities have research, scholarship, and action consequences for the field of black studies. These are the issues I would like to articulate. First, there is the issue of the politics: political economy, ideology, and black studies for a new century and its interconnectedness to issue two: centering gender and black women's studies.

Political Economy, Ideology, and Black Studies

Instantiating black studies in the context of complicated political space—economy, polity, academy, ideology, and state—means shifting the center of the field to the study of political economy. It means locating the transformation of black life in the context of advanced capitalist logic, internationalization of labor, and the global structure of culture. African diaspora takes on new meaning given these realities. Indeed, structural adjustment on the continent— in Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and elsewhere—is matched by welfare state dismantling in advanced capitalist nations such as the United States and those of Western Europe. In either guise, people of African descent suffer.

The suffering is not strictly material but goes to issues deeply ideological and identity based. I approach these ideas gingerly, but I have no illusions that enslavement, colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, racism, sexism, economic exploitation continue to have devastating psychological and social consequences for the peoples of the African diaspora. Indeed, for over 400 years in U.S. society and globally the deep and profound racialized othering of people of African descent has been the fact. Indeed, it is constitutive of the American social order. I would like to take this issue further and assess the following: (1) the problematics of the dominant discourse of the academy on black life in the U.S. and globally, (2) the persistence of racist scholarship and discourse on people of African descent, and (3) the need to put front and center the inversion of othering—defining the lived experience through the livers of that experience. It requires shifting the lens of racial othering. It is through opposition in all that complexity, defining self for self—agency, rebellion, resistance, cultural creativity—that the subaltern speaks. Indeed, it is the deep refusal to be defined from without, even in the context of highly determinative structural inequalities, that must, too, inform our notion of black studies. Yet, this is a complicated space. Currently, it is rife with the contradictions of black neoconservative voices. It is also a space that is typically masculinist in its public and private face. This interior space of self-definition draws us into the complicated gender and class spaces of racial othering. Thus, conceiving of black people—men and *women*—as historical and material subjects[1]—is a rough road. These are places where not all blacks contest the status quo, nor are all progressives feminist. These are issues of liberation as well as oppression, internalized domination, and internalized oppression.

Accordingly, by the middle of the 1990s, social science racism gained respectability in the work of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. In 1994, they published *The Bell Curve*.[2] The book was a thinly veiled assault on the social safety net that benefited poor women and the social policies that opened doors to African Americans in previously closed venues: white universities, higher education, skilled trades, and so on. The book reaffirmed the linchpin of racial othering: black stupidity and white genetic superiority (although Herrnstein and Murray conceded that that superiority was mediated by class).

Nonetheless, the most intense racial othering was reserved for poor black women. Their work demonized poor women generally,[3] and poor black women specifically. Herrnstein and Murray asserted that if these young women were *smart,* they would not get pregnant. In short, they introduce the old eugenics argument by saying that "dumb girls" have "dumb babies." And if the young women do get pregnant and are unmarried, there should be no welfare or other supports provided them. This of course does not touch the centerpiece of women's poverty in this country: sexism, sex segregation in the labor force, low earnings, and lack of universal child care and health care. It erased the complex intersection of race, class, and gender in the social situating of women of color.

Not all traditional academic discourse was as racially vulgar as Herrnstein and Murray. But gendered and racialized inequality did not become a central concern of black studies. These discourses were occurring in the context of the most dramatic redistribution of wealth upward in the history of U.S. society (or any society). By the time of the appearance of *The Bell Curve,* it was apparent that many sectors of the black population in the United States and globally were confronting social, economic, and political crises. Moreover, this situation reflects the rigidity and fixity of racial stratification in the United States and the structure of culture internationally.

Moreover, it is evident that the reemergence of overt racism, attacks on affirmative action, and strengthened institutional racism are part and parcel of the crises. Consequently, the intersection of political, economic, and cultural dynamics more completely captures what is happening in this period in American history than does either alone.

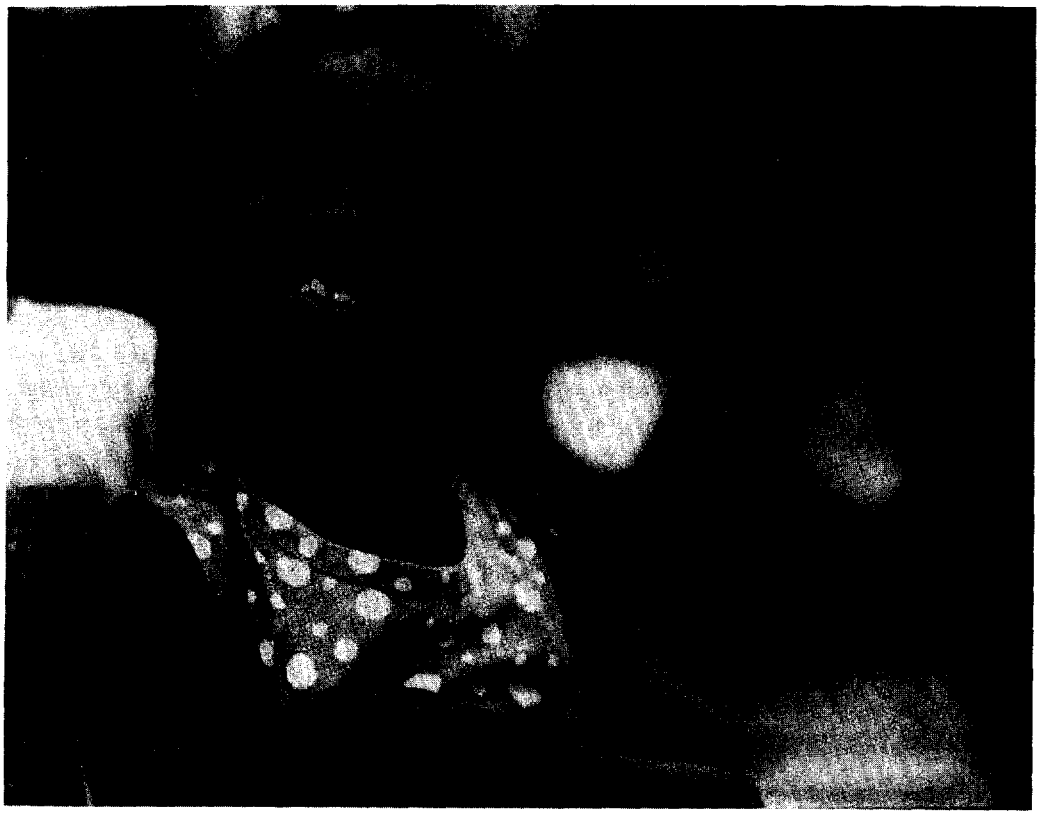
Essentially, here, I am arguing that the period encompassing the production of *The Bell Curve* represents a new social formation for people of African descent. In the United States, this is expressed most strikingly in the continuing economic marginalization of African Americans. The fracturing and restructuring of black labor is key to this process, as is the struggle for work. Although a difficult period, it signals a chance for resistance and change. Yet, because African Americans occupy restricted labor, social, and political positions and, indeed, because of racism and sexism, the current crisis has been quite difficult. Even today, when the political elite touts low levels of unemployment, the official unemployment rate for blacks is still high. The youth population continues on the margin, even as a few are brought into the edges of this economy, and many black women take low-wage work below the level of subsistence to survive or are mired in the politics of workfare.

Given this, the other major issue of this essay is worth exploring. This involves centering gender and interrogating the theory and practice of black women's studies in black studies.

Black Women's Studies

The colonization of African diasporic people in its neocolonial form is alive and well. The colonization of our intellectual lives is a further expression of this process. This reality is deeply reflected in the academy: intellectual colonialization. It is the latter, intellectual colonization, that is the subtext for this discussion of black women's studies in the context of assessing black studies.

Where to begin? Black women's studies should not simply and cannot only be located within the academy, but it is a key place to begin given the political realities of black studies today. Therefore, it strikes me that any discussion of black studies must interrogate the still unfinished business of black women's studies



Young Lady. *Photo by Kristen Clarke.*

in the context of diaspora, identities, culture, gender, race, and class. The critiques such study engenders involve looking at the social context of black intellectuals and how that social context shapes identity. Indeed, black women's place in the academy reflects (1) the larger economic, social, and political forces discussed earlier; (2) the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and class in training and socialization; and (3) the interplay between biography, oppression, and a particular sociohistorical juncture or social location.

Thus, the heavy task in black women's studies remains the decolonization of knowledge, the centering of knowledge, and the resistance to intellectual erasure for women of African descent. Taking a diasporic perspective means studying seriously black women's dispersal and linkages.

Indeed, since the principle statement of a need for black women's studies[4] we have witnessed some of the most vicious attacks on black women. The public attack has been especially hard. If *The Bell Curve* grounded the attack ideologically as explicated earlier, materially the reality has been worse. For example, the mortality of black babies in some places in the United States surpasses the infant mortality rates in some of the poorest countries in the world. In this richest of rich countries, universal health care is denied, and people increasingly live in the street. What does black studies say and do about this?

Furthermore, women scholars of African descent increasingly find themselves in new spaces and places from which we had been formerly excluded. In these settings, we operate as thinkers and teachers as well as writers, and this entails a number of contradictions and challenges. Thus, black feminist academics must continue to confront this question: In whose interest is knowledge? Knowledge for whom? Indeed, late capitalist racialized gender inequality signals complicated gender, caste, and class forces that must be considered in any serious discussion of black studies. Thus, explicating the inequality and the specific position of women of African descent remains an unfinished agenda. This must be connected not only to issues of discourse and text but to political economy.

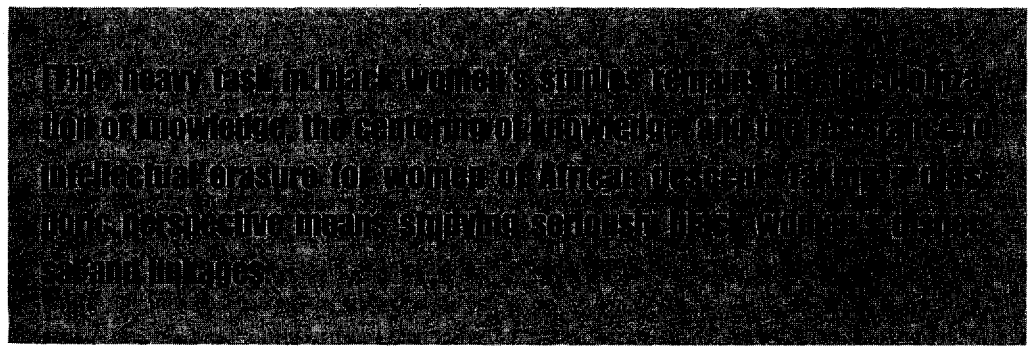
In a broader political-economic sense, given the new international division of labor, women globally have been brought into the center of capitalist world economy. Multinational corporations increasingly use women workers, paying them exceedingly low wages. In the United States, some black women are losing work just as others are obtaining low-paid, secondary labor. A significant number of people of African descent remain marginalized or removed from the economy altogether.[5] Such occupational shifts sent shocks through the class and gender structures of the African-American community. Indeed, it is increasingly apparent that capitalist patriarchy works differently for black men and women.[6] Yet, as Spillers noted, black feminist scholars' call for a gendered analysis of race and class still too goes unheeded most of the time in black Studies. Centering gender simultaneously with race and class would be the conceptual bedrock of a black women's/black studies for a new century.

Conclusions

The challenge for black studies is to reconnect to a left perspective that understands complicated racialized, gendered, global economy realities. The economic aspect of the crisis confronting peoples of African descent must be understood in terms of racial, gender, class, and cultural facts. In short, my fundamental point is that black studies for a new century must be engaged in theory and practice that is deeply intersectional and relational and mired in the simultaneity of class, gender, and race. Crucially, beginning to articulate the gendering of race means calling into question a too-frequent theoretical misstep for scholars of the black experience: the assumption that race is a "primary" oppression that is not filtered through either gender or class. The field has to take on gender.

Angela Harris sums the latter point up powerfully in the following way:

> Black men and women live in a society that creates sex-based norms and expectations



> which racism operates simultaneously to deny. . . . An effort to develop an ideological explanation of gender domination in the Black community should proceed from an understanding of how cross-cutting forces establish gender norms and how the conditions of Black subordination wholly frustrate access to these norms.[7]

Finally, from the premise of an unfinished black studies agenda we are facing extremely complicated questions around the roles of black studies and black intellectuals and the position of the people of the African diaspora. These are dangerous racial, gender, and class times in view of the transnational political economy, racist ideology, and a profoundly crippled social welfare state. In the academy, this period is expressed as the near-total suppression of black radical thought. The founding vision of black studies is relevant here. There was a deep call for decolonizing social research and seizing research channels to further the cause of black life in this country. Needless to say, this has not happened. In this period, black studies can be brought into the circle of domination simply by existing within and attempting to negotiate the rules of the academic game.

Indeed, to survive and prosper in these settings, academic units must incorporate in their operations regularized assumptions and practices of university life and culture. These include the power relations, intellectual assumptions, and general political pettiness and intrigues of these situations. Of course, resistance does occur and fighting back is not dead, but the everyday social relations of the academy are increasingly corporatized and black studies does not escape this logic.

The perennial question for black studies theory and practice is why are we here? This is true because of our intellectual heritage, and it is true because African people throughout the diaspora remain oppressed and exploited. Now, I believe, maybe more than ever black studies scholarship and social practice must be rooted in a strong sense of the political-economic, the logic of gender, as well as race, history, and culture.

Notes

1. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986).

2. Richard J. Herrnstein, and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

3. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

4. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1986).

5. Rose M. Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class, and Gender: The New Scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women's Labor," in *Theorizing Black Feminisms,* S. M. James and A. P. Busia, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13–30.

6. Ibid.

7. Angela Harris, "Race and Essentialism," in *Feminist Legal Theory,* D. Kelly Weisberg, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 389.