

## Forging New Ground: A Critical Reassessment

# A Discussion

**Manning Marable:** I would like to invite the speakers again to come up to the front and I would like to present five interrelated questions to them. They can answer any one or more of the questions, but they suggest some challenges for us as we rethink Black feminism in the twenty-first century.

The first question is, how can African-American studies as a field of scholarship interrogate and overcome its entrenched patriarchy, its heterosexism and homophobia?

Second, what can African-American studies as a field learn from queer studies, women and gender studies, and ethnic studies to provide a more meaningful analysis for contemporary Black social reality?

Third, what are the primary political tasks and objectives of Black feminism as a political project in the twenty-first century?

Fourth, what may be the new questions or areas of scholarly research in the field of Black feminist scholarship.

And finally, perhaps most fundamentally, what will it take for the Black freedom movement to overcome its contradictions on issues of gender, especially relating to the status of African-American women?

**Beverly Guy-Sheftall:** Okay, I'll start. The questions were just wonderful. I just want to start very briefly about Black studies. I really think that we are going to have to start explicitly and publicly speaking about what's going on in Black studies at some places and particularly the behavior of unprogressive sexist, homophobic human beings, individuals whose names we can call. I have been really having conversations with some of my progressive Black male colleagues about confronting certain people within Black studies privately, maybe, not in public, about offensive behavior. So, I think that we are going to have to have interventions that are not abstract and generic and I also think that we are going to have to get more feminist persons, men and women, into Black studies. What I really think is that we are going to have to start talking openly about some of our awful behavior.

**Barbara Smith:** Manning, I just want to back up what Beverly just said, and I don't mind naming names. The so called flagship Black studies department in this country is of course Harvard. To my knowledge, they have

yet to hire a Black woman there. Tell me if I am wrong about this, those of you who are more up on recent hires than I, but . . .

Higginbotham is there.

But she's been there.

That's true.

*Smith:* I'm talking about new hires. Have they hired any females since they became the flagship department?

*Leith Mullings:* Let me play devil's advocate and throw out for discussion what I consider to be a major challenge to the Black feminist movement. That is, in the midst of the hard-fought struggles of Black freedom movement, how do we actually operationalize what we say on panels and in classrooms—that race, class, and gender oppression are interrelated and must be addressed together. This issue has come up all day in various forms. In New York City, we are confronting an incipient police state. Our sons, our brothers, our friends, and ourselves are subject to being shot by the police. This is something we must address immediately. On one hand, there is always a tendency to sideline issues around gender inequality now in order to give full attention to “frontline” issues. Many of us here have been in many political organizations and have experienced this in the sixties, in the seventies (and in the eighties and nineties). This issue has come up in South Africa, in Cuba, and in liberation movements all over the world. But we have not solved the problem of how to deal with these issues on the ground, in the heat of struggle. It's one thing to theorize intersectionality, but how do we work it out in political movements and in doing day-to-day political work when our brother Amadou Diallo is murdered by the police with forty-one shots?

*Smith:* I have a specific answer to that. I didn't have a chance to read these notes during my presentation, but I wanted to let you know, and this is in direct response of what Leith has raised. With our Capital Region Justice for Diallo Committee demonstrations and rallies during the trial, every time a speaker either at a rally or at a meeting talked about police brutality is a problem that only affects Black men, a couple of us would say loudly, and Black women. At a certain point, those who had been saying, and only Black men would also say, and of course the sisters as well. So, in other words, teaching moments and teaching opportunities in the context of practice. And then at every demonstration, sometimes because I was traveling so much during the month February I would not be a part of the planning for speakers, although I chaired the speakers committee for the first rally and invited Leslie Fienberg, transgender and feminist activist in RIDER, to speak at our first rally, so on January the 31, Leslie Fienberg was out there with us and delighted to be, of course. And that was a great teaching opportunity, particularly for Sharpton's troops who were out there in the middle of the day. But at every demonstration—I kind of feel like I was blowing in after having gotten off a plane or train—I would ask my comrade Vicky Smith, who has been our point person with organizing, I would also say it, we would be out there in the mud, the slush, and the snow, I would say, do we have a lesbian or gay speaker? And she said, oh we don't, would you like to do it? And generally, I would end up speaking about the connections between the issues. And we have done some teaching within this struggle around police brutality.

*Tamara Jones:* You know, this is one of the reasons why this Diallo thing was so disappointing, and it was disappointing on many

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levels. The last two years this city has really been mobilizing around police brutality. I mean, really been mobilizing, and I want to connect this to Leith's concerns. I was fortunate and honored to do work with the Audre Lorde Project (ALP) as part of the Coalition Against Police Brutality. The coalition organized Racial Justice Day, which is a rally against police violence, racism, and, now that ALP is involved, homophobia in communities of color, and it was real interesting to see that intersectional approach worked out in the organizing of this coalition. This was the only coalition, of all the ones that were getting the media attention and mobilizing people, the only one that I knew of that was truly not only multiracial, but also multigender, including sexual identity. And I just want to relate one example of how I think that intersectional philosophy of ALP made a difference in how that coalition worked.

One of the times that we got together, another member of the coalition complained that he was scared to put up flyers in Black communities now that they said "homophobia" on them, because he was afraid that people would come behind him, read the flyers, think that he was gay, and beat him, beat him up. On one level, that reflects a certain truth about violence in our communities. But there was something deeper. He went on to talk about if we put the word homophobia on the flyer, our people wouldn't come out because they were going to think it's for "them over there. It's for those queer people." "It ain't a Black thing." But because we had come together around the issue before that day, because we had developed within the coalition an analysis of police brutality that not only talked about the way it affected Black men, but also the ways in which gender played out in that, and the ways in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirit, and transgender people of color are also incredibly vulnerable to and victimized by the police, there was a shared

foundation there to which we could hold this member and all of us accountable. We were accountable to our analysis that we had developed through a conversation that reflected these kinds of values.

So, I do think that the work is going on out there and that there are good models about how this can be put into practice. I would also like to quickly point to the rise of Black conservatives and Black Republicans and the way in which that significantly impacts the political debate in our community. It is no longer going to be possible to write political conservatism off as just a white thing. Black people are increasingly coming out in support of and taking leadership on some of the most reactionary policies out there.

*Elizabeth Hadley:* I think that our answers are reflective of with multifaced issues there are also many ways of addressing some of these issues and one of the ways in which my department is addressing. I went to Simmons College, which is a women's college, in 1997 and I moved the program from a program to a department, and now the present chair of the department is Christina Brinkely, and we are developing different kinds of programs in the curriculum that not only include imagery, someone mentioned image engineering, those are some of the courses that I specialize in. We are also developing requirements where students are required to go into the community, we are connecting them with different organizations that they need to work with, and that's one way. And also, our department is focusing on—our focus, because I am up there with the Harvard machine, so our focus is on women of color, specifically. That's what our department is about, and I would just like to announce that this year, June 14–18, we will have the first NWSA conference, which is the National Women's Studies Association. It's the first time in the history of that organization that

they have had a conference in New England, and Christina Brinkely is the person who organized that.

*Michael Awkward:* I just have two quick points, one about disciplinarity in Afro-American studies, and the other about Harvard. The question of how Afro-American studies programs respond to the challenges that Manning asked us to address—challenges that our conversation has at least somewhat strategically not addressed to this point—is complicated by these interdisciplinary units' internal disciplinary differences. We have to think more strategically about how we talk to one another because of our common ideological agendas, certainly, but also to address how our individual disciplinary homes in English, in history, in political science, for example, complicate such discussions. Often, we are in such units as divided by our methodological differences as we are united by our concern with providing serious investigation of the lives of Black people, and how we create a discourse or discourses that speak across such differences out to be, at this moment at least, a crucial concern for participants in the field of Afro-American studies.

The other point, about Harvard, may not be necessarily a popular one. To our collective detriment, the media's overemphasis of Harvard as a site of Black scholarly production is making us here and elsewhere spend too much time thinking about and being "jealous" of, being overly concerned about how other people are thinking about what's going on at Harvard. As the recent controversies emerging from New Haven indicate, even programs like Yale's, which have been hugely influential and which have lengthy histories of exemplary scholarly production and student training, are being made to feel somewhat inferior, not because of what they're doing at Yale as

opposed to Harvard, but because of the media's and white administrators' lazy representation of Harvard's as the model minority program, if you will. One could argue that what's going on at Yale in terms of scholarship, for example, is infinitely greater and more significant than at Harvard, most of whose recent books feed the media frenzy but do not constitute serious scholarly contributions. But the media overemphasis of Harvard and the capacity of people who are at Harvard to have the spotlight keeps us in certain kinds of ways overly concerned with what they are doing and not concerned enough, publicly at least, with other efforts and successes, such as Columbia's, which this gathering is a clear manifestation of. I do think that the Harvard model is an important one to assess and even, on occasion, to attack, but there are other models of building Afro-American studies that have been hugely successful, and those need our attention, too.

*Michele Wallace:* I'm thinking about what Beverly said in regard to the necessary critique of the Harvard machine and I was trying to figure out in my mind how you could do it in such a way that would keep it from becoming overly personal and counterproductive.

*Guy-Sheftall:* I wasn't really talking about Harvard actually.

*Wallace:* I'm thinking that maybe we need to have a session of internal criticism of what's going on in Black studies. It could be centered around a lot of different things, either political issues in the Black community or intellectually more esoteric issues of epistemology. In talking specifically about Harvard, there are some things that are going on with Skip Gates's new collection of products (web sites, CD-ROMs, the Africana Encyclo-

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pedia, and so forth) that bear looking into for anybody who is serious about Black scholarship. Talk about interdisciplinary, I mean this is interdisciplinarity with a vengeance, and it is being masterminded and engineered by somebody who hasn't been authorized by anything or anyone in the Black world to speak for all of us. Now, I don't think that I am talking about mere jealousy here. (Although jealousy has been a problem in the public interactions of Black intellectuals, including my own misguided attack on bell hooks a few years ago. For Black feminists, and perhaps Black intellectuals in general, rage has always interfered with coherence.) I think this is a machine, or at the very least a distinctive ensemble of cultural mechanisms, and that we need to address it, to scrutinize it. Granted, in the process he is employing perhaps hundreds of cultural workers to do the grunt work, and such workers would probably face underemployment otherwise, but no matter how collectively constructed, the project always seems to the greater glory of his individual name. What is the political import of this project if not noblesse oblige?

**Guy-Sheftall:** Well, actually, talking about Harvard, I was thinking specifically about Temple, if you want me to be specific, and to say that our communities would be much healthier and much more functional if we could start looking at ourselves, which is why I began with Anna Julia Cooper. This is what she said in 1892. She said, "We need to stop for a little while," as Sonia said, and be quiet and look at ourselves and see if we can name some of our flaws. But it is very difficult to do, and we can do it more easily around police brutality, but it is very difficult for us to do it around intracommunity complicated issues that have to do with our own stuff.

**Marable:** We have time for about three more comments. We are going to have to wrap up in about five minutes.

**Wallace:** I am afraid police brutality is endless. It is endless, it has an endless history . . .

**Response:** And therefore?

**Wallace:** Right now it has an endless future. I'm not saying therefore that it should be ignored.

**Guy-Sheftall:** I am saying that we also need to do it about rape for example.

**Wallace:** Exactly, I'm saying that it is hard for us to do things that have to do with our own responsibility in our own places where we are working, as opposed to this issue, which is a national issue, it is really an international issue, that has to continually be addressed, but we never address our own stuff. That's my point, Barbara.

**Smith:** I guess we might as well make the conversation public. I was saying that I did not agree with what Michele was saying because it depends on how you are looking at the kind of cross-identity, cross-community interventions that Tamara and I have been talking about in relationship to police brutality. I don't think that working against police brutality prevents our being able to challenge Black women's oppression, especially when Black feminists like myself continue to be outspoken about how these issues connect to each other. During any political struggle, education goes on and we bring our Black feminist politics to campaigns against racial violence. Police brutality may seem to be endless under capitalism and rape may seem endless under capitalist patriarchy, but as revolutionaries we always work as though revo-



*Debating. Sonia Sanchez. Photo by John Smock.*

lution and building a completely new system are possible. Saying that horrible oppression is bound to go on forever can stop people from acting in the present, can stop them from bringing about change on their own behalf.

I believe that one day people will create a just society. I may not live to see it, but when we finally have had enough, all these bad things that supposedly cannot change will be over. We have the capability to create a just society. We already know what justice is and what it looks like. It's people having something to eat, a place to live, clothes to wear, quality education, quality health care, and the

opportunity to maximize their full human potential without violence. A just society: We could make it happen. We're not there yet, but we must proceed as if it is possible and that includes getting rid of police brutality and making sure Rudy Giuliani is not our next senator, nor Hillary Clinton for that matter. We deserve so much better.

*Joy James:* And to follow through with what Barbara was saying and what I was about to say about community, and this ties into what Beverly was saying, part of our own liability is that we restrict the notion of community and we stop short too often. One of the ways that I was politicized aside a couple years ago was by Angela Davis, a former political prisoner, talking about prison abolitionism, and I think we know the numbers, it is about 2 million. Former Black Panther political prisoner Duraben Waahad has described prison as Black communities.

There are a 138,000 women inside now, so the patriarchal control over women of color, poor women, working-class women increasingly is going into this state and that's where you find the worst abuses. Like if you are raped, who do you report it to, your guard who raped you? The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution legalizes slavery in prison. I mean there is a whole host of issues in the way in which I am increasingly politicized, and again I am echoing Barbara and other people when I think of Mumia Abu-Jamal's case. Once you connect to people inside—like we are in the so-called free world, right, and they are not—but once you connect with

people inside and you have a sense of community and accountability, responsibility, even love, Robin Kelley brought up the question, the issue of love, he didn't "Bring it up" it's been here all day, but once you articulate that, I think that pushes you toward taking

brary, teach a course in—for five years I was at Gretaford, go into that prison and say to those brothers, we are going to talk and have a conversation, I'm going to teach discipline, at the same time I am going to teach love, what that's about.

We have to think more strategically about how we talk to one another because of our common ideological agendas, certainly, but also to address how our individual disciplinary homes in English, in history, in political science, for example, complicate such discussion.

risks that you never thought that you would take and making challenges, whether they are to patriarchal homophobic heads of Black studies or to the police or not even focusing just on lynching on the streets. There are over 3,000 people on death row, so the clean sanitized lynching that comes from lethal injection inside the state, right? And I find in my own struggles like how to be respectful and responsible, that once I identify and say, oh that's part of my community, then I am drawn outside of my restricted circle.

**Sonia Sanchez:** I think what everyone has said is so correct. I think it is so much easier to deal with big things, Diallo, Mumia, which we all do, and that's not negative. We've got to do that, but it's harder to deal with somebody who lives next door to you, who drinks beer every day and wants to know why you are always going out doing that work, you know. How do you organize people on that level and one of the hardest things I know is that we've got to do that. You got to come out of academia, we've got to, if we teach a course in Harlem, teach a course at the li-

And I think, to the young people, I was saying it is very difficult for us to really think at some particular point that you are going to change all the people who are very rich out there. Why should they give it up? However, now this is real business, okay, because I think what the country has done, the people in power, what the people in power have done is that they have identified us all, found out our weaknesses and moved accordingly with this capitalism. That's what I meant by liberalizing this thing. It is given whatever it needs to do to people who feel at some point contented about stuff. The people who are coming up, the young people, I say to you is that what we do have then come to them with new ideas. We have got to say to the people who run the sucker, you know sometimes, do you know that we are going to go under if you continue your globalization, if you continue the destruction and the rape that you do all over the world, the earth will not sustain that, whatever, it will go under. And then at some particular point, it is important for you to understand that you can't continue that if we are all to stay alive, you got to catch them someplace else

sometimes, other than necessarily at the same time, working to change the sucker. I believe we need a new different government here, I believe that deep in my heart, and I know that it can happen and I know it will happen, however, you got to work on every front.

So, every young person here should be involved with all kinds of organizations, whatever. Don't go in and say, I'm bright, I'm a grad student, I know more than you know, you know, you are crazy. You go in and you work with people and you organize people and you organize them always on the need. If you are a student here and there are people flunking, then you grab them and say, I can help you with that, but you organize them in that way and it is about organizing. It is about my coming to your organization to speak, you know what I'm saying, and you are coming because I invited you to my organization to speak, you know what I'm saying. That's how we mix with each other and get to know and we don't have to then when someone says, hey, look, I'm going to put a sign up, you say, I'll go with you to make sure that no one beats you up. But I'll go with you to that community also and say simply, cool it, you know what I'm saying, this is my friend. People have said to me, hey, I saw somebody but I knew that she was with you so she was okay, I mean we make use of each other as a consequence, yes we do, and you know it's the truth.

And I'm saying simply, I've been trying, you know, all my life for the last thirty years,

to make us walk upright as a human people. It is not easy, the oppression says don't be human. The money says don't be human. It is difficult to walk upright as a human being, but it is possible and we can do that and in our time, because I've come through the fire with Barbara and a whole lot of people and had to change. The fire changed you, you couldn't be the same people, and as a consequence I could understand, I can look at students and say you must get in the fire, you can't just get in a book and say I know it, you got to get in that fire, the fire will burn you sometimes, but the point is that we have hands that can soothe you, we have salves that can soothe you, and above all ideas and also an vision. A vision that in the twenty-first century we will be human, there will be peace on this earth. That's not being romantic, that is because I can see it and you've got to see it too.

*Marable:* Thank you, Sonia, thank you, panel. I have a very final, very brief comment that I want to unite with my sister Barbara when she said, to paraphrase you, Barbara, that what I have learned from Black feminism more than anything else is that you have to live your life as if the revolution has already occurred. If we can do that, if we can change ourselves, if we can challenge our field, if we can challenge our institutions, we can transform this world. I am absolutely convinced of it.