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Transnational Black Feminisms, Womanisms and Queer of Color Critiques

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INTRODUCTION: WHY WE ALL NEED A SPACE AND TIME OF OUR OWN

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, representation and theorization of women and queers of color in academic discourses on the African Diaspora appear to be at a stalemate, both flourishing and 'stuck' at an impasse. These voices are flourishing, with a proliferation of scholarly discourses in women's and queer studies, yet they continue to be marginalized within dominant discourses on Blackness in the West. Writ large, transnational Black feminisms, womanisms and queer of color critiques seek to expand our definitions of Blackness in the West to always include Black bodies that also identify as female, queer or otherwise outside of Black Western communities' sexual and gender norms. I mention feminism and womanism here as two separate systems of belief. Whereas most white Western feminisms tend to assume that all women, no matter what their socioeconomic, racial, ethnic or national

status, share common concerns and causes, 'womanism' rejects this premise and denotes an approach to women of color movements that is explicitly sensitive to and aware of the socioeconomic, historical, cultural and political differences that can often divide white women and women of color on issues of gender (Walker, 2004). In a very similar way, 'queer of color' critiques argue that these same categories produce differences between themselves and representations of 'queerness' that implicitly exclude Blackness (Ferguson, 2003).

This scholarship has made great strides from its earliest contemporary invocation in the 1970s, when a critical mass of Black women and Black queer-identified scholars began to matriculate and receive doctoral degrees in universities across North America, Western Europe and West Africa. Today, a broad range of academic journals and publications reflects their work and accomplishments in inspiring many women (and some men) to reflect upon the social and state regulation of gender and sexual

norms, codified violence against women, the lack of equal opportunities for women across all nations, and the disturbingly endless renewal of so-called 'scientific' studies that assert that gender inequality is the effect of 'Nature' and not human manipulation (a stance that is notably similar to some scientific claims on racism). Perhaps most importantly, Black feminist and queer critiques of their exclusion from and/or denigration in mainstream academic discourses have finally achieved a foothold in undergraduate and graduate education curricula, no longer being dismissed as needlessly hostile or self-involved.

As history has shown us, the importance of accurate representations is not simply a matter of theory but can become a matter of life and death when inaccurate and grossly distorted theories become practice, or 'praxis'. For example, early nineteenth-century US gynecology used live Black female bodies for surgical experiments, arguing that the 'Negress' – although clearly anatomically corresponding to the white female body – was less capable of sensation and therefore pain and suffering (Ojanuga, 1993). Similarly, as many scholars of Black studies are aware, the Black female Khoikhoi native Saartje Bartman, aka the 'Venus Hottentot', was displayed around the West for the entirety of her short adult life as an animal of curious proportions, deprived of both human interaction and any recognition of her suffering (Holmes, 2007; Crais and Scully, 2009). In both of these examples, the Black female body is seen as worthy of study, but the Black female mind is predetermined as beneath consideration, a tragic reflection of her dehumanization in racist 'scientific', political and legal discourses of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century white West.

In other words, the ways in which we theorize and represent gender, race and sexuality in the university more often than not will serve as the basis for research and, possibly, state laws and practices informed by that research. In white Western nations it

is most often those bodies seen as possessing an inferior gender (female), sexuality (non-heterosexual) and/or race (most often 'Black') that are marginalized socially, economically and politically by the state. Women, non-whites and queers are always the numerical minority amongst the political, social and economic elite and thus are most vulnerable to violent crime, poverty and under-representation within the polity. Furthermore, the biological and medical sciences continue to view these bodies as the 'ab-norm' despite the fact that their combined numbers will always comprise a majority of the state's population (Schiebinger, 2003). There is every reason, then, for all scholars who work on Blackness in the African Diaspora to ally in their condemnations of these bigoted state policies and scientific 'findings'.

Yet, in looking at the current canon of scholarship on the Black Diaspora today, we in fact see two sets of scholarship published alongside one another: one which represents Blackness through a heterosexual and/or heteropatriarchal masculine norm, and one which seeks to subvert this norm as it produces its own proudly feminist, womanist and queer viewpoints. These two sides rarely communicate with one another: women of color and queers are either simply not mentioned in most volumes theorizing Blackness or else they are mentioned briefly and (implicitly or explicitly) assumed to be represented through the viewpoints and experiences of the heterosexual male. This is a strange and sad state of affairs, a sobering reminder of the degree to which minority collectives often seek to replicate the white state through the deployment of a heteropatriarchal logic on their own populations.

This essay first provides a genealogy of Black feminist/womanist transnational thought by tracing the inspirations, arguments and influences of key thinkers, before moving on to the obstacles still faced by these discourses in matters of representation. I will use the organizing lenses of

space, place and time to analyze the ways in which these academic discourses implicitly and explicitly explore, as the African American historian Paula Giddings has asserted, 'when and where' (Giddings, 1984) Black women and queers enter into the annals of (Western) history.¹ The conclusion of this essay will look at places where space and time are denied to Black feminist representations of Black women to argue that emerging queer of color critiques, which re-imagine space and time, offer up new possibilities for not only locating non-heteronormative forms of Blackness in the past but also representing them in the here and now. Finally, I point out how these new efforts at locating Black queers and women of color in Diaspora spaces and times integrate those space-times into the African Diaspora and thus into the world as a whole across national, ethnic, gender, sexual, class and 'racial' lines.

Theoretically, concepts of space are understood to always be informed by concepts of time. For example, if one is discussing the geographical space of the 'Soviet Union' it can be understood that the space under examination exists only between 1917 and 1989. Therefore the space of the Soviet Union is always implicitly modified by time (by the years 1917 to 1989). Indeed, whenever one denotes a space, chances are high that either the speaker or his or her interlocutors will assume a particular timeframe. The same is true when one conceptualizes time; when an historian uses the term 'Modern era', for example, he or she almost always means an era that happened only to majority white nations in the Western hemisphere (implicitly referring to a particular space), regardless of other famous examples of Modernity outside the West. In the Black feminist, womanist and queer of color discourses that follow, it is space that is most explicitly used to discuss the challenges that women and queers of color face in the West, and that space is most often located in the contemporary moment.

SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL MARGINALIZATIONS IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY WHITE WESTERN DISCOURSES

At least since the early nineteenth century, emphasis on space and time can be found throughout Black feminist and womanist scholarship of the African Diaspora as well as in academic, lay, and media discourses as whole. In particular, both past and present sexism and misogyny fundamentally argue that women belong in the domestic space, not the public arena, and racists tell members of racial minorities to go back to 'where they came from' even when those people were born in the same nation-space as the racist. Indeed, one can usually identify deeply bigoted discourses and practices by seeing how they attempt to limit certain bodies to marginal spaces. In some cases this may take the form of prohibiting particular bodies from spaces where important decisions are made (as within a legislature, a church or mosque); in other cases those 'unwanted bodies' are provided with a secondary space of lesser importance so that they might participate with the group, but be reminded of their inequality. In other instances bodies are regulated by time, denoting when they can or should be in certain spaces and not in others, such as cleaning or laboring only when important bodies are not present. These regulated bodies are most often female and/or belonging to persons of color because traditional heteropatriarchal discourses on a nation's history often marginalize and erase – and/or simply prevent the possibility of – female and minority achievements and accomplishments by seeking to keep them outside of important spaces at certain times.

This oppressive practice extends to metaphorical spaces and times, which are equally, if not more, important, especially the space-time of history and progress. Western depictions of minority spaces (particularly of Asia, South America, Africa, South Asia and the Middle East) locate them in the past, or

outside of the timeline of progress. Critics, historians and theorists such as Martin Bernal (1987), Paula Giddings (1984) and Edward Said (1978) have memorably pointed to the ways in which dominant Western discourses on world history have repeatedly distorted and/or marginalized the presence of Blacks, women and even whole civilizations. For example, Bernal shows how pre-eighteenth-century Europeans both knew about and circulated information on East and North African contributions to Ancient Greek Science, Mathematics and Philosophy which their nineteenth-century successors hotly denied. Likewise, Giddings shows that the earliest insurrectionist movements in the United States were organized and operated by Black women and not Black men, as so many traditional histories depict in textbooks and online. In other words, women and queers of color are under-represented not because of a lack of achievement but because acknowledging Black and female achievements en masse is noxious to the concept of a white Western civilization born from the history and contributions of Ancient Greece. Instead, by virtue of race, gender and sexuality, they are barred from this space-time of white Western civilization as backward, unreliable and/or irrational.

When Western histories do make space to discuss these space-times ostensibly 'outside' of the Western progress narrative, they often fill the space needed for accurate representations of non-Western civilizations with their own racist fantasies or projections. As Edward Said famously argues, Western depictions of the 'Near East' are not so much composed of objective observation, but are white Western male projections of what they desire that space to be, and include, for instance, the mythical pleasure spaces of the harem, the 'natural' and effeminate sensuality of the young Middle Eastern male found in the public spaces of streets and squares, the hostile and irrational conduct of the Middle Eastern politicians practiced on the battlefield, in the home and in spaces dedicated to statecraft (Said, 1978). This exotic

space of the 'Orient' is both located as elsewhere and in another more romantic and primitive time.

CREATING SPACE: NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMANIST AND FEMINIST ORGANIZATION IN THE US AND EGYPT

The two earliest examples of feminist/ womanist organization in the African Diaspora are found in the United States and Egypt in the nineteenth century. As Paula Giddings narrates:

After the end of Reconstruction, Black women were prepared to create organizations and institutions that reflected their feminist concerns. In 1880, Mary Ann Shadd Cary led the way, organizing the Colored Women's Progressive Association. One of the association's goals was to "assert" equal rights for women, including that of suffrage. (Giddings, 1984: 75)

By stressing the term 'progressive' in their organizational name, along with Giddings' own use of the term 'assert', we can see how US Black women had to push and strive to create a space for themselves not made readily available by white feminist organizations. Importantly, it was also during this time of organizing that Black feminist consciousness gained its character as a movement distinct from white feminist organizations and those arguing for equal rights on the part of the larger black collective. Giddings continues:

[...] the argument for woman suffrage went beyond the universal-rights concept to address the specific needs of Black women. This trend, seemingly initiated by Cary, resulted in a more broadly based involvement of Black women in the suffrage struggle. As Cary's proposal also signified, Black women were ready to begin institutionalizing their claims to economic, social, and political equality. (Giddings, 1984: 75)

In other words, Black women organizing in the United States discovered early on that their voices, although female, had no space

in white feminist arguments even though white feminists understood their privileged position as 'universal' for all women (Davis, 1981; Hine, 1994; McDowell, 1995; Hunter, 1997).

The politics of space and spatial representation for women of color feminists can also be found in East Africa at around the same time. In the late nineteenth century Egyptian women, prompted in part by the anti-colonial struggle against Britain, began articulating a feminist consciousness in which they sought liberation from the *harem* system of Egyptian society. In finding a voice for their feminist consciousness, Egyptian women faced a double-edged sword. The *harem* system dictated both a social segregation of the sexes and the strict control of women by male family members as a means to remove doubt of a woman's sexual purity upon marriage. Yet, even as Egyptian women gained strength in their feminist organizations the prevailing belief that women were 'naturally' sexually deviant meant they had to observe the social customs of segregation and of veiling in order to avoid sexual exploitation (Cole, 1981; Badran, 1988; Khater and Nelson, 1988).

Giddings' explication of the double exclusion faced by Black women in the US also applies to the situation described above in Egypt. Although their bodies symbolically bridged two sociopolitical movements (women's suffrage and Black civil rights, and women's liberation and Egyptian nationalism respectively), rather than being able to bring those two spaces together these women of color effectively found themselves marginalized in or exiled from both:

If the countertide had come from just one direction, it would not have been so brutal, but it also included conservative elements of the black community as well – particularly regarding the achievements of women. This is at variance with the abiding faith of our progress, our legacy as agents of change, even our survival. (Giddings, 1984: ii)

Giddings underscores that, at this time in the United States (and, we can also see, also in

Egypt), when men of color were under the rule of white regimes, women of color were not only barred from consideration in white spaces and times but also found their demands for equality in the Black community judged to be, rhetorically speaking, 'untimely' and taking up too much space.

It is important to note that, while few and far between, there are in fact some communities that make time and space for women of color. Perhaps most famously, Dutch and Surinami feminist Gloria Wekker explores what she defines as an Afro-Surinamese practice of *mati*. In *mati* marriage is rejected in favor of male and female sexual partners. Exploring the life and experiences of an eighty-four-year-old Afro-Surinamese woman, Misi Juliette Cummings, Wekker explains:

As far as marriage was concerned, contrary to theoretical beliefs that have been circulating for decades according to which working-class Caribbean women see marriage as highly desirable but virtually unattainable, Misi Juliette and many of her younger sisters strongly rejected this for not giving them enough autonomy. In the domain of sexuality Juliette's behavior unhinged the certainty that the core of sexuality is reproductive heterosexual intercourse. Even though there was no dearth of the offspring she produced, her sexual joy was overwhelmingly located in her connections with women. In addition, it was abundantly clear that her sexual activities with women were not passive and nongenital. (2006: 171–2)

Mati quite literally legitimizes the notion of an intimate shared space for women where men need not be agents or representatives of that household, whether socially, economically or even politically (and vice versa). Yet Wekker does not idealize this practice (although some of her supporters and detractors have, towards their own ends).² She points out that even as the practice of *mati* allows women and men to have control over their own spaces and their own time outside of the institution of marriage, preferences, for example, for 'light-skinned' partners over 'darker-skinned' ones indicate that not all bodies enjoy equal consideration and respect at all times and in all spaces.

RESPONDING TO THIS DOUBLE EXCLUSION: THE INFLUENCE OF MARXISM ON BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

While the practice of *mati* is inspiring and informing, it is difficult to understand how it might be transplanted into those spaces to which Giddings refers where women seeking agency and representation apart from men are resisted and denounced. Indeed, in the United States there is already a built-in resistance to the notion of females as heads of household – a bigotry one finds repeated in *both* white racist and Black male nationalist arguments. Despite its being refuted every few years or so, the 1975 ‘Moynihan Report’ is still used in media and academic arguments to assert that African American families suffer poverty and crime because Black women have usurped Black men’s natural leadership roles in the home. The report reads that by asserting agency in a *space* that does not belong to them (as head of household) black women stunt or even reverse the (temporal) *progress* of the entire collective. In other words, this racist and misogynist logic argues that when the ‘wrong’ body occupies a space, time reverses itself because this occupation is anti-progressive or uncivilized. As Madhu Dubey has noted in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994), both the Black Panthers and conservative white men were in eerie agreement about the negative effects of Black women with agency: ‘Black nationalist leaders not only echoed this masculine emphasis, but identified the black woman as an active agent of the black man’s economic and social emasculation’ (1983: 17).

Beginning with their rise in the late 1950s, Black Western and African nationalist movements in the US, the Caribbean, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya dictated that this new era was a ‘time’ for Black male leadership, and that Black women needed to wholly remove themselves to the domestic space to take up supportive roles as wives and mothers. When it comes to gender and sexuality, anti-colonial

movements and organizations such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam (the latter two in the United States) differed very little from white Western nationalism. Both ideologies shared the same concepts of how men, as leaders and innovators, were the agents of time and therefore deserved a monopoly on all spaces that symbolized power and leadership. These nationalisms understood women as ‘outside of time’ – that is, not as part of history or progress except in their supportive roles to men. The new Black nations imagined (as in the US) and achieved (as in West, East and, eventually, North, Central and South Africa) in the mid to late decades of the twentieth century offered little hope for advancement, much less equal power, to the women who were nonetheless told they were now truly ‘liberated’.

By imagining a ‘Black nation’ that would be ordered along the same logic as the white Western nations they so bitterly criticized, organizations such as the US Black Panther Party as well as early post-colonial African liberation movements explicitly foreclosed a space and time for women that was not always already dictated by men. Unsurprisingly, many women of color looked outside men of color nationalist movements that did not have time or space for their concerns. In the case of the Black female revolutionaries of the 1970s and 1980s, Angela Davis, Elaine Brown and Assata Shakur stress how racism and capitalism disable, denigrate and otherwise disempower Black women, but also discuss and analyze misogynist and sexist practices within their own Black communities. As one of the founding members of the Los Angeles chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1968, Angela Davis writes in her autobiography:

whenever we women were involved in something important [the men] began to talk about ‘women taking over the organization’ – calling it a matriarchal coup d’état. All the myths about Black women surfaced. Bobbie, Rene and I were too domineering; we were trying to control everything, including the men – which meant by

extension that we wanted to rob them of their manhood. By playing such a leading role in the organization, some of them insisted, we were aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men weak and unable to hold their own. (1974: 181)

Worthy of note is the work of the US women of color writing and sociopolitical action group the Combahee River Collective, led by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Audre Lorde and Demita Frazier, which, while drawing on the same Marxist and anti-colonial critiques, also condemned the specific behaviors and machinations of Black patriarchy in their communities, writing that ‘a combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism’ (Combahee River Collective, 1983: 45).

The representations of Black womanhood in the West articulated by these writers and activists provided much of the schematic background that would go on to inform Black womanist writing in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, France, Germany and Britain. While figures such as Davis point to specific Marxist influences in forming this writing, more generally it was approached through both critiquing and combining the work of Marx and Engels with that of contemporary (black) revolutionaries and activists such as Frantz Fanon, Huey Netwon, CLR James and George Padmore. While it is often ignored by contemporary Black Marxist theorists across disciplines, Marx and Engels – and Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin after them – do provide a Marxist feminist critique of what they determine to be ‘bourgeois capitalist norms’ – in which all women should be wives and mothers, raising children and tending to the household rather than out in the public sphere (Gimenez, 1975: 61–80). This argument asserts that however one sees ‘women’s work’, raising children and tending to the household (cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.) is nonetheless work, and unpaid labor at that. Not unlike the way

capitalism estranges the working man and woman from their labor by placing them on assembly lines (where they become a mere part of the process, not the creator, producer and seller of the product), it is argued that women who do labor in the household are also denied the right to control their labor because society rejects any claim that they should be paid for their work. The state and society make it difficult for women to control the terms of their labor, often assuming that working-class women who wish to spend more time outside of the home are ‘bad’ mothers and mates.³

Marxist theory not only validates Black women as equal laborers whose work should be recognized but also acknowledges the racial oppression they suffer. In *gestalt* Marxist arguments, Blackness in the West is understood as the result of Western capitalism which, in its drive for profits from products such as tobacco, sugar, cotton and rice, first enslaved and then found other means to exploit Black Africans and their successive generations in both the West and in Africa. Fanon and Padmore go beyond Marx and Engels’ exhortations to ally themselves with the white working classes of Europe by explicitly linking the Black economic experience in the West writ large with the white Western shift from cottage industries to the rise of transnational corporations and the military industrial complex in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.

Seen another way, Marxist theory does what white feminism and Black nationalism largely fail to do: provides a space for Black women in time. Black women enter time because Marxist theory organizes history through different eras of society’s organization of labor and power.

Unfortunately, this is the *ideal* of Marxist feminist writers. Sexism and misogyny – as well as racism – can be found in Marxist, Socialist and Communist practices. While for decades the Soviet Union and Cuba have touted the large proportion of female doctors they train, these doctors, unlike their male counterparts, are still expected to prioritize

marriage, keeping house and raising children. In Communist states such as the former eastern bloc and China, the few women who did enjoy positions of power in the early decades have all but disappeared – along with the right for feminists in those nations to voice their concerns. This is one of the reasons why many of the Black female theorists named above, including Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, used aspects of Marxist theory but did not commit to it wholesale.

A SPACE AND TIME WHOLLY TO OURSELVES: WOMANISM IN THE 1980S AND 1990S

Influenced by, but not wholly dedicated to, Marxist theory, a second narration of women of color theorizing themselves in the West took place in the 1970s and into the 1980s. The 1960s and 1970s saw a rise in immigration to the West from its former colonial regimes, bringing in poor women of color seeking work (especially in North America, but also in Europe and parts of Central and South America) just as a critical mass of educated white women entered the professional labor force. In a perverse echoing of the colonial era, women of color now found themselves trapped in the domestic space previously occupied by the white female. As middle- and upper-class white women went to work, women of color cooked, cleaned and raised those women's children. Scholarship such as Black British cultural theorist Hazel Carby's 'White Woman, Listen!' (1989), US Caribbean lesbian theorist Audre Lorde's essay collection *Sister Outsider* (1984), and US theorist bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) provide the first racialized and gendered critiques of dialectical materialism, noting that in racist capitalist societies women from the elite often move on to occupy positions just as oppressive to racial minorities as those of their male counterparts, even if those same women suffer from misogyny and sexism in their own circles.

'Womanism,' a term that US writer and activist Alice Walker is understood to have coined, argues that in the space-time of contemporary bourgeois white capitalist societies in the West women of color enter from outside the West only to take up roles reminiscent of those forced on to Black women in the colonial space a century ago. An irony emerges: in the 'modern' space of the West the woman of color is given a space that takes her back in time to an equally oppressive age. It is as if this domestic space – once occupied by the white woman, now the woman of color – is never empowered, only passed down to the woman who is too poor and too vulnerable to escape it.

Hazel Carby's 'White Woman Listen!' details the specific ways in which white women's own timeline of progress has almost always been exclusionary towards the Black female subject. She opens by underscoring the ways Black women have been excluded by the space and time of white male and white female histories and what she calls 'herstories':

The black women's critique of *history* has not only involved us coming to terms with 'absences'; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. *History* has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed. [...] We cannot hope to constitute ourselves in all our absences, or to rectify the ill-conceived presences that invade herstory from *history*, but we do wish to bear witness to our own herstories. (1989: 45)

Carby does not see white Western spaces as open to Black female agency; instead, she observes 'absences', places where they should be yet from which they have been removed. Perhaps equally devastatingly, Carby also criticizes depictions of Black women where they are written into white histories and herstories as stereotypes rather than fully realized human beings.

Absences also mean silences, so, in spite of the power of these critiques, there is often a stark difference between the woman of color

scholar who is writing the critique and the women of color *of* whom she writes. One is armed with a laptop and, most often (no matter how small), an audience, whereas the other toils away in silence, perhaps without legal status or recourse to family or friends. They work within two very different spaces. The first is contemporary – one can find reams of woman of color criticism on the web and, should one have the time, go hear a woman of color critique speak on these matters in a public (i.e., not domestic) space reserved for the topic. The second, as noted above, is anachronistic: the woman of color as maid/nanny/cook/cleaner is called upon to do demanding tasks over long hours, a type of labor we often assume to be out of step with the democratic ideals of the modern era. She is forced to occupy a space that is not her own, forced to work but never able to claim her labor as her own, because both space and labor exist for the pleasure of another (perhaps even a woman of color feminist scholar).

The next section focuses on a theoretical and practical problem central to this essay's purview: how the breadth and diversity of transnational womanisms and feminisms creates a breadth and diversity of views that cannot possibly all fit into one space (i.e. a book on the topic). There are too many different spaces (from nations to neighborhoods) and too many different times (histories) to consider. Additionally, as we have seen, there is no one theory that speaks to all the different needs and considerations one can find in transnational womanist and feminist theories – not to mention queer of color critiques, with which the essay concludes. Scholarly writing – even websites and public speeches – reach limited audiences; fiction, however, reaches much larger ones. As the next section will show, by being able to create and communicate the multiple spaces and times where women of color characters can cogently and clearly communicate their lives, Black women fiction writers push open new doors for articulations of transnational Black feminisms and womanisms.

THE IMAGINATION OF MULTIPLE SPACE-TIMES: AFRICAN DIASPORA WOMEN'S FICTION IN THE 1990S AND 2000S

Black women's fiction and creative non-fiction writing from the United States, the Caribbean, Britain, France and Germany in the 1980s and 1990s has played an important role in contemporary theorizations of race, class, gender and sexuality from the 1990s to today. Coming from such 'post-colonial' writers as Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Alice Walker, Michele Cliff (Jamaica), Paule Marshall (US/Barbados), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria/Britain), Sylvia Wynter (Canada/Jamaica), Toni Morrison (US), Andrea Levy (Britain), Ika Hügel-Marshall (Germany), Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua and Barbuda), May Ayim (Germany) and Calixthe Beyala (France), these essays, novels and poetries explore the real and imagined lives of women who are often lost to history. Figuratively and metaphorically speaking, these writers create and explore moments in space and time where and when a black woman's consciousness interprets the world. They reveal ways in which millions of working poor, working-class and even middle-class women may occupy the 'glocal' (global and local) spaces. The 'glocal' can be achieved in fiction because its narratives operate as both a fictional story and a metaphor for sociopolitical forces at large. These discourses are often the boldest of all in reimagining multiple spaces – times for Black women in the world, or what Gayatri Spivak (via Martin Heidegger) refers to as 'worlding' (Spivak, 1985). By locating the minority female subject at a series of intersections – as a economic, gendered, ethnicized, sexualized and political being – these fiction writers underscore that although marginalized in masculinist discourses, women of color nonetheless *do* impact and are impacted by 'glocal' forces.

In Buchi Emecheta's celebrated autobiography *In the Ditch* (Emecheta, 1971) and

subsequent *roman à clef* *Second Class Citizen* (Emecheta, 1974) (heavily patterned on *Ditch*), the intersecting yet often conflicting demands of the Black British Nigerian woman show how cultural norms routinely disempower those bodies they fail to consider as sufficiently complex or important. In Emecheta's texts, Yoruba culture demands that the moral wife and mother devote her days to the raising of children and the tending of her husband. Yet London's twin role as the hub of opportunity for immigrants and a prohibitively expensive locus demand Buchi/Adah be both a full-time wife and mother and a worker in its labor force. However, in performing these multiple roles to provide for her family as well as raise and care for them she simultaneously finds herself failing Yoruba expectations of supporting her husband as sole breadwinner, putting him at risk for ridicule and emasculation. Buchi/Adah's status as a Yoruba woman and a Black woman in London also begin to conflict when she is encouraged by co-workers to view her salary as her own and to resist her husband's demands for total obedience and subservience.

These contradictions reveal the degree to which the Black female subject is figuratively rent apart by inadequate societal expectations, unable to remain within a stable, empowering and enabling identity. According to theorist and literary critic Okonjo Ogunyomi:

If the feminist literary movement desires the illumination of female experience in order to alter the status quo for the benefit of women, the African women writer's dilemma in a feminist context becomes immediately apparent. Black women are disadvantaged in several ways: as blacks they, with their men, are victims of a white patriarchal culture; as women they are victimized by black men; and as black women they are also victimized on racial, sexual, and class grounds by white men. (Ogunyemi, 1985: 67)

Particularly, Buchi/Adah finds herself divided by the demands of the different spaces which she occupies – the kitchen, the bedroom, the employment office, the

compound of her Yoruban in-laws and the homes of her London friends – each of which refuses to recognize her roles in any other spaces.

The transnational feminist critique in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* are clear: Buchi/Adah is forced to occupy different spaces in different times: primarily as a 'traditional' Nigerian women within a middle-class household and as a Black African immigrant woman within the capitalist work space of London. Importantly, neither space nor time – both of which are wholly allocated to her labor (including the serving of her husband's sexual desires) – provide her with agency or control. As such (both in her texts and in real life), Buchi Emecheta carves out a living for herself (arguably her own space-time) as a celebrated novelist, educating her audiences by conveying the double space-times Black woman immigrants in the West must often endure. While one cannot herald Emecheta's bestselling works as the coming of a grand revolution, her use of the creative form has reached tens of thousands of readers who reference her work to understand their own lives and how, through the creation of a writing voice, they might create a space and time in which they have agency.

I begin with Emecheta because she is a rarity, an author who has reached both lay audiences and the academy in profound ways with her unstinting view of hardship where, nonetheless, she demonstrates that agency can be imagined and acquired. Most literature that explores Black women's hardships offers the same unstinting and insightful theorizations, but do not end happily. However, before ending this section on Black transnational literatures and moving to queer of color critiques it is important to note how even texts that do not end happily can sometimes provide enough ambiguity and ambivalence to create space-times of agency and opportunity, no matter how unlikely.

Through her novels, Guadeloupien writer Maryse Condé explores what Hazel Carby has termed the 'triple oppression of gender,

race, and class', as the result of the diversity of Black women's identities (for instance, as a black woman, mother and woman in the workforce). Furthermore, she complicates this idea by opening it up to Black women in the West who also enjoy economic privilege. In *Heremakhonon* (Condé, 1999), Condé's Guadeloupean-born, Parisian-by-choice, bourgeois anti-heroine Veronica Mercier travels to a fictional African nation to enact a journey of return to the 'homeland' as a Black diasporic subject. Yet Veronica's race and gender place her within a completely different space-time, one quite distinct from the linear progress narratives authored by Black men who write of "returning" home to Africa and being "rejoined" to the "authentic Blackness" that, to them, is synonymous with a Black African heteropatriarchal collective. This difference reminds the reader that something as seemingly universal and spiritually fulfilling as a (symbolic) homecoming to ancestral lands can often be a very gendered experience. While men of color may rejoice to find themselves in a collective space in which men that look like them are in charge, women of color may question how a "homecoming" that expects them to subordinate themselves can be empowering and/or enabling. Finding herself marginalized as a woman, she attempts to use sex as a means of attracting powerful male partners, but is raped by a lover who does not distinguish between her identity as his intimate partner and the Black African women he and his troops have savaged. For strongman Ibrahima Sory, Veronica occupies only one space: that of her body, existing to await the times of his sexual pleasure. Veronica's bourgeois status, which has paid for an apartment in Paris as well as an independent life where she is free to make her own choices about sex and marriage, provides her with luxury and the freedom to travel in Africa, but not much more. Ironically, it is to Paris, and not Africa, that she makes her 'return' by the end of the novel.⁴

Heremakhonon has been read as a tragic, dystopian novel by critics such as Suzan Z.

Anadrade, Nora C. Cottille-Foley and Phillip D. Bailey, who conclude that it underscores the idea that Black women can find no place in the world. However, a closer look at the final passages of the book (upon Veronica's 'return' to Paris) do not appear to align so easily with these assumptions:

One day I'll have to break the silence. I'll have to explain. What? This mistake, this tragic mistake I couldn't help making, being what I am. My ancestors led me on. What more can I say? I looked for myself in the wrong place. In the arms of an assassin. Come now, don't use big words. Always dramatizing. Spring? Yes, it's spring in Paris. (Condé, 1982: 167)

While these final thoughts are hardly triumphant, they do not appear defeatist. One hears both dramatic regret ('this tragic mistake') and self-teasing for 'always dramatizing'; a shrug over a mistake ('What more can I say?'), but, more importantly, the suggestion that, whereas Africa may have been the wrong place, Paris ('Yes, it's spring in Paris') may possibly be the 'right' place to which she can return.

Condé's depiction of Africa as the 'wrong place' is powerful yet ambivalent. On the one hand, this essay notes how dominant discourses try to argue that the bodies of women as well social and economic minorities do not 'belong' in certain spaces, and it is possible to read the passage above as no more than Veronica (as a Black woman) echoing this oppressive and bigoted idea. On the other hand, Veronica, as a Parisian woman from Guadeloupe, does not appear to express devastation and/or disempowerment. The fact that the novel begins and ends with Veronica traveling first from Paris and then 'back' suggests that Paris, not Africa, is the space to which she 'belongs', the 'home' to which she 'returns' after all. Unlike her reflections on Africa, Veronica is often nostalgic for Paris and the specific attitudes, habits and ways of its multicultural denizens. When Veronica imagines Paris in the novel, it is as an enabled and empowered denizen greatly engaged in her environment and

intimate with the cultural habits that mark the Parisians of different *arrondissements*.

Condé's intervention is bold yet effective. Black nationalist discourses tend to read the West, at best, as an ambivalent space – the home of the colonizer, where Black men must always experience some form of colonization at white hands. Alternatively, *Heremakonon* contrasts the violence and silencing Veronica endures in her attempt to reconnect with her symbolic 'home' in Africa against the pleasure and anticipation Veronica feels when thinking of her home in Paris. While Paris is not Paradise, Condé in effect argues that women of color can find times and spaces that 'fit' them. For a cosmopolitan gadabout like Veronica, Paris is a place of voice and agency for her multiple selves.

Yet before all Black women rush to Paris, *Heremakonon* must remind the reader that Veronica, unlike her neighborhood street sweeper, who is a Black man, belongs to the Black bourgeoisie and clearly enjoys enough economic privilege to take trips to Africa and return when she chooses. The street sweeper has no such opportunities, and while Veronica looks forward to seeing the sweeper again one wonders if the latter would feel the same. After all, the space in which Veronica greets the street sweeper is one of leisure and pleasure for her, but one of tiring and unpleasant labor for him. Despite the proliferation of views and critiques in transnational black feminisms and womanisms summarized above, the problem of space and place for Black women of all socioeconomic classes remains. While the creation of other narratives, herstories and timelines that represent Black women in the African diaspora provide an accurate and agential presence, Black women remain absented, misrepresented.

Fiction allows for the expression of ambivalence and complexity in a different way. US scholar Mae Gwendolyn Henderson has termed this type of view point the 'dialogic' point of view, arguing that to be a Black woman is already to occupy three different collective identities (as Black, as a woman

and as a Black woman) and thus conferring multiple 'voices' with which to speak:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about a black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s),' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of a black women's writing is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or 'generalized Other,' but a dialogue with the aspects of 'otherness' within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the 'Other' of the Same, but also as the 'other' of the other(s) implies, as we shall see, a relationship of difference and identification with the 'other(s)'. (1993 119)

WHEN AND WHERE DO I ENTER? QUEERS OF COLOR AND HORIZONTAL SPACE-TIMES IN THE 2010S

While Henderson offers us a good rule of thumb in refusing to frame one's minority identities as always already oppressive, we must also consider the intent on the part of the speaker when speaking from a 'dialogic' subjectivity. For instance, it is not beyond belief to think that a biracial Hispanic Catholic Black Egyptian Muslim transgender lesbian is also outdoorsy and perhaps more obsessed with raising horses than with her theoretical dialogic potential for millions. When she speaks, must we assume that she speak for all aspects of her subjectivity?

There is another consideration before we celebrate 'Black womanist dialogism', and that is finding the voices. To 'add' just one category to Henderson's model, that of queerness, we already find obstacles in our path to their voices: it is hard for those spaces to be found, at least in Black communities. Black feminist theorist bell hooks relates this dilemma for Black queer histories in the US (which, I should note, are also true for the entirety of the African Diaspora):

Unfortunately, there are very few oral histories and autobiographies which explore the lives of

black gay people in diverse black communities. This is a research project that must be carried out if we are to fully understand the complex experience of being black and gay in this white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society. Often we hear more from black gay people who have chosen to live in predominantly white communities, whose choices may have been affected by undue harassment in black communities. We hear hardly anything from black gay people who live contentedly in black communities.⁵

There are two different ways in which Black queer discourses have responded to this challenge, and it is the second of them that is the focus of the end of this essay. The first way is by establishing and retrieving black queer discourses from black communities (predominantly in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean). This is being partially met by the gathering of oral histories in scholarly volumes and, as queer theorist and performance artist E. Patrick Johnson has done with *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008), in public performances of those narratives of black gay men in the United States and Australia. I write 'partially' because hooks is painfully correct in noting the enduring paucity of narratives from earlier generations – these identities, far fewer found than logically existed, are retrieved through social histories of black queer urban life (such as in James F. Wilson's *Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies* (2010)) or documentaries and autobiographies of 'out' Black celebrities of the early twentieth century (such as those on early twentieth-century US blues singers Bessie Smith and Moms Mabley and Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin).

The second way is to return again to the imagined space for Black queerness through fiction, such as in the Black queer Scottish poet, playwright and novelist Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (2000). Through imaginations of alternative spaces and times, Kay's novel is able to locate a Black transgender identity within the white West, albeit in a way that hooks understands as insufficiently representative (because these discourses represent non-heteronormative, or 'queer', identities through interactions with whites).

At the beginning of *Trumpet* Joss Moody, a Black Scottish jazz trumpeter, is discovered upon his death (or, more specifically, upon the coroner's initial observation) to be biologically female by his community (Kay, 2000). Joss's life is primarily recalled by his white female widow, who knew about and supported Joss's simple yet convincing transgender performance, and their adopted son, Colman, now an adult heterosexual Black male, who did not know. In *Trumpet* the life of a queer Black European is produced through the recollections of a white heterosexual and queer woman and a black heterosexual son, underscoring the way in which Black queerness is created through intersections with other collective identities – whether those identities are aware of it or not. Kay also provides us with a reminder of the ways in which sometimes one set of minority identities can oppress others – as when Joss uses his masculine privilege to control the domestic spaces he shares with his wife and son, often abandoning them for the public arena to perform his music, despite their complaints of loneliness and isolation.

What queer narratives do is open up new spaces that are adjacent to the Black queer ones others may occupy (including all Black men, women, Black women and white men). More specifically, they imagine and create spaces shared with those whom they understand to be their peers rather than their superiors or inferiors. While sometimes this means emphasizing relationships that are ostensibly between equals (lovers, friends, allies), it can often mean deliberately destabilizing relationships seemingly fixed into a hierarchy: rather than the father being superior to the son in all ways, the son may possess knowledge or power equal to that of the father. In the case of *Trumpet*, Kay shows us how the life of a Black (queer) transgender musician is not lost, but retrieved through familial and professional relationships. Joss is not and never was isolated in space or time because he shared so many of those spaces and times with others – when he so chose.

Trumpet is admittedly a small move. Nonetheless, it points the way to understanding and seeking out queer of color bodies we might assume to be isolated and/or lost from our archive. Its notion of moving into ‘horizontal’ spaces and times where queers of color can be seen and heard is a mainstay of queer of color literature. Importantly, this horizontal movement is not simply a creative mechanism that could be turned into a plan for activism. There is a startling comparison between the ways in which popular queer literature – especially the paperback novels of the 1950s mainly written by heterosexuals to titillate ‘straight’ audiences (but consumed by black and white queers in large metropolitan centers in the West) – paralleled the end of World War II, with the demobbing of (closeted) gay and lesbian servicemen and women. Having discovered others ‘like them’ while in service, many stayed in the cities in which they were discharged (hence the birth of San Francisco as a ‘gay capital’) or else moved to other urban centers where, unlike in their tiny rural birth towns from which they originally hailed, they could find some joy and satisfaction, if not peace, in their public and private lives.

USHERING IN THE NEXT DECADES: ‘QUEERING’ BLACK TRANSNATIONAL DISCOURSES AND THE LEGACY OF AUDRE LORDE

Black German queer and feminist/womanist theorist Fatima El-Tayeb takes up this concept of finding spaces and times through ‘horizontal’ peer organizing in her *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*:

In order to support my argument with specific claims, I will present a number of border-crossing case studies focusing primarily on Western Europe. [...] Building on works addressing specific national contexts, I suggest that the complex interactions of race, religion, migration and colonialism haunting the presence of minorities of color in Europe might be best explored through a

shift away from a *vertical* look at one ethnic group, covering various generations and their move from home to host country, toward a *horizontal* perspective crossing various ethnic and national divides. (2011: xxii)

For El-Tayeb, ‘queering’ ethnicity means reinterpreting and even changing one’s space-time: the ‘Veronicas’ of the Diaspora could ally with Adahs and the Angela Davises (perhaps even with the Josses) through street protests and community organizing. They need not wholly confine themselves to the spaces dictated by patriarchy or capitalism but, like Marxism, could seek out allies even on the shop-floor, if not on the street. By changing one’s space and how one spends time in it, women and queers of color can transform, El-Tayeb argues, both disempowering spaces of labor and oppressive public spaces (such as Tianamen Square) into spaces for alliance and empowerment.

This does not mean, of course, that ‘queering’ one’s identity through space and time will not be met with obstacles – the obstacles are formidable and often violent, sometimes horribly and deliberately fatal, as often seems intended on the part of the murderer. To violate spaces that the elite have reserved for themselves and to act as if in a different time in those spaces often begets such vicious retribution that one cannot help but ruminate on the importance of continuing to violate those spaces. After all, it was only some hundred years ago that many white women were first allowed into the (albeit mostly daytime) public sphere in the West unaccompanied by men. The first to violate heteropatriarchal space-time were harmed and humiliated; however, the gains that have been made by this repeated ‘violation’ have brought some women a measure of socioeconomic independent and political representation.

Change can happen, and few are a greater testament to that for women and queers of color than Audre Lorde, who, as poet, activist, teacher and essayist, trained women and queers of color in the 1980s and 1990s in activism (Professor Fatima El-Tayeb was one such associate). For instance, the late May

Ayim and the very vibrant and alive Katherine Oguntoye have testified to the importance of Audre Lorde's 1984 teaching visit to the Free University of Berlin, where Lorde first encountered Black Germans. Rather than teach and attempt to organize them 'vertically', Lorde served as an interlocutor, as a student and teacher who learned about their lives and stressed the importance of seeking one another out and sharing their different yet united voices as Black German women. Out of these meetings and organization came associations that are still active today – ADEFRA (AfroDEutscheFRauen, or Black German Women) and the ISD (Initiative Schwarz-Deutsch, or Black German Initiative). Numerous scholarly anthologies, collections of poetry and essays, films, conferences and other group and individual efforts have emerged and continue to emerge. In interviews and testimonials on websites, on the printed page and in conference minutes Black German women and queers of color testify to how Lorde's teachings about horizontality enable and empower these organizations and their public and private lives. By finding public and domestic spaces where they could meet and commune with other Black Germans, they also took themselves, they report, away from white German interlocutors who engaged with them as if they were 'African savages' – i.e., back in a mythical colonial time not unlike the mythical time painted and written about by white Western Orientalists.

As argued at the beginning of this essay, Black transnational womanist, feminist and queer of color critiques have made great strides in securing newer and more diverse representation into media, discussion and the written word. While their concerns are still habitually excluded from scholarship on the Black Diaspora that does not identify itself as feminist or queer in its concerns, points of intersection have begun to emerge. If this notion of peer networking, or queering ourselves, continues to gain ground in young activist queer and feminist circles across the Diaspora, we might one day find this essay a quaint relic from another space and time.

NOTES

- 1 History itself is a Western concept – or more specifically, the theory (long since disproven by Western scientists and philosophers like Einstein and Derrida) that time and space flow in a neat linear progress.
- 2 See Blackwood, 1999 and Brown, 2007.
- 3 See Woolf, 1938; Beauvoir, 1953; Emecheta, 1971; hooks, 1981; Friedan, 1983.
- 4 Ironically, because most Black Caribbean and Black African creative and scholarly texts by men frame Paris as the 'home of the colonizer' and thus a space where Blacks can only feel colonized, not liberated.
- 5 I first came across this quote in Black queer theorist Dwight McBride's essay 'Can the Queen Speak?' (Carbado, 1999). The original citation is hooks, 1989: 120–26.

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