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TOWARD A GENEALOGY OF BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY: THE PROBLEMATIC OF SILENCE

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Sexuality has become one of the most visible, contentious and spectacular features of modern life in the United States during this century. Controversies over sexual politics and sexual behaviour reveal other tensions in US society, particularly those around changing patterns of work, family organization, disease control, and gender relations. In the wake of Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and the more recent murder charges brought against football star O. J. Simpson, African Americans continue to be used as the terrain upon which contested notions about race, gender, and sexuality are worked out. Yet, while black men have increasingly been the focus of debates about sexuality in the academy and in the media, the specific ways in which black women figure in these discourses has remained largely unanalyzed and untheorized.

In this essay, I will argue that the construction of black women's sexuality, from the nineteenth century to the present, engages three sets of issues. First, there is the way black women's sexuality has been constructed in a binary opposition to that of white women: it is rendered simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses. Secondly, I will describe how resistance to these dominant discourses has been coded and lived by various groups of black women within black communities at different historical moments. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of these

strategies of resistance in disrupting dominant discourses about black women's sexuality and the implications of this for black women with AIDS.

In addressing these questions, I am specifically interested in interrogating the writing of black feminist theorists on black women's sexuality. As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has noted, while black feminist theorists have written extensively on the impact of such issues as rape, forced sterilization, and homophobia on black women's sexuality, 'when it comes to other important issues concerning the sexual politics of Black womanhood, . . . Black feminists have found it almost impossible to say what has happened to Black women'.¹ To date, there has been no full length historical study of African American women's sexuality in the United States. In this essay, I will examine some of the reasons why black feminists have failed to develop a complex, historically specific analysis of black women's sexuality.

Black feminist theorists have almost universally described black women's sexuality, when viewed from the vantage of the dominant discourses, as an absence. In one of the earliest and most compelling discussions of black women's sexuality, literary critic Hortense Spillers wrote, 'Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb'.² For writer Toni Morrison, black women's sexuality is one of the 'unspeakable things unspoken' of the African American experience. Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women's bodies are always already colonized. In addition, this always already colonized black female body has so much sexual potential it has none at all.³ Historically, black women have reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex that constructed this image with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility.⁴

Black feminist theorists – historians, literary critics, sociologists, legal scholars, and cultural critics – have drawn upon a specific historical narrative which purportedly describes the factors that have produced and maintained perceptions of black women's sexuality (including their own). Three themes emerge in this history. First, the construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen – everything that is not white. Secondly, the resistance of black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and to the material effects of those stereotypes on black women's lives. And, finally, the evolution of a 'culture of dissemblance' and a 'politics of silence' by black women on the issue of their sexuality.

COLONIZING BLACK WOMEN'S BODIES

By all accounts, the history of discussions of black women's sexuality in Western thought begins with the Europeans' first contact with peoples on the African continent. As Sander Gilman argued in his widely cited essay 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late

Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature',⁵ the conventions of human diversity that were captured in the iconography of the period linked the image of the prostitute and the black female through the Hottentot female. The Hottentot female most vividly represented in this iconography was Sarah Bartmann, known as the 'Hottentot Venus'. This southern African black woman was crudely exhibited and objectified by European audiences and scientific experts because of what they regarded as unusual aspects of her physiognomy – her genitalia and buttocks. Gilman argued that Sarah Bartmann, along with other black females brought from southern Africa, became the central image for the black female in Europe through the nineteenth century. The 'primitive' genitalia of these women were defined by European commentators as the sign of their 'primitive' sexual appetites. Thus, the black female became the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty and was relegated to the lowest position on the scale of human development. The image of the black female constructed in this period reflected everything the white female was not, or, as art historian Lorraine O'Grady has put it, 'White is what woman is [was]; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be'.⁶ Gilman shows that by the end of the nineteenth century European experts in anthropology, public health, medicine, biology, and psychology had concluded, with ever-increasing 'scientific' evidence, that the black female embodied the notion of uncontrolled sexuality.

In addition, as white European elites' anxieties surfaced over the increasing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, especially syphilis, high rates of these diseases among black women were used to define them further as a source of corruption and disease. It was the association of prostitutes with disease that provided the final link between the black female and the prostitute. Both were bearers of the stigmata of sexual difference and deviance. Gilman concluded that the construction of black female sexuality as inherently immoral and uncontrollable was a product of nineteenth-century biological sciences. Ideologically, these sciences reflected Europeans males' fear of difference in the period of colonialism, and their consequent need to control and regulate the sexuality of those rendered 'other'.

Paula Giddings, following Gilman, pointed out that the negative construction of black women's sexuality as revealed by the Bartmann case also occurred at a time when questions about the entitlement of nonenslaved blacks to citizenship was being debated in the United States. In part, the contradiction presented by slavery was resolved in the US by ascribing certain inherited characteristics to blacks, characteristics that made them unworthy of citizenship; foremost among these was the belief in the unbridled sexuality of black people and specifically that of black women.⁷ Thus, racial difference was linked to sexual difference in order to maintain white male supremacy during the period of slavery.

During slavery, the range of ideological uses for the image of the always-already sexual black woman was extraordinarily broad and familiar. This

stereotype was used to justify the enslavement, rape, and sexual abuse of black women by white men; the lynching of black men; and, not incidentally, the maintenance of a coherent biological theory of human difference based on fixed racial typologies. Because African American women were defined as property, their social, political, and legal rights barely exceeded those of farm animals – indeed, they were subjected to the same forms of control and abuse as animals. For black feminist scholars, the fact that black women emerged under slavery as speaking subjects at all is worthy of note.⁸ And it is the fact that African American women of this period do speak to the fact of their sexual exploitation that counts as their contestation to the dominant discourses of the day. Indeed, as Hazel Carby has described, black women during slavery were faced with having to develop ways to be recognized within the category of woman by whites by asserting a positive value to their sexuality that could stand in both public and private.⁹

THE POLITICS OF 'RECONSTRUCTING WOMANHOOD'¹⁰

As the discussion of sex roles and sexuality began to shift among whites in the US by the end of the nineteenth century, the binary opposition which characterized black and white female sexuality was perpetuated by both Victorian sexual ideology and state practices of repression. White women were characterized as pure, passionless, and de-sexed, while black women were the epitome of immorality, pathology, impurity, and sex itself. 'Respectability' and 'sexual control' were set against 'promiscuity' in the discourse of middle-class whites, who viewed the lifestyles of black people and the new white immigrants in urban centers as undermining the moral values of the country.¹¹ Buttressed by the doctrine of the Cult of True Womanhood, this binary opposition seemed to lock black women forever outside the ideology of womanhood so celebrated in the Victorian era. As Beverly Guy Sheftall notes, black women were painfully aware that 'they were devalued no matter what their strengths might be, and that the Cult of True Womanhood was not intended to apply to them no matter how intensely they embraced its values'.¹²

In the late-nineteenth century, with increasing exploitation and abuse of black women despite the legal end of slavery, US black women reformers recognized the need to develop different strategies to counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality which had been used as justifications for the rape, lynching, and other abuses of black women by whites. More than a straightforward assertion of a normal female sexuality and a claim to the category of protected womanhood was called for in the volatile context of Reconstruction where, in the minds of whites, the political rights of black men were connected to notions of black male sexual agency.¹³ Politics, sexuality, and race were already inextricably linked in the US, but the problematic established by this link reached new heights of visibility during the period of Reconstruction through the increased lynchings of black men and women by the early decades of the twentieth century.

[...]

THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

Although some of the strategies used by these black women reformers might have initially been characterized as resistance to dominant and increasingly hegemonic constructions of their sexuality, by the early twentieth century, they had begun to promote a public silence about sexuality which, it could be argued, continues to the present.¹⁴ This 'politics of silence', as described by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, emerged as a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman.¹⁵ Historian Darlene Clark Hine argues that the 'culture of dissemblance' which this politics engendered was seen as a way for black women to 'protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives'.¹⁶ She defines this culture as 'the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors'. 'Only with secrecy', Hine argues, 'thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own'.¹⁷ And by the projection of the image of a 'super moral' black woman, they hoped to garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity for all black Americans. Of course, as Higginbotham notes, there were problems with this strategy. First, it did not achieve its goal of ending the negative stereotyping of black women. And second, some middle-class black women engaged in policing the behavior of poor and working-class women and others who deviated from a Victorian norm, in the name of protecting the 'race'.¹⁸ Black women reformers were responding to the ways in which any black woman could find herself 'exposed' and characterized in racist sexual terms no matter what the truth of her individual life; they saw any so-called deviant individual behavior as a threat to the race as a whole. But the most enduring and problematic aspect of this 'politics of silence' is that in choosing silence, black women have also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality.

Yet, this last statement is perhaps too general. Carby notes that during the 1920s, black women in the US risked having all representations of black female sexuality appropriated as primitive and exotic within a largely racist society.¹⁹ She continues, 'Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed black women to be rampant sexual beings, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain'.²⁰ As many black feminist literary and cultural critics have noted, the other terrain on which black women's sexuality was displaced was music, notably the blues. The early blues singers – who were most decidedly not middle class – have been called 'pioneers who claimed their sexual subjectivity through their songs and produced a Black women's discourse on Black sexuality'.²¹ At a moment when middle-class black women's sexuality was 'completely underwritten to avoid

endorsing sexual stereotypes', the blues women defied and exploited those stereotypes.²² Yet, ultimately, neither silence nor defiance was able to dethrone negative constructions of black female sexuality. Nor could these strategies allow for the unimpeded expression of self-defined black female sexualities. Such approaches did not allow African American women to gain control over their sexuality.

In previous eras, black women had articulated the ways in which active practices of the state – the definition of black women as property, the sanctioned rape and lynching of black men and women, the denial of the vote – had been supported by a specific ideology about black female sexuality (and black male sexuality). These state practices effaced any notion of differences among and between black women, including those of class, color, and educational and economic privilege; all black women were designated as the same. The assertion of a supermoral black female subject by black women activists did not completely efface such differences nor did it directly address them. For black women reformers of this period, grounded in particular religious traditions, to challenge the negative stereotyping of black women directly meant continuing to reveal the ways in which state power was complicit in the violence against black people. The appropriation of respectability and the denial of sexuality was, therefore, a nobler path to emphasizing that the story of black women's immorality was a lie.²³

Without more detailed historical studies of black female sexuality in each period, we do not know the extent of this 'culture of dissemblance', and many questions remain unanswered.²⁴ Was it expressed differently in rural and in urban areas; in the north, west, or south? How was it maintained? Where and how was it resisted? How was it shaped by class, color, economic, and educational privilege? And furthermore, how did it change over time? How did something that was initially adopted as a political strategy in a specific historical period become so ingrained in black life as to be recognizable as a culture? Or was it? In the absence of detailed historical studies we can say little about the ways social constructions of sexuality change in tandem with changing social conditions in specific historical moments within black communities.

PERSISTENT LEGACIES: THE POLITICS OF COMMODIFICATION

[...]

It should not surprise us that black women are silent about sexuality. The imposed production of silence and the removal of any alternatives to the production of silence, reflect the deployment of power against racialized subjects 'wherein those who could speak did not want to and those who did want to speak were prevented from doing so'.²⁵ It is this deployment of power at the level of the social and the individual which has to be historicized. It seems clear that what is needed is a methodology that allows us to contest rather than reproduce the ideological system that has, up to now, defined the terrain of

black women's sexuality. Hortense Spillers made this point over a decade ago when she wrote: 'Because black American women do not participate, as a category of social and cultural agents, in the legacies of symbolic power, they maintain no allegiances to a strategic formation of texts, or ways of talking about sexual experience, that even remotely resemble the paradigm of symbolic domination, except that such paradigm has been their concrete disaster'.²⁶ To date, largely through the work of black feminist literary critics, we know more about the elision of sexuality by black women than we do about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire.²⁷ Thus, what we have is a very narrow view of black women's sexuality. Certainly it is true, as Crenshaw notes, that 'in feminist contexts, sexuality represents a central site of the oppression of women; rape and the rape trial are its dominant narrative trope. In antiracist discourse, sexuality is also a central site upon which the repression of blacks has been premised; the lynching narrative is embodied as its trope'.²⁸ Sexuality is also, as Carole Vance defines it, 'simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency'.²⁹ In the past the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers, while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed.

I want to suggest that contemporary black feminist theorists have not taken up this project in part because of their own status in the academy. Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a process that black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory. Black feminist theorists are themselves engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body – the maimed, immoral, black female body – which can be and is still being used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects. Legal scholar Patricia J. Williams illuminates my point: 'No matter what degree of professional I am, people will greet and dismiss my black femaleness as unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational, and probably destitute'.³⁰ When reading student evaluations, she finds comments about her teaching and her body: 'I marvel, in a moment of genuine bitterness, that anonymous student evaluations speculating on dimensions of my anatomy are nevertheless counted into the statistical measurement of my teaching proficiency'.³¹ The hypervisibility of black women academics and the contemporary fascination with what bell hooks calls the 'commodification of Otherness'³² means that black women today find themselves precariously perched in the academy. Ann du Cille notes:

Mass culture, as hooks argues, produces, promotes, and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness through the exploitation of the black female body. In the 1990s, however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community.³³

In tandem with the notion of silence, contemporary black women writers have repeatedly drawn on the notion of the 'invisible' to describe aspects of black women's lives in general and sexuality in particular. Audre Lorde writes that 'within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism'.³⁴ The hypervisibility of black women academics means that visibility, too, can be used to control the intellectual issues that black women can and cannot speak about. Already threatened with being sexualized and rendered inauthentic as knowledge producers in the academy by students and colleagues alike, this avoidance of theorizing about sexuality can be read as one contemporary manifestation of their structured silence. I want to stress here that the silence about sexuality on the part of black women academics is no more a 'choice' than was the silence practiced by early twentieth-century black women. This production of *silence* instead of *speech* is an effect of the institutions such as the academy which are engaged in the commodification of Otherness.

The 'politics of silence' and the 'commodification of Otherness' are not simply abstractions. These constructs have material effects on black women's lives. In shifting the site of theorizing about black female sexuality from the literary or legal terrain to that of medicine and the control of disease, we can see some of these effects. In the AIDS epidemic, the experiences and needs of black women have gone unrecognized. I have argued elsewhere that the set of controlling images of black women with AIDS has foregrounded stereotypes of these women that have prevented them from being embraced by the public as people in need of support and care. The AIDS epidemic is being used to 'inflect, condense and rearticulate the ideological meanings of race, sexuality, gender, childhood, privacy, morality, and nationalism'.³⁵ Black women with AIDS are largely poor and working-class; many are single mothers; they are constantly represented with regard to their drug use and abuse and uncontrolled sexuality. The supposedly 'uncontrolled sexuality' of black women is one of the key features in the representation of black women in the AIDS epidemic.

The position of black women in this epidemic was dire from the beginning and worsens with each passing day. Silence, erasure, and the use of images of immoral sexuality abound in narratives about the experiences of black women with AIDS. Their voices are not heard in discussions of AIDS, while intimate details of their lives are exposed to justify their victimization. In the 'war of representation' that is being waged through this epidemic, black women are the victims that are the 'other' of the 'other', the deviants of the deviants, irrespective of their sexual identities or practices. The representation of black women's sexuality in narratives about AIDS continues to demonstrate the disciplinary practices of the state against black women. The presence of disease is now used to justify denial of welfare benefits, treatment, and some of the basic rights of citizenship, such as privacy for black women and their children. Given the

absence of black feminist analyses or a strong movement (such as the one Ida B. Wells led against lynching), the relationship between the treatment of black women in the AIDS epidemic and state practices has not been articulated. While white gay male activists are using the ideological space framed by this epidemic to contest the notion that homosexuality is 'abnormal' and to preserve the right to live out their homosexual desires, black women are rendered silent. The gains made by gay activists will do nothing for black women if the stigma continues to be attached to their sexuality. Black feminist critics must work to find ways to contest the historical construction of black female sexualities by illuminating how the dominant view was established and maintained and how it can be disrupted. This work might very well save some black women's lives.

[...]

The question remains: how can black feminists dislodge the negative stereotyping of their sexuality and the attendant denials of citizenship and protection?

Developing a complex analysis of black female sexuality is critical to this project. Black feminist theorizing about black female sexuality has, with a few exceptions (Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Barbara Smith, and Audre Lorde), been focused relentlessly on heterosexuality. The historical narrative that dominates discussions of black female sexuality does not address even the possibility of a black lesbian sexuality or of a lesbian or queer subject. Spillers confirms this point when she notes that 'the sexual realities of black American women across the spectrum of sexual preference and widened sexual styles tend to be a missing dialectical feature of the entire discussion'.³⁶ Discussions of black lesbian sexuality have most often focused on differences from or equivalencies with white lesbian sexualities, with 'black' added to delimit the fact that black lesbians share a history with other black women. However, this addition tends to obsfuscate rather than illuminate the subject position of black lesbians. One obvious example of distortion is that black lesbians do not experience homophobia in the same way as white lesbians do. Here, as with other oppressions, the homophobia experienced by black women is always shaped by racism. What has to be explored and historicized is the specificity of black lesbian experience. I want to understand in what way black lesbians are 'outsiders' within black communities. This I think, would force us to examine the construction of the 'closet' by black lesbians. Although this is the topic for another essay, I want to suggest here that if we accept the existence of the 'politics of silence' as an historical legacy shared by all black women, then certain expressions of black female sexuality will be rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the collectivity. It follows, then, that the culture of dissemblance makes it acceptable for some heterosexual black women to cast black lesbians as proverbial traitors to the race.³⁷ And this, in turn, explains why black lesbians – whose 'deviant' sexuality is framed within an already existing deviant sexuality – have been wary of

embracing the status of 'traitor', and the potential loss of community such an embrace engenders.³⁸

Of course, while some black lesbians have hidden the truth of their lives, others have developed forms of resistance to the formulation of lesbian as traitor within black communities. Audre Lorde is one obvious example. Lorde's claiming of her black and lesbian difference 'forced both her white and Black lesbian friends to contend with her historical agency in the face of [this] larger racial/sexual history that would reinvent her as dead'.³⁹ I would also argue that Lorde's writing, with its focus on the erotic, on passion and desire, suggests that black lesbian sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised black female body. Therefore, the works of Lorde and other black lesbian writers, because they foreground the very aspects of black female sexuality that are submerged – namely, female desire and agency – are critical to our theorizing of black female sexualities. Since silence about sexuality is being produced by black women and black feminist theorists, that silence itself suggests that black women do have some degree of agency. A focus on black lesbian sexualities implies that another discourse – other than silence – can be produced. Black lesbian sexualities are not simply identities. Rather they represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency. Black lesbians theorizing sexuality is a site that disrupts silence and imagines a positive affirming sexuality. I am arguing here for a different level of engagement between black heterosexual and black lesbian women as the basis for the development of a black feminist praxis that articulates the ways in which invisibility, otherness, and stigma are produced and re-produced on black women's bodies. And ultimately my hope is that such an engagement will produce black feminist analyses which detail strategies for differently located black women to shape interventions that embody their separate and common interests and perspectives.

NOTES

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 164.
2. Hortense Spillers, 'Interstices: A Small Drama of Words', in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger*, pp. 73–100.
3. Ibid.
4. Darlene Clark Hine, 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance', *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 915–20.
5. Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature', *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 204–42.
6. O'Grady, 'Olympia's Maid'.
7. Paula Giddings, 'The Last Taboo', in Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 445.
8. See the studies of Harriet Jacobs and Linda Brent.

9. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Black Female Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 40–61.
10. This heading is taken from the title of Carby's book cited above.
11. Giddings, 'The Last Taboo'.
12. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880–1920* Black Women in United States History, vol. 11 (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990), p. 90.
13. Martha Hodes, 'The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War', in John C. Fout and Maura S. Tantillo, eds, *American Sexual Politics: Sex Gender and Race since the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 60–1.
14. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 'African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race', *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 251–74; Elsa Barkley Brown, 'Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition From Slavery to Freedom', *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 107–46; as well as Hine, Giddings, and Carby.
15. Higginbotham, 'African American Women's History', p. 262.
16. Hine, 'Rape and the Inner Lives', p. 915.
17. Ibid.
18. See Carby, 'Policing the Black Woman's Body'. Elsa Barkley Brown argues that the desexualization of black women was not just a middle-class phenomenon imposed on working-class women. Though many working-class women resisted Victorian attitudes toward womanhood and developed their own notions of sexuality and respectability, some, also from their own experiences, embraced a desexualized image. Brown, 'Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere', p. 144.
19. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, p. 174.
20. Ibid.
21. Ann du Cille, 'Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993): 419. See also Hazel Carby, "'It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Black Women's Blues", in Ellen DuBois and Vicki Ruiz, eds, *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
22. Here, I am paraphrasing Ducille, 'Blues Notes', p. 443.
23. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
24. The historical narrative discussed here is very incomplete. To date, there are no detailed historical studies of black women's sexuality.
25. Abdul JanMohamed, 'Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of Racialized Sexuality', in Domna Stanton, ed., *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 105.
26. Spillers, 'Interstices', p. 80.
27. See analyses of novels by Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset by Carby, McDowell, and others.
28. Crenshaw, 'Whose Story Is It Anyway?' p. 405.
29. Carole S. Vance, 'Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality', in Carole S. Vance (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, London: Pandora Press, 1989.
30. Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 95.
31. Ibid.
32. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race, and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 21.
33. Ann du Cille, 'The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies', *Signs* 19, no. 3 (1994): 591–629.

34. Karla Scott, as quoted in Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 36.
35. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. ix.
36. Spillers, *Ibid.*, 'Interstices'.
37. In a group discussion of two novels written by black women, Jill Nelson's *Volunteer Slavery* and Audre Lorde's *Zami*, a black woman remarked that while she thought Lorde's book was better written than Nelson's, she was disturbed that Lorde spoke so much about sex, and 'aired all of her dirty linen in public'. She held to this view even after it was pointed out to her that Nelson's book also included descriptions of her sexual encounters.
38. I am reminded of my mother's response when I 'came out' to her. She asked me why, given that I was already black and had a nontraditional profession for a woman, I would want to take on one more thing to make my life difficult. My mother's point, which is echoed by many black women, is that in announcing my homosexuality, I was choosing to alienate myself from the black community.
39. See Scott, quoted in Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 36.