CLEARING THE STATIC: CHALLENGING THE LIMITS AND REPETITIONS OF SINGLE-ISSUE FEMINISMS IN THE ERA OF WOMEN'S STUDIES' INSTITUTIONALIZATION

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MARGARET PRICE BOSTROM

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Student: Margaret Price Bostrom

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

Mary Wood	Chair
Courtney Thorsson	Core Member
Sharon Luk	Core Member
Priscilla Yamin	Institutional Representative

And

Kate Mondloch	Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Margaret Price Bostrom

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Despite longstanding critiques of single-issue feminisms—feminisms consisting primarily of a response to particular forms of sexism or specifically patriarchal violence—this model for theorizing and protesting gendered and sexual violence, and for envisioning more egalitarian futures, continues to have widespread and powerful purchase, both in mainstream U.S. culture and in feminist scholarship. This dissertation traces the continued centrality of single-issue feminist frameworks back to the late 1970s and 1980s, the period of women's studies formal institutionalization as an academic discipline. By analyzing a diverse array of cultural objects, including the shifting personas of actress, activist, and fitness entrepreneur, Jane Fonda, the critical theory of black feminist thinker Hortense Spillers, and a novel by black feminist writer and cultural worker Toni Cade Bambara, I show how the broader historical context in which the process of women's studies institutionalization occurred shaped which commitments became definitional to this emerging field of study, even as these very commitments were being openly critiqued as inadequate, exclusionary, unsophisticated, or misleading.

I argue that rather than revising some of its fundamental epistemological commitments, the emerging discipline of women's studies attempted to adapt to these critiques in two primary ways: by adopting a shared understanding of women's victimization as women (Fonda) or by valuing and incorporating difference under a model of multiculturalism that inaccurately suggests that incompatible positions can be reconciled with one another. Drawing on the work of Spillers and Bambara, I show how alternate models for theorizing interconnected forms of multi-scalar violence, including gendered and sexualized violence, were being articulated during this same period, and I explore how they have been developed in specific fields of thought and their continued relevance to our contemporary moment.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Margaret Price Bostrom

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, OR
Scripps College, Claremont, CA

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, English, 2019, University of Oregon
Master of Arts, English, 2014, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, English, 2009, Scripps College

CERTIFICATES AND SPECIALIZATIONS

Graduate Specialization in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Graduate Certificate in Politics, Culture, and Identity

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Late-Twentieth and Twenty-First Century American Literature
Feminist Historiography
Gender and Sexuality Studies

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow and Graduate Employee, Department of English, 2012-2018

Assistant Director of Composition, The Composition Program, Department of English, 2016-2018

Graduate Teaching Fellow and Graduate Employee, Department of English, 2012-2018

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Fortnightly Club of Eugene Grant, Summer 2017
Center for the Study of Women in Society Research Grant, Spring 2017
Sarah Harkness Kirby Award for Best English Graduate Student Essay, Fall 2014
Sarah Harkness Kirby Award for Best Graduate Student Essay, Winter 2013

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: CLEARING THE STATIC

This dissertation takes the opening part of its title, "Clearing the Static," from a phrase that black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers uses in 2007 to describe her work from the 1980s, and specifically to describe the goal of a series of essays in which Spillers theorizes the terms and conditions through which the emergent fields of Black Studies and Women's Studies were becoming what she calls "curricular objects" (ix). Speaking with fellow black feminist scholars Saidaya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan about the twentieth anniversary of her well-known 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers describes how the work from this earlier period of her career was "searching for a vocabulary" that would be capable of describing black women's experiences in theoretical terms, a "vocabulary that would make it not just desirable, but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation[s]" that were then taking form in and emerging from the newly reconfigured humanities academy (Spillers et al 300).

It is tempting to hear Spillers as describing a desire for the recognition and inclusion of black feminist theory—and black feminists—as both participants in and legislators of the fields of women's studies and black studies, fields that were rapidly taking on institutional form within universities, as departments or centers with deans, professors, administrators, committees, and students, and as areas of inquiry supported by specific networks of conferences, journals, and publishers. But in her later descriptions of her own work from the 1980s, Spillers emphasizes that *not all* terms of recognition would actually be sufficient for achieving the inclusion of black women as subjects and authors

of knowledge. As an example, Spillers explains how she was invited to write a piece on "the sexuality of black women" to present at the 1982 Barnard Conference of feminist scholars (300). The title of the conference was "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," but (describing in 2007 how she felt preparing for this conference) Spillers says, "I thought, you know what, before I can get to the subject of the sexuality of black women…Before you could have a conversation about [the] sexuality of black women, you had to clear the static, clear the field of static" (301).

As is evidenced by the publication of Spillers' conversation with her colleagues, all members of a younger generation of black feminist scholars who understand their own intellectual careers as formed through and building on Spillers' early work, Spillers' essays from the eighties have become foundational pieces of scholarship. But they have become foundational primarily for the distinct but also distinctly interrelated disciplines of black feminist studies, black queer and trans* studies, and black studies, and they have had far less influence over the field of women's studies generally, despite women's studies scholars being among their initial addressees. This is due to the fact that, as Saidaya Hartman points out, the key theoretical contributions of Spillers' work include "questioning…the purchase of gender as an analytic category" and demanding that feminist scholars more deeply interrogate the relationship between many of their discipline's key terms—"woman," "femininity," and "patriarchal oppression"—and the historical underpinnings of white heteropatriarchal power (Spillers et al 303-304).

This dissertation proceeds from the perspective that, for the most part, women's studies, as well as a good deal of feminist scholarship and pedagogy based in other disciplinary locations, have yet to clear their fields of static in the way that Spillers was

referring to. This is not so much because of how feminist scholars have overlooked problems of racism, of the instability of gender, or of other issues of exclusion, discrimination, or difference, but rather because of the primary modes and intellectual formations through which they have addressed them. While this dissertation collects three independent essays (the three that follow this introduction) instead of building a single linear argument, the idea of clearing the static as a necessary precondition of useful feminist scholarship provides a theoretical framework that makes sense of how my three main chapters relate to one another. By "useful" feminist scholarship, I mean scholarship that does not contribute to the continued mystification of the role of gender and sexual hierarchies, and the role of certain forms of feminism, in the maintenance and reproduction of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalist exploitation.

Writing in the United States in 2019, as we witness a moment of both widespread mainstream protest of sexual violence and newly re-empowered and publicly visible misogyny, it is again apparent that certain forms of feminism, especially those that gain mainstream popularity, routinely repeat exclusions and distortions that have been addressed in the past. These feminisms, which I describe as single-issue feminisms (for reasons I will address in a moment), effectively limit the horizons of feminist political consciousness and continually conscript the labor of women of color and non-cisgender women (those who chose to engage these discourses rather than, or in addition to, developing their own intellectual traditions) into a long-established pattern of redressing feminism's failures. Documenting this pattern in the academy, philosopher Mariana Ortega describes the repeated marginalization and erasure of women of color, as it

operates hand-in-hand with the tokenizing celebration of their intellectual labor, as the result of epistemologies of ignorance. She writes,

> In her 1979 text *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, Adrienne Rich labels problematic treatment of women of color by white feminists "white solipsism," a tunnel vision blind to nonwhite experience and which Elizabeth Spelman criticizes in her influential 1988 text, *Inessential Woman*. But it is 2006 now and we are supposed to have moved forward. (57-58)

Ortega describes twenty-first century white feminist epistemologies of ignorance as particularly dangerous because the scholars who participate in and reproduce them have read the work of a select canon of women-of-color feminists whom they cite dutifully in their research to mark their work as satisfactorily "Third Wave." These scholars, Ortega argues, "theorize and make claims about women of color…[without] check[ing] whether in fact their claims…are being described with attention to detail and with understanding of [their] subtleties" (62). This allows the production of ignorance to occur in tandem with "the production of knowledge about the experience of women of color" (Ortega 62).

Like Spillers' 2007 look back at her essays from the 1980s, in this dissertation I move retrospectively between twenty-first century women's studies and feminist scholarship, and this earlier period, roughly from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, in which these areas of inquiry were defining their initial operating procedures. Spillers describes this process in the introduction to her collected essays, *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (2003). I quote her here at length, as her analysis of field formation—of how traditions of knowledge contingently create themselves in relation to the "differentiated objects" of study already available to define

themselves against or as alternative to—is crucial to how the idea of "clearing the static" gives thematic coherence to the different parts of this dissertation **(**Spillers x**).** Spillers writes,

> a field, never given in the fullness of its time, finds and situates itself on its feet, on the occasions of *practice* and *performance*, inasmuch as it depends on discursive positions staked out against the apparently more settled terrain, moment by uncertain moment. If we think of the new field as a yawning in the chain of historical necessity, then its appearance is neither guaranteed, on the one hand, nor foreclosed, on the other hand, but answers to certain conditions that cannot be predicted beforehand…discourses do not spontaneously appear, but as writing, as an intellectual technology, they will follow the path and the tide of generation; that is to say, books and articles beget their like only after a sufficient density of differentiated objects are available to an articulation of elements. An investigator will not "find" what he or she is looking for, but will have to partially "create" the differentiations against the stubbornness of tradition. Starting with a "hermeneutic demand," which had already been formulated in political movement, as well as the saturated inquiries related to modernist critical/theoretical postures, [Black Studies and Women's Studies] were not at all bound to come about, but discovered their urgency of moment in the very alignments of procedure that had assumed their impossibility. The questions broached by the new itineraries could be posed because the intransigent (and arbitrary) borders of the canonical were fragile to start with, predicated, as they were, on the reified properties of "race" and "gender." Paradoxically, the

> curricular objects that emerged in the late sixties and beyond drew attention to the emphases, the texts, the propositions that had been excluded by the traditional configurations of humanistic inquiry, but both Black Studies and Women's studies must now go beyond what was perceived as their historic mission in order to escape the frozen postures of closure that actually substitute for knowledge. (x)

Thinking in 2019 about the paths and tides of generation that have governed women's studies scholarship and pedagogy over the past forty or so years, it is possible to discern how certain terms and conditions that still shape contemporary feminist thought clicked into place (not uncontestedly) during the field's formation and have yet to be fully dislodged.

Because of its multiple meanings in relation to motion and sound, clearing the static appeals as conceptual framework for analyzing how women's studies has *not* escaped "the frozen postures of closure that actually substitute for knowledge" (Spillers X). The phrase "clearing the static" gestures toward the theorization of sound that has been important in black studies (in the work of Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, or Carter Mathes, for example), the other "curricular object" Spillers was addressing in the 1980s, but it also describes something that needs to happen *prior to* the creation of optimal conditions for receiving undistorted phonic messages (Spillers x).[1] This definition of "static" refers to the noise produced in a receiver by various kinds of disturbances—noises that distort, break up, or drown out other signals and messages by interfering with

[1] See Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), and Mathes' *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature After Civil Rights* (2015).

the clarity of their broadcast and reception.[2] Another meaning of "static" is its use as an adjective to describe something as stationary, immobile, or fixed in place, "not moving or intending to be moved" ("Static"). Deriving from the word's early meaning as a name for the science of weights and measures, this use of "static" implies a equilibrium between balanced forces.

When Spillers describes the process of field formation as dynamic and contingent, "never given in the fullness of time," but finding and situating itself "on its feet" through "occasions of "*practice* and *performance,*" she contrasts this process to naturalized understandings of "tradition" that mask their continual creation and recreation (x). This era that Spillers was theorizing as it was occurring—the era of women's studies' institutionalization—has retrospectively become the focus of a considerable amount of feminist scholarship that reckons with the consequences of the field's recognition by and incorporation into the university. Political theorist Wendy Brown's description of the obstacles facing the discipline of women's studies in the 1990s highlights several key dynamics representative of much of this scholarship. In her contribution to the 2008 anthology, *Women's Studies on the Edge*, an essay titled "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," Brown describes the litany of challenges faced by the faculty and administration of the young women's studies program at her university (University of California Santa Cruz) as they attempted curriculum revisions in the 1990s:

[2] Another term for this sound is "white noise." Michael Burns, Timothy R. Dougherty, Ben Kuebrich, and Yanira Rodríguez develop a concept of white noise in their introduction to the digital collection *Soundwriting and Resistance: Toward a Pedagogy for Liberation.* They write, "we contend that racism registers as sound, as white noise. White noise dampens reality: It manufactures a bubble of inauthentic peace and helps those within it to sleep."

> We were up against more than the oft-discussed division between "women's studies" and feminist theory, the political insidiousness of the institutional division between "ethnic studies" and "women's studies," a similarly disturbing division between queer theory and feminist theory, or the way that the ostensibly less identitarian rubric of "cultural studies" promised but failed to relieve these troubling distinctions…We were also up against more than the dramatic fracturing of women's studies as a domain of inquiry during the last decade—the fact that contemporary feminist scholarship is not a single conversation but is instead engaged with respective domains of knowledge, or bodies of theory, that are themselves infrequently engaged with each other. And we were up against more than the ways that this decade's theoretical challenges to the stability of the category of gender, and political challenges to a discourse of gender apart from race, class, and other markers of social identity, constituted very nearly overwhelming challenges to women's studies as a coherent endeavor…(20)

The language of "division," "distinction," "fracturing," and "challenge" animates Brown's description of a field that finds itself and feels itself to be embattled, facing confrontations from within and without, even as it has only just emerged from the struggles involved in establishing itself in the first place (Brown 20). Brown describes these divisions, distinctions, and challenges alternately as "insidious," "troubling," "disturbing," and "very nearly overwhelming" (Brown 20).

According to Clare Hemmings' framework for analyzing the political grammar of feminist theory, Brown's description of the (impossible) field of Women's Studies in the 1990s belongs to two of the primary narrative structures governing twenty-first century

feminist historiographical storytelling: a narrative structure defined by "loss" on the one hand, and a narrative structure defined by "progress" on the other. In narratives of loss, Hemmings writes, the imagined former unification of the category of "woman," or of the project of feminism, is grieved as the cost of "progressive fragmentation…and infighting" among a new generation of feminist academics who have lost touch with the collective urgency that characterized earlier moments in feminism's history (13-14). Narratives of progress, Hemmings writes, also address the shift from imagining "woman" as a unified category to the necessary diversification of the field of feminist theory, brought about through the "efforts of black and lesbian feminist theorists, among others" who have successfully challenged the "scope, reach, and ontological narrowness of typical Western feminism's earlier preoccupations and subjects" (12-13).

Hemmings goes on to note that narratives of progress are often compatible with narratives of loss, as each structure "divide[s] the recent past into clear decades" in order to establish its trajectory by marking specific periods of feminism as resolutely distinct from one another (17). In Brown's description of the challenges facing her women's studies program in the 1990s, a narrative of loss is present in the passage's implicit move to distinguish field's embattled present from an earlier moment when women's studies "coherence" as an intellectual and political endeavor was more easily acknowledged (a moment when women's studies was possible, rather than impossible). This sense of loss inflects the tone of the parts of the passage that also create a narrative of progress, as Brown does not reject out of hand the "theoretical challenges" or diverse "domains of knowledge" now characteristic of the field of women's studies. Instead, the adjectives she

relies on in her descriptions of the field's ostensibly new heterogeneity mark divisions as "troubling," rather than necessary, benign, or good.

In explaining how this newly established academic field, in the 1990s, was up against "more" than the "dramatic fracturing of women's studies as a domain of inquiry" in the 1980s, Brown turns to "the fact that contemporary feminist scholarship is not a single conversation" but is instead a complex field consisting of "respective domains of knowledge…that are themselves infrequently engaged with each other" (20). What is interesting about this description is the way that it sets aside the question of negotiating the terms of these infrequent engagements between bodies of theory that are imagined, in this framing, to be naturally distinct from one another, even as they are simultaneously positioned as the inheritors of the unified field of inquiry so dramatically fractured just a decade before. The distinctions between these independent bodies of knowledge, seemingly only related by their engagement with the heterogenous field of women's studies, appear to be natural, rather than epistemological or political, despite the fact that Brown identifies some of the other divisions now presenting obstacles to women's studies scholars and administrators as quite pointedly political.

For instance, while Brown describes challenges to the stability of the category of gender as "theoretical" challenges, she describes the challenges "to a discourse of gender apart from race, class, and other markers of social identity" as "political" ones (20). Likewise, in her earlier description of the institutional division between women's studies and ethnic studies, she calls out the "political insidiousness" of their separation, thus presenting this specific distinction as politically motivated, rather than being theoretically or epistemologically necessary (Brown 20). This passage from Brown's essay draws

attention to the question of the interrelated epistemological and political reasons why distinct traditions of thought that find institutional space in women's studies departments often do proceed without significantly engaging one another. "Significant" engagement requires more than simply the toleration or instrumentalization of difference and also more than the assimilation of difference under terms like those Roderick Ferguson describes as "adaptive hegemony": the strategies through which the academy, among other institutions, has learned to see "minority difference, [culture, and knowledge] as positivities that could be part of [the institution's] own 'series of aims and objectives'" (6).

Ferguson argues that fields like ethnic studies and women's studies, which originated in mid-century social movement protests and student demonstrations, connote "a new form of biopower organized around the affirmation, recognition, and legitimacy of minoritized life" (14). As these fields negotiated their new positions embedded within "prevailing institutional structures," they carried forward in new forms both their initial "estrangement from" institutional power and their appeals to that power (Ferguson 16). In the case of women's studies, the new field also carried forward feminism's already longstanding internal negotiations of power and difference, which would now, as Spillers addresses, be reinscribed in these new institutional contexts. In addressing the need to clear the field of static, Spillers' essays from the 1980s identify this period of incorporation into the academy as a particularly important one in light of how the priorities chosen at this time would shape (but not determine) the future production of knowledge.

Given middle- and upper-class cisgender white women's disproportionate power and privilege within the women's movement, women's studies was well-positioned to mirror some of the adaptive strategies, in relation to the recognition and cultivation of minoritized difference, that were occurring across the academy as its way to manage and maintain authority over the reconfiguration of knowledge production forced by the insurgent social movements. In light of these factors, the newly institutionalizing discipline of women's studies largely defined itself around a very specific form of antiracism that allowed for the apparent reconfiguration of power relations within the field, but did so without substantially altering the discipline's hierarchizing epistemological tendencies nor the material relations that support them.

For example, in *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019), Jennifer Nash describes how Audre Lorde's writings, especially those delivered to largely white audiences of feminist scholars and women academics, were central to women's studies' primary conception of antiracist feminism in the 1980s. Focusing on the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), which was founded in 1977, and which Nash describes as the emerging discipline's "institutional home, its organizing force, and as a critical factor in feminism's institutional histories," Nash analyzes how the NWSA's early commitment to a "deeply particular" kind of antiracist feminism has shaped women's studies in the decades since the field's founding (84). Nash writes,

> In its early years, the NWSA imagined its primary labor to be cultivating an antiracist feminism, a project that required feminists to undertake a rigorous form of self-labor…a feminist *should* endeavor to, in Audre Lorde's words, 'reach

down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there'" (85).

Nash describes how "the NWSA's early conception of racism as a problem of the self that could be overcome through rigorous and demanding labor" was fundamental to how the NWSA organized its conferences and to the ideas the organization disseminated about what it meant to be a feminist scholar (87).[3]

While white feminists were called upon to remediate themselves, black women were "imagined to be the agents of remediation," assisting white women in the project of improving or perfecting their feminist selves (Nash 88). Via their very presence in women's studies spaces, black women both demonstrated the discipline's commitment to leaving behind its racist past and symbolized "the possibilities of a multiracial, egalitarian feminist future" (Nash 88). Considered near canonical in many women's studies spaces, Lorde's writings are often interpreted as staging this kind of intervention, calling upon students or scholars to look inwards, scrutinizing themselves and rooting out the prejudices deep within their psyches.[4] In contrast to the role Lorde's work has played in shaping the antiracism-as-labor-of-the-self form of feminism that Nash describes, in *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (2015), Grace Kyungwon Hong contextualizes Lorde's work from the 1980s as theorizing "the aftermath of [1960s] revolutionary struggles," including "the incorporation of previously radical politics and actors into the structures" of neoliberal power (5).

[3] Conceptualizing racism as a problem of the self that could be eradicated via difficult but necessary personal labor is also reflective of the larger turn towards individualizing social issues in the 1980s.
[4] As I discuss in Chapter 4, Nash argues that more recently the field of women's studies has called upon the concept of intersectionality, and the racially marked scholars imagined to be the embodied representatives of the analytic, to continue this dual labor of marking academic feminism's progress and symbolizing its commitment to an ever-more-inclusive future.

Hong describes Lorde's essay, "Learning from the '60s," as "relatively unheralded" in relation to the more well-known essays from *Sister Outsider* (1). "Learning from the '60s" was not presented in an explicitly women's studies space, as many of the other essays in *Sister Outsider*, including "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantled the Master's House," originally were. Instead, Lorde delivered "Learning from the '60s" at Harvard University's Malcolm X Weekend in 1982, and thus her writing in this case was not constrained by an explicit encounter with white feminists. In "Learning from the '60s," Lorde emphasizes the urgent importance of learning from the past, rather than forgetting the lessons of history. She writes,

> The raw energy of Black determination released in the 60s powered changes in Black awareness and self-concepts and expectations. This energy is still being felt in movements for change among women, other peoples of Color, gays, the handicapped – among all the disenfranchised peoples of this society. This is a legacy of the 60s to ourselves and to others. But we must recognize that many of our high expectations of rapid revolutionary change did not occur. And many of the gains that did are even now being dismantled. But we must face with clarity and insight the lessons to be learned from the oversimplification of any struggle for self-awareness and liberation, or we will not rally the force we need to face the multidimensional threats to our survival in the 80s. (138)

As Lorde goes on to detail, these multidimensional threats include the U.S. government's "intended slaughter" of people of color both "here and abroad"; its imperialist violence and support of "repressive governments across Central and South America, and in Haiti";

the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment as "subversive legislation"; the targeting of LGBTQ people by the New Right; cuts to public aid for the ill, the elderly, and the poor, including dramatic funding cuts for health care, food stamps, and housing (Lorde 139-140). Like Lorde in the 1980s, today we face a time of multidimensional existential urgency that has developed directly from the conditions she was then describing.

It is with this in mind that, in my title, I describe this dissertation's chapters as challenging the limits and repetitions of single-issue feminisms, rather than of white feminisms. White feminisms could also be an appropriate term, given that many feminist projects continue to fail to interrogate their own relationship to white supremacy or their exclusions of the perspectives and experiences of women of color, thus contributing to (rather than rupturing) the ongoing power of racialized and gendered systems of domination. However, at this point, the principle pattern of response to critiques of women's studies' still unexamined, or at least, unresolved racism is the deeply ingrained repetition of critique, guilt or apologia, and (potentially) reform, the origins of which, as Nash describes, stretch back to women's studies' disciplinary formation.[5]

Regardless of which term one takes up (single-issue feminism, white feminism, etc.) for analysis, precision and specificity are what is important. As Cathy Cohen argues in her important essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (1997), which addresses the limits of political agendas "where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals," we need "a

[5] Regarding guilt or apologia (defending one's position) as the response to criticisms pointing out racism or exclusion, Sara Ahmed has written a great deal about how the labor she describes as diversity work, the work of "trying to open institutions to make them more accessible to populations that have historically been excluded," is increasingly "framed as complaint…not only as being negative, but as an imposition of your will upon others…as restricting their freedom" (Killjoys).

politics where one's relation to power, not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades" (437-438). Likewise, it is important to avoid relying on homogenized conceptions of identity not only in determining one's "political comrades," but also one's political opponents (Cohen 438). In this dissertation, I define single-issue feminisms as feminisms that conceptualize feminist politics as consisting primarily of a response to various forms of sexism and/or specifically patriarchal violence. As I discuss in Chapter 4, in our contemporary moment, single-issue feminisms may mark themselves as intersectional while remaining "single-issue," despite the fact that their embrace of intersectionality would seem to signal attention to compounding forms of oppression, particularly racism, but also cissexism, ableism, or classism.

Recent and not-so-recent history show us how feminist politics can be mobilized to silo deeply interrelated material and ideological conditions while simultaneously preserving the appearance of progressive, often reform-focused activism.[6] To take up a popular example, discussions of the gender pay gap, or the gap between the amount that men and women earn "even when they have equivalent education, experience, and job skills," have generated a great deal of public attention in the U.S. in recent years (Stanberry 189). These discussions often occur within a framework that prioritizes binary sex/gender difference as a leading category of analysis, before going on to explain

[6] I'm appreciative of Eli Clare's work in *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (1999/2009*)* for expanding my ability to think beyond single-issue politics. Like Lorde (whom he cites as an intellectual model), Clare eloquently documents how certain hierarchies of value—particularly those that confirm the superiority of whiteness, middle-classness, and able-bodiedness, typically while also naturalizing the economic system of capitalism—remain unchallenged in spaces that are otherwise understood to be politically progressive.

additional layers of complexity. The National Women's Law Center, for example, reports that "women in the U.S. who work full time, year round are typically paid only 82 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts" (NWLC 1). The study then goes on to state that "Black women make only 62 cents for every dollar paid to their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts," Latinas only 54 cents, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women, 61 cents, and Native women, 57 cents (NWCL 1).

The fact that women, as a collective group, make approximately 82% of the median hourly wage that men do provides a headline that then gives way to the more complex analysis of how additional factors (such as race, region, age, sexuality, gender identity, or occupation) reveal further stratification of wage difference between and among different groups (Stanberry 189; Chapman and Benis 79). This more layered analysis also reveals "men" to be a heterogeneous rather than unified category, although the default "man" against whom women's pay inferiority is measured is a "white, non-Hispanic male" (NWCL 1). Framing this complex differential data primarily as a matter of gender inequality therefore relies on and reinforces a conception of sexism (meaning the oppression of women by men) as a shared experience and obstacle for women, with this shared experience then being complicated by additional intersecting factors.[7] If racism, for example, is understood to compound the still-universal-albeit-differentially-experienced effects of sexism, feminism can remain single-issue while also being "intersectional." Put another way, if other forms of discrimination or oppression are understood to be important insofar as they exacerbate the effects of sexism and make

[7] In the case of the NWLC's analysis, which focuses on women who are employed full-time and year-round, the broader context of their employment in relation to other forms of labor – part-time, not-year-round, unpaid, or as part of illegal economies, also doesn't factor into the picture.

individuals and communities vulnerable to unique forms and greater magnitudes of suffering, the coherence of sexism as a shared experience that unites women can continue on, fundamentally unaltered, even while admittedly not providing the "whole" story. And we need whole stories—as Lorde writes in "Learning from the '60s," there is "no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (138).

In theory, political organizing around an identity category as capacious as "woman" continues to promise the possibility of uniting a very broad base, even as decades, if not centuries, of experience contradict the likelihood of realizing this theoretical potential. The "53 percent of white female voters who cast their ballots for Trump" in the 2016 U.S. presidential election have plenty of historical precedent, notably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century white women's liberation and suffrage movements (Nash 133). Following the enfranchisement of black men after the U.S. civil war, "[W]hite women's expressions of resentment" led not to multiracial organizing with black women, but rather to white women's embrace of evolutionary discourses of white racial superiority that "measured the (lack of) 'social progress' of non-white races in terms of their (lack of) conformity to Anglo-American Protestant middle-class gender relations" (Newman 14). As historian Louise Michele Newman writes,

> One of the most profound ironies of this history…is that at the very moment that the white women's movement was engaged in a vigorous critique of patriarchal gender relations, it also called for the introduction of patriarchy into those cultures deemed "inferior" precisely because these cultures did not manifest these gender [and sexual] practices. White leaders' critique of the cult of domesticity—as too restrictive and oppressive when applied to themselves—went hand in hand with

> their defense of domesticity as necessary for the "advancement" of "primitive" women. [This] limited the critiques white women could offer of racism and sexism in their own culture because in the end they had to acknowledge that patriarchy had been key to their own racial advancement. (14)

Women's studies inherits this history and practice of self-interested disavowal. As opposed to the self-labor Nash describes as central to the antiracist feminism of the NWSA, in *Death by Disavowal,* Hong reads "Lorde's mobilization of a politics based on self-critique over one based on self-interest [as] an example of a politics of difference that radically rethinks self and community" (74). It is easy to see how different interpretations of Lorde's writings can be put to work for these divergent projects: the improvement or perfection of a feminist self through rigorous individual labor on the one hand, and the dialectical work of self-critique, in the context of both individual and community accountability, on the other.

For Hong, Lorde's theorization of difference illuminates how neoliberalism, which she defines "foremost as an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past," responds to "the post-World War II period [and its] movements for decolonization, desegregation, and self-determination, within and outside the territorial bounds of the United States" (7). Hong argues that Lorde's critical politics of difference is a crucial response to "new configurations of power that, in contingently extending protection and value to formerly categorically marginalized identities, 'are unevenly sutured to older categories of race, gender, and sexuality'" (6). In the opening paragraph of "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1980), Lorde addresses how the framework of

"simplistic opposition" characteristic of Western conceptualizations of order and value is necessary to a capitalist economic system that relies on shifting assignations of (or axes of) difference in order to produce the exploitable labor required to ensure ever-ongoing profitability. She writes:

> Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systemized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women. (114)

As Lorde, Spillers, and other black and women of color feminists in and before the 1980s emphasize repeatedly, so long as they leave their own relationship to patriarchal power unexamined, women's studies scholarship and feminist politics continually run the risk of reaffirming the validity of hierarchical binary structures like dominant/subordinate or male/female in their critiques of patriarchal power. Lorde describes how a narrow political focus on addressing inequalities ostensibly caused by hierarchical binary sex/gender difference functions as a "tool of social control" (122). She criticizes these forms of feminism for how they limit their own achievements to "the most superficial aspects of social change," writing that "[t]he old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges" (122-123).

Lorde's description of the "old patterns…cleverly rearranged to imitate progress" but nevertheless still condemning us "to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges" resonates with Spillers' urging the inchoate-but-rapidly-solidifying field of women's studies to "go beyond what was perceived as their historic mission in order to escape the frozen postures of closure that actually substitute for knowledge" (Lorde 123; Spillers x). Following Spillers' analysis of disciplines and knowledge traditions always being in the process of formation and recreation, the opportunity always exists to reorient one's work—but the structures inviting disavowal, appropriation, and repetitions of old exchanges cannot be ignored or presumed to remain static. With this in mind, each of the three remaining essays in this dissertation approaches the project of clearing the static from a different angle or with a different form of stasis, interference, or "noise" in mind.

The second chapter (following this introduction) takes up Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980), as an example of black feminist theoretical work that offers an alternative to single-issue models of understanding gendered and sexual violence. Written and set in the late 1970s and published in 1980, *The Salt Eaters* involves a large cast of characters struggling to understand their places in a transforming political landscape shaped by the traumas, disappointments, and unfinished work of the civil rights and black nationalist movements, as well as by longer histories of resistance and resilience. Drawing on Katherine McKittrick's work in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) and Bambara's own critical essays, especially her analysis of Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dust*, I argue that Bambara uses the bus journey that takes place in the novel's third chapter to embed an analysis of how specific black geographies contest—and refuse containment within—competing

geographies of domination in the mid-to-late twentieth century United States. Throughout the novel, Bambara employs a motif of concentric explosions and implosions in order to theorize connections between different forms of multi-scalar violence, for instance linking the effects of internalized racism on individual psychology to the global violences of U.S. imperialism and long histories of forced displacement and diaspora among different communities of color. Using Bambara's political analysis in her essays from this period, and Jodi Melamed's more recent theorization of the role literature and literary criticism play in legitimizing the "formally antiracist" ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism, I read *The Salt Eaters* as rejecting U.S. narratives of racial progress by focusing instead on how individual characters and communities strategically respond to changing conditions of oppression and opportunities for liberation.

While one method of "clearing the static" is to focus on theorizations of multi-scalar violence like Bambara's, which pointedly refuse to elide the connections between racism, misogyny, and U.S. imperialism, another way of addressing these issues is to explore how mainstream narratives work to obscure or forget the kind of connections that Bambara insists on making visible. As Spillers points out when she emphasizes how Anglo-American feminists often repeat the universalizing gestures characteristic of the patriarchal discourses they ostensibly oppose, white femininity and white feminism regularly function to secure, rather than challenge, the hierarchies of value that undergird projects of domination and dispossession. Therefore in my third chapter, I shift my focus to U.S. popular culture, and specifically to the figure of actress and activist Jane Fonda, in order to explore how two aspects of what Richard Dyer would term Fonda's "star image"—the figure of "Hanoi Jane" and the commercially successful Jane of *Jane*

Fonda's Workout—contribute to the reconstitution of U.S. national identity in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

While scholarship on *Jane Fonda's Workout* tends to see her earlier activism as irrelevant to the development of her fitness empire, in this chapter I argue that tracing the histories of "Hanoi Jane" and "Workout Jane" alongside one another reveals important continuities that make the two figures very relevant to one another, as well as emblematic of larger historical transformations taking place in the late 1970s and 1980s. To this point, I argue that *Jane Fonda's Workout* materials provide an important opportunity for a racialized and gendered rehabilitation of Fonda's image (as an individual), while they also served the broader cultural function of disciplining middle- and upper-class women (primarily but not only white, and primarily but not only heterosexual) during a decade that entertained both the idea that the U.S. had arrived in a post-feminist era, and powerful rhetoric focusing on the deterioration of the "traditional family" as a primary cause of national economic woes and political weakness. Because this discourse on traditional values operates through villainizing its own set of scapegoats—particularly the black, single, often teenage mother and the so-called welfare queen—the disciplinary function of *Jane Fonda's Workout* must be understood for how it contributes to the solidification of hierarchies of worthiness/unworthiness that operate in racialized and gendered ways.

My fourth and final chapter analyzes a scenario that takes place within an imagined introductory Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies classroom. I begin by presenting an interaction between a student and their professor in which the student asks the professor to account for the "ungendering" of black women as part of a staple

introductory course unit on the social construction of gender. The professor responds by introducing the concept of intersectionality, as if it is an equivalent, or at least adequate, way of taking up the historical and contemporary situation of black women that the student wants to see addressed. Building on Jennifer C. Nash's work in *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, I analyze the limitations that follow from how intersectionality is taken up both in this specific example, and more broadly within lower-level WGSS classrooms, where the concept functions as a (if not *the*) primary framework for analyzing issues of power and difference.

Returning to the initial use of the term "ungendering" in Hortense Spillers' essays from the 1980s, I analyze the epistemological problems that Spillers asked women's studies scholars to address during the period of this field's formalization as a discipline within the university. I focus specifically on Spillers' essay, "Interstices: A Smaller Drama of Words," and the 1982 Barnard Conference titled "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," where it was initially presented, as well as Spillers' later essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." I suggest that this contemporary interaction between the student and their professor echoes the dynamics of Spillers' earlier call for scholars to attend to the deep ties between feminist discourse and white patriarchal power. Rather than directly engaging the challenges Spillers levels at the foundations of women's studies as an intellectual project, the field has embraced intersectionality as the primary analytic used to represent the contributions of black feminist theory, to mark women's studies progression from its earlier exclusionary roots, and as the cornerstone of its pedagogical approach to teaching students how to think about power and difference. I consider how beginning with "ungendering" as a primary

analytic might usefully reorient women's studies' curricula and disrupt the persistence of simplistic analyses of patriarchal power. To do so, I draw on the fields of study where Spillers' work has been engaged substantively over the last three decades: that is, within the distinct and intermingled fields of black feminist theory, black queer studies, and black trans* studies.[8]

[8] See Ch. 4 for an explanation of the use of "trans*" rather than "trans."

CHAPTER II

Home One Minute, A Crater the Next: Fred Holt, Pruitt-Igoe and *The Salt Eaters'* Black Geographies

In the third chapter of Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters*, bus driver Fred Holt feels powerfully sick to his stomach. As he steers his passenger bus along its route toward Claybourne, Georgia—the fictional southern town where Bambara sets much of the novel—his stomach lurches and churns. His lunch, a lousy bowl of chili from a roadside pitstop, roils in his belly and threatens to boil up through his throat. His indigestion and discomfort are exacerbated by the day's extreme heat; the bus is nightmarishly hot, especially where Holt sits, stressed and perspiring in the driver's seat, just above the burning heat of the engine. Describing the scene through Holt's perspective, Bambara writes "it was too damn hot to think and it was overheating underfoot too, scorched metal fumes in his face…burning his eyes" (66). As Holt wipes perspiration from his forehead and tries to keep his mind off his twisting guts, the aggravating pressures of the drive build as well: his bus is running behind schedule and his passengers, a discordant group, are getting antsy and impatient, increasingly irritated by the heat, by one another, and by the shared, growing sense of delay. Weaving together Holt's nausea, the contained heat of the bus and its passengers, and the pressure of needing to arrive on time, Bambara creates an atmosphere that is simultaneously ordinary and explosive.

Fred Holt is not the main character of *The Salt Eaters*. If Bambara's novel, with its chorus of many richly detailed voices, can be said to have a principal protagonist, that

character is political activist and mother Velma Henry. Velma has just attempted suicide at the beginning of the novel and the quest, question, and possibility of her healing is the narrative's primary structuring element. Fred Holt does not know Velma, but Velma's sister, Palma, is on Holt's bus, with her fellow members of the women-of-color performance collective, The Seven Sisters. Palma travels towards Velma unaware that she has attempted suicide, but worrying about her sister after having woken up that morning from a bad dream about her. In one of the novel's many moments of layered and interspliced simultaneity, as the bus and its passengers travel towards Claybourne, Velma sits precariously on a stool in the town's community infirmary. She wears an ill-fitting hospital gown and seems nearly catatonic, with deep cuts in her wrists and her head still clouded from having placed it in an oven with the gas on. Like Fred Holt, sitting in his driver's seat, Velma's consciousness shifts between memories of the past and the present, as Velma decides (perhaps subconsciously) whether or not to open herself up to the gifted hands of Claybourne's healer, Minnie Ransom.

The setting of a bus journey allows Bambara to construct a scene in which a diverse group of people who otherwise would not likely be found in one another's company, coexist with one another in a shared, enclosed public space. Throughout the chapter, Holt's memories are juxtaposed to the conversation and thoughts of his passengers, especially the members of the Seven Sisters, the collective of women of color political performance artists who are headed toward a festival happening in Claybourne. While Holt feels himself to be on the outside of overt racial politics—he notes the tension between himself and his recently killed best friend, Porter, who was a self-identified "race man"—his memories and fantasies add deeper dimensions to the novel's

conception of blackness, revealing points of continuity as well as contrast with the political theorizing and direct actions of the Seven Sisters.

For instance, as members of the Seven Sisters discuss adding a skit about the history of railroad construction in the United States, and how they'd want any piece "to do with metals…done by the brothers," Holt reflects on his career in the transportation industry and also on rumors that unmarked cargo cars, like those rolling by on the train holding the bus up at a railroad crossing, are carrying nuclear waste. His memories of Porter, talking about working near the U.S. military's nuclear testing ground at Yucca Flats, connect those train cars both to histories of U.S. imperialism and warfare, and to the legacies of African and Asian labor that built the railroads in the first place.

When Holt must stop the bus at a railroad crossing to wait for a passing train, the complaining voices of the bus's passengers, who are annoyed by the delay, deepen his irritation and underscore Holt's sense of his own powerlessness, even as the driver ostensibly in control of his vehicle. The external heat of the day and of the bus's engine blends into and exacerbates Holt's internal discomforts: his frustration, growing near to rage, his grief at the recent loss of his friend, and the sickness in his stomach as it struggles to digest his lunch. Stuck at a standstill, knowing the bus is falling farther and farther behind schedule, Holt tries to distract himself from his stress and indigestion by eavesdropping on the conversations of his passengers, which often leads him to get lost in the long, associative threads of his own thoughts and memories. Describing Holt, Bambara writes,

> [Fred Holt] hung on to the talk around him lest he overheat too. He felt light and feverish, as though he might float away in delirium at any minute, leaving thirty-

> one passengers stranded. Which might not be a bad idea, he was thinking, his teeth bared in a grin or a sneer, he wasn't sure which. Too hot to care. *And* it had been one crummy lunch. *And* he was late. *And* he couldn't afford to blow the extra job, the chartered bus of doctors visiting the Infirmary. *And* the train was taking its own sweet, mile-long time. (66, my emphasis)

Through *The Salt Eaters'* omniscient narratorial presence which, at this moment, floats close to Holt's consciousness and relays his thoughts to the reader, Bambara characterizes Holt as man caught between attachment and detachment, uncertain whether his expression is "a grin or a sneer" (66). In this passage, Bambara describes Holt as "too hot to care" and nearly ready to welcome delirium, but also anchored by the very stresses that drive him into a fever, the stresses introduced through Bambara's building repetition of "Ands" (66).

In addition to resituating her characters in time, Bambara is careful to weave a detailed map of the recent past and the historical present into *The Salt Eaters*. During the bus journey, Bambara peppers the conversation of different groups of passengers with references to political actions, illnesses, and coups. Written and set in the late 1970s and published in 1980, *The Salt Eaters* involves a large cast of characters struggling to understand their places in a transforming political landscape shaped by the traumas, disappointments, and unfinished work of the civil rights and black nationalist movements, as well as by longer histories of resistance and resilience. With this in mind, the bus's delay functions both literally and symbolically. The passengers and the driver worry about the individual consequences of a literal late arrival, while, on a symbolic

level, the situation of being collectively delayed invokes larger questions about progress and momentum in the historical moment of the novel's present.

In this essay, I read the bus journey section of *The Salt Eaters* through the lens of black geographies, the field of study where black studies' "situated volatility" meets, inhabits, flees from, and exceeds the discipline of geography, with its attention to space, place, location, and scale (Moten 1743). In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick explains how geographical frameworks and processes of racialization and subjectification are co-constitutive. Drawing on McKittrick's work, and Bambara's own theorizing of the relationship between black geographies and narrative conventions,[9] I show how Bambara uses the bus journey that takes place in the third chapter of *The Salt Eaters* to embed an analysis of how specific black geographies contest and exceed competing geographies of domination in the twentieth century United States.

In this chapter and throughout the novel, Bambara employs a motif of explosions and implosions as a way of connecting different kinds of multi-scalar violence, from the effects of internalized racism on individual psychological and physical health to the historical and contemporary global violences of U.S. militarism and imperialism. As McKittrick writes, "if practices of subjugation are also spatial acts, then the ways in which black women think, write, and negotiate their surroundings are intermingled with place-based critiques, or respatializations" (xix). Bambara's black geographies explore the complex interpenetration of bodies, psyches, and built space. Throughout *The Salt Eaters,* Bambara refuses to naturalize the built landscape and likewise refuses to accept

[9] Particularly in her essay "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement."

the assignations of value that link the apparent success or ruin of a place—be it a neighborhood, a public housing project, or the imagined space of a nation—to the deserving or undeserving character of its inhabitants. I focus primarily on how Bambara uses the character of Fred Holt to invoke the history of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing projects, and particularly the televised demolition by implosion of several of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings in 1972. Bambara weaves this history into her novel as one thread in a larger exploration of the persistence of black social life in the face of repeated destruction and forced diaspora, and as a way of theorizing how attachments to the past that are composed primarily of guilt, shame, and grief, can inhibit individual and collective growth towards a future that realizes healing, integrity, and wholeness.

In her essays, Bambara is explicit in her rejection of the terms of post-racial discourse (meaning the idea that race and racism have become insignificant in the aftermath of legal changes related to civil rights) and also in her rejection of the minoritized status ascribed to non-white people under the ostensibly antiracist rubric of multiculturalism. As she writes in "Language and the Writer," for instance,

> [t]he normalization of the term 'minority,'—for people who are not white, male, bourgeois, and Christian—is a treacherous one. The term, which has an operational role in a whole politics of silence, invisibility, and amnesia, comes from the legal arena. It says that a minority or a minor may not give testimony in court without an advocate, without a go-between, without a mediating something or other, without a professional mouthpiece, without someone monitoring the speaking and the tongue—which is one of the many reasons I do not use the term 'minority' for anybody, most especially not myself. (143)

The bus scene in *The Salt Eaters* is one of the places in the novel where Bambara most clearly uses formal techniques, including metaphor, memory, and the motif of layered, concentric explosions and implosions, to enact a political grammar of contingency that refuses the teleology of racial progress central to the increasingly "color blind" post-civil rights landscape of the United States in the late 1970s.

Demonic Grounds and Black Geographies

Katherine McKittrick's work in her book, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), can help us understand how *The Salt Eaters* participates in the project of black geographies. In the United States, McKittrick writes, we are familiar with geography as a "well-known history…of white masculine European mappings, explorations, [and] conquests" that enact "rational spatial colonization and domination: the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands" (x). These processes of erasure and objectification are not always thought of as geographic because traditional geography[10] proposes itself as a mapping of what *already is*, rather than as a series of social and material processes that produce space and its attendant meanings. Thus, "boundaries, color-lines, 'proper places,' fixed and settled infrastructures and streets" can appear to be "secure and unwavering," the effects or markers of "seemingly predetermined stabilities," rather than what they really are: the ongoing outcomes of complex material and ideological negotiations and struggles (McKittrick xi).

[10] Following McKittrick, I employ the term "traditional geography" for "formulations [of geography] that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point" (xiii).

Here we can think of the myth of the empty North American continent, waiting for the arrival of European settlers capable of taming the wilderness and civilizing its "savage" inhabitants. This mythos is, among other things, a geographic story, a story that claims a stable, unitary, and objective relationship to land and space, enacted through exploration, conquest, and ownership. To secure its naturalized status, this geographic story must disappear and disavow alternate, preexisting geographies, like those of sovereign indigenous nations and their already established (though neither fixed nor unitary) relationships to land, territory, and the human and non-human life existing in these spaces. Far from being a neutral intellectual technology, traditional geography, McKittrick argues, is itself a weapon in these projects of domination. It can assert itself as stable and universal only to the extent that it disappears or disavows opposing geographic knowledges and the subjects whose competing understandings of space and place resist its claims to transparency and universality. McKittrick writes,

> If prevailing geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually, and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing 'difference.' That is, '*plac[ing]* the world within an ideological order,' unevenly. Practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong. This is, for the most part, accomplished through economic, ideological, social, and political processes that see and position the racial-sexual body within what seem like predetermined, or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical. This naturalization of 'difference' is, in part, bolstered by the ideological weight of transparent space,

> the idea that space 'just is,' and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true. (xv)

What McKittrick describes as the "ideological weight of transparent space" is actually the achieved appearance of transparency, accomplished through the naturalization of "both identity and place," or of identity-in-place, such that who belongs where and who is out of place becomes commonsensical, "readily knowable" upon sight.

McKittrick points out that while the labor, placement, and displacement of black people has been and continues to be integral to the production of space—to the construction of infrastructure, the amassing of wealth—this has relied on keeping black people *in place*, rendering them as objects, denying their role in the production of space and in the production of *knowledge* about space. Traditional geography maintains the transparency of space in part through denying any relationship between blackness and geography wherein blackness exercises agency, a version of what Hortense Spillers describes as "the proximity denied between ideas and black life" that "has to do with the shadow that falls over the Word as it approaches some supposed dread subject/object, imagined to inhabit a territory of power and danger" (xiii). This "proximity denied" is still proximity, however, and in bringing together the fields of black studies and human geography, McKittrick turns to literary and cultural productions created by black women as a way of foregrounding the creativity and longevity of black geographies that have always existed even where they have been supposed to be impossible. She writes, "[t]he relationship between black populations and geography—and here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations—allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black

histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic" (x).

McKittrick begins by demonstrating how the academic discipline of geography participates in the construction of the category "human" that black studies, as a field, critiques. Black studies shows how "human" in fact contains a hierarchical set of relationships of domination, between Man and non-human subjects, all of whom add up to the category human. What McKittrick draws attention to in bringing together black studies and human geography is how these processes of human categorization have been and continue to be spatialized. In the United States, status quo geographic arrangements rest on at least two crucial geographic paradigms: indigenous dispossession and extermination, and human captivity and enslavement. Each of these projects depends not only on physical domination, but also on ideological subordination and objectification. McKittrick writes, "[t]raditional geographies, did, and arguably still do, *require* black placelessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays 'in place'" (9). An important part of McKittrick's argument is establishing the interrelation of space and subjectivity, demonstrating how geographic meanings shape subjects and subjects likewise shape and negotiate competing understandings of space and place. McKittrick writes, "[g]eography's discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space 'just is,' and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which 'just is' not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are" (xi). In other words, as long as spaces and places are understood as coming into and going out of particular forms of existence *naturally*, then transformations of space

and place appear to unfold in a neutral plane, unrelated to the complex human (and non-human) intimacies and relations occurring, in, through, and alongside them.

Traditional geography is then understood to be the discipline of objectively mapping these already existing landscapes and configurations of space. Building on the work of Marxist and feminist social geographers like Doreen Massey, McKittrick argues that such an understanding of geography not only reifies an understanding of space and place as fixed and stable, but furthermore also naturalizes the forms of relation and subjectivity occurring within those spaces, upholding—through repeated instantiation—hierarchical oppositions like white/black or civilized/savage, as well as inside/outside or margin/center. Black geographies rupture the "just is" of geographies of domination in myriad ways through their positive insistence on the existence of heterogenous black subjects whose experiences and partial perspectives reveal "the social production of space," showing "[c]oncealment, marginalization, [and] boundaries" to be "social processes" rather than a priori features of a stable landscape (McKittrick xii).

Though without using the term "black geographies," in her writings from the 1980s and 1990s Bambara frequently theorizes how black conceptions of home, self, family, and community contribute to alternative understandings and valuations of spaces and places across a range of geographic scales. From autobiographical reminiscences about Speakers' corner and other key locations in Harlem (where Bambara lived as a child), to reflections on the aesthetics of space in Black Independent Cinema, Bambara frequently writes about the imbrication of geography, subjectivity, and social relations. For instance, in her essay, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," Bambara writes, "[o]ccupying the

same geographical terrain are both the ghetto, where we are penned up in concentration camp horror, and the community, wherein we enact daily rituals of group validation in a liberated zone—a global condition throughout the African diaspora" (95). Here Bambara theorizes the social production of space that McKittrick elaborates on in *Demonic Grounds*, showing how the "penned up concentration camp horror" of the ghetto does not foreclose occupation of the same space as "liberated zone" that is produced through "daily rituals of group validation" (95). Bambara's production of space as a process of ordinary social rituals performed in the context of community makes visible specific forms of black geographic knowledge that, as McKittrick argues, traditional geographies (geographies of domination) work to disappear.

To set up our reading of *The Salt Eaters*, it is useful to consider how Bambara writes about the formal and material construction of space in film, particularly in Julie Dash's feature-length film, *Daughters of the Dust*. *Daughters of the Dust* was released in 1991 and Bambara's essay about the film, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye," was composed after its release and first published in the anthology *Black American Cinema* in 1993, more than a decade after the publication of *The Salt Eaters* in 1980.[11] However, Bambara's observations about the aesthetic and political principles characteristic of what she calls Black Independent Cinema, which Bambara sees as exemplified in *Daughters of the Dust*, provide valuable insights for understanding the vision and construction of Bambara's novel. (This is especially true given the oft-noted "difficulty" of Bambara's text, which I will discuss at greater length later in this chapter).

[11] Diawara, Manthia. *Black American Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print. AFI Film Readers.

Part of Bambara's purpose in "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye," is to articulate the aesthetic and political commitments of black filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s in a way that makes their vision distinct from the values of mainstream, Hollywood cinema *and* also distinct from films that ostensibly critique mainstream values but that, nevertheless, model themselves after these values. In "conventional cinema," Bambara writes, "symbol, style, and thematics are subordinated to narrative drive" and "an ideological imperative overrides it all: to construct, reinforce, and 'normalize' the domination discourse of status quo that posits people of color as less than ('minority,' as they say)" (*Deep Sightings* 116). Black independent cinema, rather than protesting what Bambara calls "domination discourse" on its own terms, is grounded by its own independent values, prioritizing "accountability to the community" rather than success in "an industry that maligns and exploits, trivializes and invisiblizes Black people," and the goal of "reconstruct[ing] cultural memory," rather than "slavishly imitate[ing] white models" (92).[12]

Though she writes about many films in her essay, Bambara focuses the majority of her analysis on Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Unlike *The Salt Eaters*, which takes the recent past (the late 1970s) as its starting present, *Daughters of the Dust* takes place in 1902. The film's setting is Ibo Landing on the Carolina Sea Islands, a place used as a "port of entry for European slaving ships…where captured Africans were 'seasoned' for servitude" (*Deep Sightings* 94). The film documents a momentous family occasion, a

[12] Bambara's discussion of film in "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye," recalls James Baldwin's critique of the protest novel in his well-known 1949 essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel." In his analysis of protest literature, and specifically Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*, Baldwin shows how such works can play a role in reifying and securing, rather than dismantling, the white supremacist status quo. This is a point I will return to in the next section.

gathering of the Peazant family, descendants of the enslaved Africans brought to the islands centuries earlier. Like many black people in the U.S. south at this moment in history—a few decades removed from the end of the Civil War—the members of the family's younger generations are preparing to move north, leaving behind their rural landscape to seek new opportunities.

Nana, the family's eldest member—a mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and soon-to-be the great great grandmother of Eula Peazant's unborn child—worries her descendants will sever their connections to place (to the soil and to the sea) and to their African ancestors, and in so doing, Nana fears they may lose the knowledge they need to survive. As Bambara writes, "[u]nknown hazards await the Peazants up north. The years ahead will require political, economic, social, and cultural lucidity" and the ancestral spirits whose knowledge Nana guards, a knowledge "from an older and more comprehensive belief system than the meanings produced by European traditions of rationalism and empiricism, may prove their salvation" (*Deep Sightings* 98). Some of the younger Peazant women (born Peazants or having married into the family), however, view Nana's rituals not as valuable ancestral practices, but as unholy witchcraft, or "hoodoo," the relics of an uncivilized past.

It is important that the conflict in the film is not an either/or between the choice of leaving or remaining, or between maintaining the "old ways" or sacrificing them to achieve assimilation. Instead, the film explores the challenges of maintaining ancestral connections and lucid self-knowledge (which the film understands to be crucially linked, both individually and communally) through violent historical transformations, changes, and diaspora. This theme of the importance of spirituality and ancestral rituals and

traditions to present-day self-determination, individual and collective well-being, and survival, is also central to *The Salt Eaters*. Bambara writes about the process of composing *The Salt Eaters* that "the novel…came out of a problem-solving impulse" (*Conversations*, 52). In the aftermath of what she describes as the "stunning and highly complicated period from 1954-1972," Bambara explains that she "was struck by the fact that our activists or warriors and our adepts or medicine people don't even talk to each other," their "two camps" having "yet to learn…to appreciate each other's visions, each other's potential, each other's language" (*Conversations* 51). *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara writes, is in part a response to the question of what it would take "to bridge the gap, to merge those frames of reference, to fuse those camps?" (*Conversations* 51-52). For instance, Velma Henry, the cultural worker whose suicide attempt precedes the opening pages of the novel, has been a stalwart participant in community organizing for decades, an "activist" and a "warrior." Her well-being and will to survive, however, will depend on healing the psychic and somatic wounds she has sustained—the healer, Minnie Ransom, wonders if she can help Velma, because Velma (like others of her generation) seems to have lost touch with the spiritual powers and perspective that would allow her to be whole.

Parallels can be seen between Minnie Ransom and her mentor, Old Wife (who communicates with Ransom on the spiritual plane, being no longer living), and Nana in *Daughters of the Dust*, and between Velma Henry and the novel's other characters who are struggling to re-center themselves after the turbulence of the 1960s and amidst the continued and evolving threats of the late 1970s. In addition to analyzing the film's setting and dialogue, its multi-perspectival diegesis and its processes of characterization,

Bambara also writes explicitly about how *Daughters of the Dust* depicts space, and subjects in space, and how specific compositional and material choices—camera angle, framing, frame rates, film resolution etc.—contribute to the film's meaning. Describing how the film's visual presentation relates to its ethics of relationality, or how characters relate to one another, Bambara writes,

> Throughout *DD*, no one is background scenery for foregrounded egos. The camera work stresses the communal. Space is shared, and the space (capaciousness) is gorgeous. In conventional cinema, camera work stresses hierarchy. Space is dominated by the hero, and shifts in the picture plane are most often occasioned by a blur, directing the spectator's eye, controlling what we may and may not see, a practice that reinscribes the relationships of domination ideology. (120)

Rather than controlling the viewer's eyes in order to establish hierarchical relationships of importance between a protagonist and less valuable supporting characters, Bambara reads the camera work in *Daughters of the Dust* as emphasizing a communal ethos. Specific formal and material choices on the part of the filmmaking team enable this result. For instance, though Bambara "recall[s] hearing that [the film] was shot in 35mm" (the standard film format for motion pictures), she disputes this on the basis of the film's feel (and her expertise as a filmmaker in her own right), writing that the film,

> [f]eels in scope like 70mm or higher, encouraging the spectator's belief in limitless peripheral vision, for indeed a world is being presented…The spaciousness in *DD* is closer to African cinema than European and Euro-American cinema. People's circumstances are the focus in African cinema, rather

> than individual psychology. The emphasis placed on individual psychology in dominating cinema deflects our attention away from circumstance. Social inequities, systemic injustices, doctrines and policies of supremacy, are reduced to personal antagonisms. Conflict, then, can be resolved by a shrink, a lawyer, a cop, or a bullet. Not, for example, by revolution. (123)

Here Bambara writes again about the social, epistemological (and maybe also ontological) consequences of how films direct their spectators' vision. The reinscription of "domination ideology" Bambara cites as characteristic of European and Euro-American cinema is enacted through a tight visual focus on "individual psychology" that reduces large-scale injustices down to interpersonal (or perhaps even intrapersonal) drama that can be resolved by actions as similarly limited in their scope as the presumed cause of the conflict or distress.

For Bambara, who, in response to the question "What do you view as the function of the artist?," replied that, "[a]s a cultural worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible," it is no surprise that the principles of spaciousness she observes in a film like *Daughters of the Dust* are also present in her writings, though necessarily handled differently in the medium of fiction (Bambara and Bonetti 35). Throughout "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye," Bambara frequently draws connections between black independent films and black women's writings from the same time period, comparing the work of Dash and other filmmakers to novels by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Paule Marshall, among others. Bringing Bambara's writing about *Daughters of the Dust* to bear on *The Salt Eaters* can help us makes sense

of the novel's own conceptualization of the social production of space, its own specific and multifaceted black geographies.

"Difficulty" in *The Salt Eaters* and Fred Holt's *Black Geographies*

Before discussing McKittrick's work and *The Salt Eaters* together, it is useful to take a moment to describe some features of the novel as a whole, especially the aspects of the text that are often acknowledged for making it a "difficult" book to read. The challenge of trying to describe how the bus journey section of *The Salt Eaters* relates to the larger novel emerges in part from the book's formal complexity, for instance its layering of simultaneous linear and non-linear temporalities and its narrative polyvocality. These features, among others, contribute to the novel's reputation as a "difficult" literary text. In "A Prescription for Wholeness: Resisting the Discourse of Difficulty to Embrace the Challenge of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," Ashley David addresses this issue head on. David notes that although *The Salt Eaters* "has been widely praised since its initial publication in 1980," the novel has also "been saddled with…a *discourse of difficulty*" (57). She writes,

> A complex narrative structure that defies expected plot conventions; a set of allusion and metaphor sources that ranges the gamut from culture to history to politics to spirituality to gender to race…; an approach to character that does not completely privilege a single character over others, even while it incorporates the trajectory of a 'main' character, Velma…; and an act of compression and expansion that explodes linear notions of time by simultaneously creating…the passage of two hours and the existence of past-present-future-never-always, have

> all relegated the novel to a limbo-land of discourse that constructs texts as 'inaccessible,' 'difficult,' and 'too tough to teach.' (57)

David rightly points out how the challenges that mark the *The Salt Eaters* as a hard book to understand are the cumulative result of a number of factors, including but not limited to the text's formal features. She also notes that difficulty is not always considered a reason *not to teach* a text, as many modernist and postmodernist masterpieces (T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* comes to mind as a prime example of this) are lauded for the formal complexities that make them heuristically difficult.

So, while David's point here, about how discourses of difficulty operate in heterogenous ways (for instance, sometimes adding to, rather than detracting from, the value ascribed to a text), is framed in terms of literary form, she also draws attention to the deeper social, intellectual, and epistemological processes which result in certain texts being labeled "difficult" and, subsequently, create varied meanings, values, and responses to these ascriptions of difficulty. As her reference to a *discourse* of difficulty implies, David is far from alone in emphasizing the challenges *The Salt Eaters* presents to its readers. As Courtney Thorsson writes, also addressing the *The Salt Eaters*' reputation as a difficult literary text,

> [m]ore than being a difficult read, the novel is, as both [Carter] Mathes and [Cheryl] Wall suggest, difficult work. It demands not just comprehension but also alteration from its reader, who must expand her inner nation to include "a wide variety of spiritual beliefs and practices" in its topography. (60)[13]

[13] See Mathes, Carter. "Sonic Futurity in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters," Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights.* U of Minnesota P, 2010. 133-157. And Wall, Cheryl. "Toni's Obligato: Bambara and the African American Literary Tradition." *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*. Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall, eds. Temple UP, 2008. 27-42.

Like Thorsson, David argues that the book demands "more than code-cracking" on the part of its readers" (David 57). It requires, as David writes, "a complete overhaul of our conceptual frames," or as Thorsson puts it, an expansion of the reader's "inner nation" and intellectual topography (57). Thus, while it easy to mark the difficulty of Bambara's text in formal terms (as David initially does, describing the novel's "complex narrative structure," its refusal to "completely privilege" one character over others, and its wide-ranging sources of "allusion" and "metaphor"), these formal markers are related to, but do not fully represent, the deep epistemological and ontological challenges present in the text. In other words, the novel is not difficult simply because of its complicated temporality or its varied and sometimes esoteric references, though these formal features of the text are representational strategies related to the conceptual challenges that make the text what Thorsson and others describe as "difficult work."

Here we can return to Bambara's essay on *Daughters of the Dust,* where Bambara highlights some of these same types of formal complexity as belonging to the narrative conventions of another epistemology and cultural tradition. For instance, Bambara writes that while the film "adheres to the unities of time, place, and action," with the Peazant family's reunion taking "place in one day in one locale scripted on an arrival-departure grid," the narrative "is not 'classical' in the Western-specific sense. It is classic in the African sense. There are digressions and meanderings—as we may be familiar with from African, Persian, Indian, and other cinemas that employ features of the oral tradition (99). Similar observations hold true for *The Salt Eaters*, which, on one level does contain a unified linear narrative, the arc of which is Velma's healing. However, this narrative trajectory that takes place, as David notes, over "the passage of two hours" also contains,

by “an act of compression and expansion that explodes linear notions of time…the existence of past-present-future-never-always” (57). This layering of “past-present-future-never-always” (David 57) in *The Salt Eaters* is often accomplished through “digressions and meanderings” (*Deep Sightings* 99), as Bambara crafts a multi-perspectival narrative in which characters’ conversations, as well as their thoughts, memories, and fantasies, allow for contingency and alteration to exist within (and in excess of) the progression of Velma’s healing.

This meta-discourse among literary critics about the challenges of interpreting and/or teaching *The Salt Eaters* illustrates how the difficulty of a literary text is not a given, but rather is the outcome of the processes which occur when a cultural object intersects with and interacts with different audiences. While this observation is at least superficially straightforward, in the case of Bambara’s novel and other texts by black women, assignations of “difficulty” and of value are, first of all, influenced by the politics of recognition and visibility that shape the production and reception of black women’s writings and cultural productions, and, subsequently, related to the larger knowledge-power formations that influence both which writers and works are taught in college classes and which authors and texts are canonized and/or taken as representative of “African American women’s writing.”

Writing about *Daughters of the Dust*, Bambara describes how the amount of “work” a viewer has to do to understand the film—another way of naming the “difficulty” of a text—relates to the viewers’ training and expectations. “*DD* demands some work on the part of the spectator whose ear and eye have been conditioned by habits of viewing industry fare that masks history and addicts us to voyeurism, fetishism,

mystified notions of social relations and freakish notions of intimate relations" Bambara writes (116). In contrast to these cinematic conventions,

> There is no evidence in *DD* of trying to position a range of spectators, as many filmmakers find it expedient to do… *DD* asks that the spectator honor multiple perspectives rather than depend on the 'official' story offered by a hero; it asks too that we note what particular compositions and framing mean in terms of human values. The reward is an empowered eye. (116)

Likewise, *The Salt Eaters* asks its readers to honor multiple perspectives rather than depend on an official story, the work of interpreting the novel, as Bambara describes in relation to *Daughters of the Dust*, is also a matter of unlearning, rejecting, or setting aside certain forms of prior training on the part of the reader.

As Hortense Spillers writes in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, "traditions are not born. They are made…they are not, like objects of nature, here to stay, but survive as *created social events* only to the extent that an audience cares to intersect with them" (250). Writing in the mid-1980s, a few years after the publication of *The Salt Eaters*, Spillers describes witnessing "the formation of relatively new social and political arrangements," as the "American academy, despite itself," becomes "one of the enabling postulates for black women's literary community simply because it is not only a source of income for certain individual writers, but also a point of dissemination and inquiry for their work" (249). One of the "fruitful contradictions" articulated by these "relatively new" social and political arrangements is that a community of black women writers are now able to create knowledge about themselves through and from within the academy, rather than simply being taken as objects of study by a university system that

formally excludes them from agential knowledge production. This situation is contradictory in part because one of the purposes of universities within Western modernity has been to produce knowledge about race that upholds and justifies hegemonic white superiority — thus for black women to produce their own knowledge from within these strongholds is not only subversive, but in some ways foundationally illogical (as the University is premised or founded on the impossibility of such knowledge or such agency—black women's epistemological agency—existing).

The post-WWII social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by global liberation movements and uprisings against colonial powers, ruptured the credibility of outright, Jim Crow white supremacy as the unifying racial discourse of the United States, a discourse that justified "the political, economic, and ideological structures of colonial capitalist modernity" (Melamed x). As black studies programs, women's studies programs, and other ethnic and/or marginalized-group based programs began to establish institutional homes in U.S. universities, making the outright exclusion of these knowledges from the academy impossible, a new racial discourse emerged to manage the crisis. In her book, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (2011), Jodi Melamed identifies this discourse as "racial liberalism" and argues that this new "world-historical formation" was unified by "the fact that race was identified as the central problem—the crux of everything wrong and unequal in governance, economy, and society," thus calling for the intensive study of "the Negro problem" and assuring that resolutions to this problem would also be framed in and expressed through "the register of race" (x). Melamed describes how certain kinds of African American literary and cultural production have operated as stabilizing, rather

than resistive or disruptive, forces in relation to transforming American conceptions of race. Building on James Baldwin's critique of protest literature in "Everybody's Protest Novel," Melamed offers a large-scale materialist analysis of how, over the second half of the twentieth century, certain African American literary texts and the larger, interpretive context of the discipline of literary studies, have helped to secure hegemonic racial formations that recode the terms of white dominance into a palatable, liberal multiculturalism that allows for the continued expansion of capitalism.

Following Baldwin, Melamed identifies the protest novel as a "thoroughly normative" form of literary production, "in the sense that it generated precisely the knowledges about race that conventional epistemological and political forms of postwar American modernity required" (xiii). In contrast to the protest novel, Melamed also constructs a partial genealogy of what she terms "race-radical" literature, identified as literature that persistently opposes (and ruptures) formal, often state-sanctioned liberal multicultural antiracisms. Put another way, for Melamed, protest literature presents a form of racial discourse that secures the (unjust) racial status quo by *confirming* what is known about race. This relates to one of the central claims that McKittrick articulates in *Demonic Grounds*: the idea that there is a relationship between the ostensible transparency of space and the ostensible knowability of blackness, and specifically of black femininity.[14] In other words, texts by black women are supposed to confirm an *already-known* understanding of race, and when they refuse to do this, they become not only indecipherable to traditional interpretative paradigms, but furthermore (and again within these frameworks), not worth interpreting—empty of interpretative value.

[14] Thanks to Carmel Ohman for conversations about *Demonic Grounds* with me.

Bambara identifies and repudiates the racial discourse of "the Negro problem," specifically as it pertains to black women, in her preface to 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*. In the preface, Bambara (the anthology's editor and author of several of its pieces) writes of the need for black women to "find out what liberation for ourselves means, what work it entails, what benefits in will yield" (1). Bambara writes that black women seeking their liberation "from the exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society…the constrictive norms of 'mainstream' culture, [and] from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation)" naturally search for "data to define the term ['liberation'] in respect to ourselves," only to realize "all to quickly the lack of relevant material" (*Anthology* 1). She then lists the types of knowledge about black women that are readily available, describing the irrelevant (to the question of liberation) and usually harmful material produced by experts who have either ignored the existence of black women completely or have relied on racist depictions of them (1). Her list includes "psychiatrists," "commercial psychologists, market researchers, applied psychologists," "biologists," "biochemists," historians, and the authors of literature (1-4). Her preface historicizes black women as objects of study for "experts" parenthetically qualified as "(white, male)" and ("white, black, male") and the "new field of experts (white, female)" and rejects the knowledge produced by these groups in favor of the knowledge produced by black women for and about themselves (1-4).

As David, Thorsson, and others note, one of the things that makes *The Salt Eaters* difficult to interpret—particularly for readers working within primarily Western, dualistic

intellectual frameworks— is that it does not hold to or clearly mark distinctions between physical, imaginative, and spiritual planes of existence. Inside/outside, interiority/exteriority, living/dead, future/past, material/spiritual—all of these dualities and others exist in *The Salt Eaters* not as opposing and starkly divided binaries, but along a continuum of existence that the novel's characters (as well as its readers) navigate in diverse ways and with varying degrees of (dis)comfort. In her own writings, including her essay on *Daughters of the Dust* and Black Independent Cinema that I discussed earlier, Bambara is careful to situate her work in relation to African diasporic cultures and communities, and also to third world and women of color artists and writers. She articulates her aesthetic-political values not in opposition to European intellectual frameworks, but in the context of and in continuity with knowledge traditions that pre-exist Western modernity. Sheila Smith McKoy, a scholar of African and African diasporic cultures, explains how Bambara's utilization of "notions of space and being," and particularly of time and temporality, have their origins in Ifa, Dogon, Bambara, and other concepts of African epistemology" (112).[15] Focusing on the novel's layered and complex temporality, Smith McKoy writes, in "The Future Perfect: Reframing Ancient Spirituality in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," that Bambara's intention in *The Salt Eaters* "is to resituate both her characters and her readers in time," in such a way as to reject "the Western appropriation of blackness as a racial category by embracing a political and social consciousness of cultural wholeness" (112). Smith McKoy describes how this understanding of cultural wholeness is made available through "reclaim[ing] a

[15] See "How She Came By Her Name," Bambara's interview with Louis Massiah, in which she explains the stages through which she came to inhabit the full name "Toni Cade Bambara." Collected in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, pp. 201-245.

temporal identity that is separate and distinct from the hallucinations of Western racial pathology" (113).

An implication of Smith McKoy's argument, borne out in Bambara's own writings about *The Salt Eaters,* as well as in the novel itself, is the idea that if one is in the grip of "the hallucinations of Western racial pathology," it will be difficult to apprehend, let alone attain, cultural wholeness (113).[16] A further implication of Smith McKoy's argument, then, may be that Bambara's formal choices in her novel (in this specific case, the novel's complex temporality as it relates to the book's treatment of identity) are difficult to interpret because they occur within a text whose orientation towards questions of identity and difference do not align with dominant understandings of racial identity (nor with the correlative conventions of "racial" literature) both in the moment of and in the decades following its 1980 publication. What is important here, for our purposes, is to reframe the relationship between *The Salt Eaters*' formal features and its epistemological and ontological challenges so that we can pose a question about the intersection of heuristic difficulty with dominant conceptualizations—or what Smith McKoy and Bambara describe as pathologizations of—race.

Smith McKoy writes that it is Bambara's "call to reconceptualize American concepts of 'race,' 'personal space,' and time that makes the novel difficult to grasp on a first reading" (116). Her focus on concepts of "race" and "personal space," as well as time and temporality, helps us connect Smith McKoy's work with McKittrick's analysis of black geographies in *Demonic Grounds.* While Smith McKoy's argument and its focus

[16] Though David does not directly address Western racial pathologies, she agrees with Smith McKoy that a "prescription for wholeness" is at the center of the novel's transformative potential, further stating that the discourse of difficulty which surrounds the text is related to a misunderstanding of what Bambara means by wholeness (David 58).

on temporality contextualizes *The Salt Eaters* within African diasporic traditions of folklore and epistemology, McKittrick's work in *Demonic Grounds* is useful for understanding the novel's construction of twentieth century U.S. spaces, places, and geographies. McKittrick's work analyzes contemporary black geographies through frameworks grounded in, or at least reaching towards, pre-Western contact epistemologies and practices. Her emphasis on overlapping geographies of domination and terrains of struggle can be useful for readers who are still working through what Smith McKoy describes as the "hallucinations of Western racial pathology." In the case of *The Salt Eaters*, the text's "difficulty" is as much about the book's audience(s) and the dominant interpretative frameworks at work within literary criticism, and then about the larger world-historical formations at work , as it is about any difficulty intrinsic to the text itself.

The Salt Eaters **and Pruitt-Igoe**

One way to understand how *The Salt Eaters* reconceptualizes "American concepts of 'race,' 'personal space,' and time" is to look at the specific spatial and geographic histories that Bambara references in the novel. One thread of African American history that Bambara weaves into the bus journey chapter of *The Salt Eaters* is the history of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing projects, which Bambara incorporates into a longer reflection on the myriad and complex forces that shape Fred Holt's intergenerational experiences of place, home, family, and belonging. Through Fred Holt's layered recollections of Pruitt-Igoe, sparked by the landscape he sees passing by outside the bus, Bambara embeds into this section of *The Salt Eaters* a fragmented, submerged, but nonetheless re-constructible

narrative of the historical shifts and continuities that Melamed describes in *Represent and Destroy*.

Melamed documents the coming-into-being/power of "state-recognized U.S. antiracisms" that she describes as "race-liberal orders" (1). Following World War II, these race-liberal orders replace Jim Crow white supremacy as the "chief ideological mode for making the inequalities that global capitalism generated appear necessary, natural, or fair" (Melamed xvi). Through his internal monologue, Fred Holt offers his own analysis of these shifting historical formations from his perspective as a working-class black man who grew up during the Great Depression and for whom mobility and forced movement have been structuring elements of his life. The significance of Bambara's choice to have Holt's character be someone who lived in the Pruitt-Igoe projects emerges from Pruitt-Igoe's function within racialized-spatialized discourses about urban poverty in the twentieth century United States.

In this section, I analyze the thematics of heat, pressure, explosions, and implosions that Bambara weaves into the bus ride chapter of *The Salt Eaters*, primarily through her characterization of the bus's driver, Fred Holt. The iconicity of Pruitt-Igoe is due in part to the spectacular demolition of part of the complex in 1972 (Figure 1), when three of the complex's buildings were imploded. The implosion was broadcast live on television and captured in photographs published in national and international newspapers.

Figure 1: Implosion of Pruitt-Igoe Building, 1972. Photo: The State Historical Society of Missouri.

Though the buildings were home to low-income black residents of St. Louis for nearly twenty years, the dramatic destruction of the by-then derelict apartment buildings gives Pruitt-Igoe a here-one-moment-gone-the-next quality. It is this quality that lingers in Fred Holt's memory, the condensation or implosion of time such that nearly twenty years are collapsed into one moment, a home, the next moment, a crater. The destruction outside the bus window, destruction that was not there the last time he drove this route, calls these memories to mind for him.

The construction of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings was financed in part through federal funding made available by the American Housing Act of 1949. Roderick Ferguson describes Pruitt-Igoe and the federal housing policies that led to its creation in his short essay, "Michael Brown, Ferguson, and the Ghosts of Pruitt-Igoe." He writes that the 1949 Housing Act,

> provided cities with federal dollars to clear slums, redevelop urban space, and build affordable housing. As a housing experiment, the Pruitt-Igoe complex—made up of thirty-three towers that rose eleven stories high—would stand for many as an exemplar of the ideals and failures of modernist social visions, particularly the belief that intelligent design could solve social problems, in this case the problems associated with black poor and migrant classes. (140)

In the documentary, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, urban historian Joseph Heathcott describes how two simultaneous post-WWII trends—urban growth and the exodus of wealthier whites from the inner cities to (what would become) the suburbs—impoverished the municipal tax base that was meant to keep the costs of maintaining the Pruitt-Igoe buildings and grounds low for the complex's residents. Ferguson writes "[i]t becomes clear in the history of Pruitt-Igoe that racist discourses made the failures of the housing complex interchangeable with the supposed pathologies of the people themselves" (140) The discourses that reduce complex sets of socioeconomic factors to the language of racial pathology help naturalize specific geographies of domination, showing how, as McKittrick writes, "existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies *in place* and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways" (McKittrick x).

In "Reframing the Ruins: Pruitt-Igoe, Structural Racism, and African American Rhetoric as a Space for Cultural Critique," Elizabeth Birmingham recounts how architectural theorists and historians have used Pruitt-Igoe as a symbol for the ultimate failure of modernist architectural visions (291). Birmingham demonstrates how critics have used Pruitt-Igoe as both example and exemplar of modernist architecture's central design flaw: the incongruity between the well-intentioned "high" aesthetic ideals of

modernist architects and the world-views and behaviors of the poor, urban populations who would go onto inhabit these structures in reality (291). Focus on architectural failure, Birmingham argues, allows the entangled forces of systemic poverty and racism to be formally disregarded as explanations for Pruitt-Igoe's deterioration, even as racial inferiority and pathology are invoked as a key aspect—perhaps *the* key aspect—of the project's decline and eventual demolition.

The original 1951 designs for Pruitt-Igoe had imagined a segregated project "with one-third of housing meant for whites (Pruitt) and two-thirds meant for African Americans (Igoe)" (Birmingham 297). However, the first occupants were slated to move into the Pruitt-Igoe complex in 1954, the same year that the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled racial segregation of public schools to be a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment.[17] The aftermath of *Brown v. Board* guaranteed, 'in practice (though not in principle)" that Pruitt-Igoe would soon become home only to black residents, as "whites could not be convinced to move into the project" without the guarantee of legal racial segregation (Birmingham 297). In a broader context, as different legalized forms of overt segregation—many of which relied on the explicit separateness of "white" and "black" spaces—became objects of protest and revision, the segregation that had formerly taken place through legally separate educational facilities was rerouted through racist housing policies that allowed *de facto* segregation to continue to exist in many schools via new

[17] The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, in combination with the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, in principle if not in practice "recognized freed male slaves as citizens," to be granted equal protection under the law, and provided sanctions against states that excluded African American men from the franchise" (Newman 10).

forms of *de jure* segregation encoded into federal, state, and local housing policies and practices.

After this, Birmingham notes, "[m]onies for the project began to dry up immediately" and much of the original design was "altered based on [this] new lack of funds" (Birmingham 297). The project's lead architect, Minoru Yamasaki, explained how the housing authorities "forced him to double the density" of apartments per acres while simultaneously eliminating funding for public spaces and services "like gyms, playgrounds, a proposed grocery, [and] even public bathrooms" (Birmingham 297). Racialized discourses of urban decline that claim specific human behaviors as the causes of environmental deterioration rely on the accepted neutrality of of the spatial arrangements themselves. However, the alterations made to the plans for Pruitt-Igoe (once it was clear the complex would primarily be home to poor black families) demonstrate the inaccuracy of this supposed neutrality, as the elimination of public spaces and services plays an important causal role in determining what types of social relationships and activities would be able to flourish and which would not, even before the buildings were inhabited.

Throughout the chapter, Bambara repeatedly fills the landscape rolling by outside the bus with exposed and mangled domestic objects: she describes "bathtubs and kitchen sinks" (69-70) strewn across a salvage yard and, in this scene, the "huge plain" of red mud littered with "rusted bedsprings…doors off their hinges leaning in the wind, flower-pot shards…[and] panes of glass" propped against a half-built and then abandoned wall (71). Bambara carefully places objects that traditionally fill or constitute the interiors of homes in a place of double exposure vis-a-vis Fred Holt, both *outside* the bus and then

not *inside* any other structure. Through the deftness of Bambara's narrative style (in which she maintains autonomy for the voice of the narrator even as it seems to disappear inside or alongside the consciousness of particular characters), these descriptions of the chapter's setting also comprise and reveal aspects of Fred Holt's character. Because Holt's subjectivity structures so much of the chapter, Bambara's description of the objects outside the bus simultaneously craft the scene's setting *and* contribute to the revelation of Holt's character, through Bambara's emphasis on sharing the things that stand out to him with the reader.

The exposed domestic objects outside the bus remind Holt of other scenes in which intimate interiors are displaced or remade into public exteriors or even into spectacles. As Holt "fumbl[es] with the gear stick," he looks outside at "what had once been a lot of other people's homes" but that he now sees as "[a] gaping hole, a grave, a pit. Nothing to even pass by in a car with the grandchildren on a Sunday and point to an say…nothing. Nothing" (73). What evokes the memory of Pruitt-Igoe for Holt is witnessing the sociality that existed, mere moments ago, where now there is a "crater." Ultimately, Pruitt-Igoe's only completed public structure, a "community center," was transformed into offices the housing authority used to "collect rent and administrate the project" (Birmingham 297). In other words, following the loss of state and federal funding for the project, the only community-centered public spaces built in Pruitt-Igoe were converted in a manner that intentionally disrupted the residents' social world by placing agents of state surveillance in immediate proximity. Understanding some of the rules that accompany living in this state-subsidized housing project confirms what Candice M. Jenkins describes as the double regulation of black intimacy: the scrutiny of

black intimate and private life as scenes of pathology, degeneracy, or deviance, and the often repressive efforts to ward off prying forms of examination by adhering to "respectable" forms of desire and behavior (34-35)."The project, as designed," Birmingham writes, "would have made use of contrasts between public and private space, but as built, it offered no public spaces" (300). Birmingham's essay goes on to demonstrate that it could be equally fair to say the no *private* spaces remained in the project (as it was built) either, due to factors like 'the housing authority's policy of rewarding tenants who informed on the activities of other tenants' and the criminalization of things like "having income (which could include receiving gifts) or living with one's husband" (301). More than a failure of architectural design, "the interaction of paternalistic regulation, racist segregation, and family-destroying welfare law" accomplished its desired effect: relocating the eyesore of the poor, black inner-city slums to a more isolated, less visible, location and then attempting to manage this newly relocated population through intruding on and regulating their social and sexual lives, all for the lowest possible cost (Birmingham 306).

That many of the causes of Pruitt-Igoe's deterioration were purposeful choices made during the project's construction provides useful background information for understanding Fred Holt's internal analysis of the landscape outside rolling by alongside his bus route. As the bus moves along the highway towards Claybourne, Bambara describes the setting through Holt's eyes and in the language he would use himself, to describe the scene to Porter:

> Passing on his right was a huge plain of mud, red, like the deep-red mud near the river mouth behind the old house when he was in short pants, then knickers. A

> plain of fresh destruction, he composed, as if to report this sight to Porter. Not there when last he had this route. Stores gutted, car shells overturned, a playground of rust and twisted steel. Mounds of broken green bottle glass, rusted bedsprings, bald tires, doors off their hinges leaning in the wind, flower-pot shards and new-looking brick and lumber strewn about but not haphazardly, as if a crew had brushed them off with profit in mind. Panes of glass up against a half-wall for pickup later, looked like. A project not long ago put up was now this pile of rubble. And in the middle of it all a crater. He specially did not want to look at that. Not in all this heat. Not with his stomach churning up the lousy lunch. No time for another rest stop. Late as hell. No way to make it by 3:10 P.M. And them bastards just looking for the chance to dump him before pension time. (71)

The "plain of fresh destruction" is both new and familiar to Holt, its red color reminding Holt of the "old house" where he lived as a boy (71). Though "[n]ot there when last he had this route," Holt's eyes quickly make sense of what he's seeing, taking in the assemblage of broken and abandoned domestic objects ("rusted bedsprings," "flower-pot shards") and also the presence of materials that have been marked as still having value. Those include "the new-looking brick and lumber strewn about but not haphazardly, as if a crew had brushed them off with profit in mind" and the "[p]anes of glass up against a half-wall for pickup later, looked like" (72).

As Holt takes in his surroundings and chooses words for what he's seeing, "as if to repost this sight" to his absent best friend, Porter, he places this "fresh destruction" into its slot in a familiar cycle. "Same old number," Holt thinks, "rumbling over the tracks. Redevelopment. Progress. The master plan. Cut back in services, declare blight,

run back from the suburbs and take over" (72). The language Bambara chooses for Holt's thoughts here is clipped and precise, a series of significant nouns ("redevelopment," "progress") and imperatives that provide neat analysis of the repeated profit-driven displacement of peoples, in this case through gentrification. Holt constructs the landscape's future in his mind's eye: "There'd be no Hoover towns sprouting up here. There'd be high rises and boutiques next time through. Blondes with dogs on leashes and teenage kids on bikes in parking lots and station wagons and new street lights and…" (72). His thoughts make visible the structural, socioeconomic processes which undergird the cyclical, racialized transformation of these urban and suburban spaces. Holt reads the deteriorating wasteland with the "crater" at its center as the predictable result of methods of "redevelopment" and "progress" which rely on allowing certain spaces to deteriorate ("cut back in services, declare blight…") in order to create new areas for investment and profit.

Bambara's characterization of Fred Holt provides enough information about his past for the reader to learn that Holt's weary recognition of what has and what will happen in this space comes from his own experiences of being placed and displaced by different occurrences of "the master plan" (72) It is the crater "in the middle of it all," at the center of this "project not long ago put up" that is "now this pile of rubble" that Holt "specially" does not want to look at (72). Holt's use of the word "crater," as opposed to simply "hole" or "hollow," suggests the specter of an eruption, explosion, or demolition. In a geologic context, "crater" refers to the mouth of a volcano and in a military context, to the "cavity formed by the explosion of a mine…or shell" ("Crater"). Bambara foregrounds both of these meanings—the volcanic and the military—in the following

passage, where she describes (still through Holt's stream-of-consciousness narration), Holt's time living in Pruitt-Igoe. Holt reflects on how the landscape passing outside the bus reminds him of:

> the home he'd known for too short a time, but a sweet time for a while. Pruitt-Igo (sic) raised up a monument one minute, blown up a volcano the next. And near the crater that had been their home was the pit that had been the elevator shaft down which he'd dropped Sen-Sen wrappers and matchbooks with phone numbers lest Wanda jump salty with him. And down at the bottom of the shaft other dumpage. Eleven dead bodies. The rotted remains of bill collectors, drug dealers, wives, husbands, raped and missing girls of East St. Louis. (73)

The wasteland outside the bus does not resemble the Pruitt-Igoe buildings as they appeared when they were first constructed. Instead, what reminds Holt of "the home he'd known for too short a time, but a sweet time for a while" is the destruction visible on either side of the road, and in particular, the crater (73). Holt's memories are tied up in the connection between these craters and their significance within a pattern of purposeful creation and destruction he describes in two nearly parallel phrases: "Pruitt-Igo (sic) raised up a monument one minute, blown up a volcano the next" (73). As the passage continues, "the home he'd known" becomes "the crater that had been their home," a home he shared with Wanda and his son. He remembers the elevator (another vehicle which travels a controlled route through space and time) through the presence of the pit that lay beneath it, the shaft into which he'd dropped his breath mint wrappers and

matchboxes with the phone numbers of other women so his first wife, Wanda, wouldn't get angry with him for his infidelities.[18]

The final lines of this passage could be Fred Holt's, or they could be the words of Bambara's narrator, as their precise omniscience—the specificity of "eleven dead bodies"—suggests. This passage, with its reference to "the other dumpage," the bodies left to rot at the bottom of the elevator shaft, recalls Gwendolyn Brooks' long poem, "In the Mecca," published in her 1968 book of the same title. In "In the Mecca," Brooks narrates life inside the Mecca Building on Chicago's south side. As plans for Pruitt-Igoe were moving forward in St. Louis in the early 1950s, the Mecca Building was being marked for demolition in Chicago. Like Pruitt-Igoe, the Mecca Building's decline from a "boldly innovative architectural prototype" to an "overcrowded tenement" was well-publicized, and in each case the buildings perform important symbolic functions within twentieth century U.S. discourses on race and space (Lowney 128).

As John Lowney writes, "[p]erhaps no other building symbolized post-World War II urban decline more starkly than the Mecca Building" (128). Built in the 1890s and razed in 1952, two years before the first residents moved into Pruitt-Igoe, the Mecca Building "follows what would become a familiar rhetorical path for describing deteriorating urban neighborhoods[:] the racialized discourse of urban decline" (Lowney

[18] In accounts of Pruitt-Igoe's design, the elevators are an important feature. The "skip-stop" elevators purposefully only opened on every third floor of the eleven-story buildings, meaning residents of other floors would have to take the stairs up or down a flight to get to their apartments. Before the buildings were occupied, the skip-stop elevators were "hailed as 'patentable' innovations that would help create 'neighborhoods' even within "the highest density public housing [project] even built in the U.S.," housing "12,000 inhabitants…within a few city blocks" (Birmingham 296). The floors where the elevators stopped were also the gallery floors, designed to provide communal open spaces where residents could mingle with one another. Because residents would need to exit on these floors to get to their homes on the floors above or below, the project's architects assumed residents would interact more often and form smaller communities with those living above or below them.

128). Originally inhabited by "the white wealthy of Chicago," the Mecca was a tourist attraction at the 1893 World's Fair: Columbian Exposition (named for its celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 arrival in the "New World") on account of its beauty and grandeur (Clarke 136). "By the Great Depression," however, "the once elaborate showplace and tourist attraction had become a crowded slum for poor black people," its "hard wood floors splintered," its atria littered with refuse, and the "accumulated dirt and grime on the glass of its skylights emitting a kind of unreal light" (Clarke 136-137). In the discourses of the "planners, designers, architects, and ideologues" defining this discourse of urban decline, the Mecca Building and its poor, black residents became a shorthand explanation for the complex demographic and socioeconomic transformations occurring in Chicago—an explanation that justified their projects of "urban renewal" that often involved "raz[ing] whole neighbhorhoods and erect[ing] housing projects in the same racially segregated areas" (Kukrechtová 458).

Many of the repeatedly displaced and re-placed residents of these urban areas, however, rejected the language of urban decline and urban renewal, responding with "demonstrations, political speeches, gatherings, riots, and revolutionary literature [that] showed the insufficiency" and inaccuracy of these concepts to ameliorating "the real problems of cities, such as social and racial inequities, residential segregation, poverty, lack of educational opportunities…limited or no health care," and other forms of intentional neglect (Kukrechtová). Cheryl Clarke notes the important position of "In the Mecca" in Brooks's career and its significance as the last text she would publish with Harper's, a primarily white, well-established American literary press, before moving her

work to Dudley Randall's Broadside Press, one of the key literary institutions of the Black Arts Movement (137).

Brooks initially attempted to publish *In the Mecca* as a "teenage novel" in 1954, but her publishers were unenthusiastic and it was more than a decade before the manuscript, by then transformed into a book-length poem, would be published in 1968 (Clarke 137). As Bambara does by bringing Fred Holt's memories of Pruitt-Igoe into *The Salt Eaters*, Brooks challenges "the racialized discourse of urban decline" in "In the Mecca," both through the voices of some of the poem's many characters and through the poem's distinct narratorial voice, which directs the reader to "Sit where the light corrupts your face" and be witness to a poem that makes the "fair fables fall" (Lowney 128; Brooks 407). Lowney writes that,

> In presenting a dialogic counternarrative to the dominant—and often dehumanizing—discourse of urban decline, Brooks underscores the continuities, as well as the discontinuities, between the utopian vision of the progressive Left in the 1930s and that of the revolutionary black nationalism of the 1960s. (131)

Suturing the work of black artists from different eras together is clearly on Brooks's mind in *In the Mecca*, a book she dedicates "To the memory of Langston Hughes," chiefly associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, "and to James Baldwin [and] Amiri Baraka…educators extraordinaire," who represent, to Brooks, a new generation of African American writers, building on—not breaking decisively from—the earlier work of Hughes and others in their alterations and expansions of the terms of black literary and political expression (402).

"In the Mecca" is a haunting poem in which Brooks employs a tight, "constricted lineation" and frequent unpredictable shifts of time, place, and perspective in order to move the reader relentlessly throughout the building's halls and rooms (Clarke 139). The reader becomes witness to one of the poem's characters, Mrs. Sally, as she searches with increasing desperation for her youngest child, her missing daughter, Pepita. And in the poem's final stanzas, the reader becomes witness and accomplice to Pepita's fate, as the narrator names her murderer—another of the building's inhabitants—and relates his successful denial of his crime, despite the body of Pepita hidden "[b]eneath his cot" (Brooks 433). Brooks imagines Mecca as an irredeemable space, and yet one in which "something…Substanceless; yet like mountains,/ like rivers and oceans too, and like trees with wind whistling through them," continues to call:

> an essential sanity, black and electric,
> builds to reportage and redemption.
>
> A hot estrangement.
>
> A material collapse
> that is Construction. (Brooks 433)

This "essential sanity, black and electric," is not of the building, whose "material collapse" constrains the lives of its inhabitants (even dealing death to some of them, like Pepita); instead, it is something simultaneously "substanceless" and like "mountains," "rivers," "oceans," and "wind," a something that resists arrest or capture within Mecca's walls (Brooks 433).

As Cheryl Clarke notes, it is in many ways fitting that after *In the Mecca,* Brooks deliberately left behind "traditional" white-led publishing venues and instead placed her

work with the black-owned presses created by the efforts of Black Arts Movement leaders like Amiri Baraka and Dudley Randall (Clarke 137). Carter Mathes writes that while Bambara, more than twenty years Brooks's junior, is not always "considered to have been a part of the Black Arts Movement," she was

> actively writing during this period, and her editing of the black feminist anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), during the height of the movement, suggests her central role in charting new directions in black feminist thought that are critical but not simply antagonistic in their relationships to the Black Arts and Black Power movements. (134)[19]

Bambara saw both Brooks and Langston Hughes as her literary kin and she describes finding Brooks's early collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and Hughes's memoir of his time in Harlem and in Paris during the 1920s, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940), on her mother's bookshelves when she was a child (Bambara and Massiah 117). Like Mrs. Sally in "In the Mecca," Zala, a main character in Bambara's last novel, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999) is also a mother searching for the fate of her missing son, but for Fred Holt in *The Salt Eaters*, the "eleven dead bodies" dumped at the bottom of the Pruitt-Igoe elevator shafts are almost incidental to his memories of the time—"too short a time, but a sweet time for a while"—that he spent living in the St. Louis projects (73). Part of what "In the Mecca" and *Those Bones Are Not My Child* explore is the shifting terms that continue to structure certain portions of

[19] In fact, Mathes writes that Bambara is "not considered to have been a part of the Black Arts Movement," but Jodi Melamed describes Bambara as "[a] major figure in Black Power, black feminism, and women-of-color feminism" and so in my framing I attempt to split the difference (Mathes 134; Melamed 97).

black life as disposable, even as dominant narratives of racial progress legitimize the destruction of some by extending value and security to others (Hong 65).

Although Fred Holt's bus moves across a fictional landscape of Bambara's own creation, the bus journey chapter of *The Salt Eaters* contributes not only to the theorization of black geographies within the field of literary criticism, but also to the larger project of creating alternative histories to the foreclosures of freedom invited by many teleologies of racial progress. Given that busses are dynamic and complex material and conceptual spaces, functioning as technologies of transport, sites for conversation, eavesdropping, and encounter, places of labor, and "moving theaters" where acts of intimacy, aggression, domination, and resistance play out among varied groups of people, it is no surprise that busses are often written about as locations in which geographies of domination are contested (Kelley 103). Rosa Parks' oft-mythologized refusal to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 is likely the most famous instance of bus-related political protest in American history. The mythologizing of Parks' role in the Montgomery bus boycott, and the highlighting of this episode as representative of the success of the U.S. civil rights movement, was well underway by the time Bambara began writing *The Salt Eaters* in the late 1970s.

The construction of Parks as a symbol of proper, peaceful protest has relied heavily on portraying her as a "tired seamstress" making a personal choice, rather than as an experienced political organizer (which Parks was) whose individual decision occurred within the broader context of long-term commitments to collective action and social change (Theoharis 147). As Jeanne Theoharis describes, the "process of iconicizing Rosa Parks" has largely obscured "the breadth of Parks' six decades of activism," both before

and after 1955 (140). Contemporary versions of the Rosa Parks story often interpret her statement (referring to the day she decided to remain seated) that she had "been pushed as far as [she] could be pushed" to mean that her choice was ostensibly spontaneous, the action of a reasonable person at last pushed too far (Theoharis 147).[20] Again, this perspective obscures the fact that she made her choice within the larger context of her already longstanding "strategic resistance…of white domination" and her participation in and awareness of the larger networks and organizations, including the NAACP and the local Women's Political Council, who had been preparing the stage for a bus boycott in Montgomery and were waiting for the right arrest around which to act (Theoharis 143-145).

Parks was far from the first black person or black woman to be arrested for protesting bus segregation in Montgomery, but the qualities that feature prominently in the mythology of Parks' protest, including her mild manners, neat and respectable appearance, and her status as a married, churchgoing woman in her forties, "proved key to the success of the boycott and worked to deflect Cold War suspicions of grassroots militancy" (Theoharis 141). Theoharis notes that Parks and her family paid steep personal costs as a result of Parks' becoming a symbol. In a 1978 interview, Parks explains "that she was 'somewhat resigned to whatever contribution she could make'" to the continued

[20] For instance, in President Clinton's remarks when he awarded Parks the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1999, Clinton described Parks' role in the bus boycott and the larger civil rights movement as "the quintessential story of the 20th Century" and "the story of the triumph of freedom" (qtd. in Theoharis, 160). It is interesting to read the full quotation from Clinton's speech because his remarks demonstrate how the narrative of a victorious civil rights movement is linked to a larger mythology of global American exceptionalism in which the ostensible achievement of racial equality is imagined to legitimate and emerge from the triumph of "free enterprise." Describing Parks' life story, Clinton says, "It is, in many ways, the quintessential story of the 20th Century -- a time with trials and tribulations which still, fundamentally, is the story of the triumph of freedom -- of democracy over dictatorship, free enterprise over state socialism, of tolerance over bigotry" (Clinton).

struggle for black freedom, though she was clearly frustrated with the fact that the people and organizations showering her with individual honors more than two decades after her bus protest "'only wanted to talk about that one evening in 1955,'" and not the varied and continuous activism that both preceded and followed that moment (Theoharis 158). The process of being made into a symbol involved consistent efforts to tether her activism to one specific moment in the past. In the bus journey section of *The Salt Eaters,* Bambara crafts a complex and ambivalent interpretation of the aftermath of the civil rights and black liberation struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, an interpretation that resonates with Parks' own ambivalence about having her name become synonymous with a moment that is remembered as a decisive step forward in the struggle for racial equality.

In Fred Holt, Bambara crafts a character who, like Parks, "has been pushed nearly as far" as he can be pushed. But unlike Parks, who was deeply engaged in organized collective struggle, Holt is an isolated character, estranged from his first wife, digusted and angered by his second, and filled with grief over the recent death of his best friend. Bambara loosely relates Holt's isolation to his desire to keep his head down and his reluctance to become politically engaged. Thoughts of his dead friend Porter dominate Holt's mind throughout the chapter. Holt's deep grief over Porter's death and the loving specificity of Holt's detailed memories of his friend—of his stories, his memories, his habits and demeanor, his dreams, his obsessions, and his jokes—convey a sense of how much Holt admires Porter's way of engaging life, and his memories of their conversations show that their friendship and banter let him feel he was a part of something, confirming his vision and analysis of the world.

But because of Porter's openly professed politics, Holt also kept his friend at a distance, never inviting him to the home he shares with his second wife, Margie, a white woman, and "for all the time of their friendship, never…talk[ing] about any wife but Wanda," his first wife, who "had left years ago" (80). Holt has his own political analyses, but he keeps them to himself. For instance, Holt understands the trauma of Pruitt-Igoe's demolition, "raised up a monument one minute, blown up a volcano the next," as part of a cyclical "master plan" in which urban development gives way to intentional neglect, the removal of public services, "declare[d] blight," and subsequent destruction or dispossession (72-73). He also understands this cycle as having done damage to his intimate life, but his anger about this is tangled up with deep feelings of shame, guilt, and personal responsibility. This becomes clear through how Holt's thoughts of Pruitt-Igoe—themselves a response to the "crater" in the midst of the abandoned housing project he sees outside the bus's windows—set off a chain of concentric explosions that ignite one another and stretch back to some of his earliest memories.

As the bus barrels along the highway attempting to make up lost time, Holt, "[b]rimming over with rage and pain and loss," imagines steering the vehicle through the guardrails on the highway's edge and crashing it into the swamp that runs alongside the road (Bambara 80). He runs over a racoon, "eyes right on it, foot to the floor," feeling its body "go lumpy and then smooshy in the wheel" (Bambara 82). As he speeds "down the highway away from it…[keeping] his eyes strictly off the rear-view mirror," Holt feels the crummy chili he'd eaten for lunch "turning on him… and he was helpless to keep ahead of it (Bambara 82-83). Already overfull of suppressed emotion, the guilt of purposefully running down the racoon overwhelms Holt even further and brings him

close to vomiting; despite his attempt to keep his eyes averted from the rearview mirror and fixed on the road ahead, he smells the chili "jamming up his nostrils, jamming up his lungs," and he smells "Fire" (82-83).

Over the space of a paragraph break, Bambara shifts from the fiery smell of the food threatening to explode up from Holt's stomach to a different scene of fire, still focalized through Holt's consciousness and presented not explicitly as a memory, but as a set of emotions and sensations that completely overtake his present:

> The fire that time and him leaning against the house throwing up his insides…Birds falling down out of the sky burnt and sooty like bedraggled crows. The furniture blistering, crackling, like hog skins crackled on Grandaddy's birthday. His mother dragging the mattress out sparking and smoldering, beating it with her slipper and the matting jumping like popcorn all over the front yard. And her screaming, screaming at him as if she knew. And she probably did. His pop's store coming away from the house, leaning over and crashing down. The store a hole in the ground and just the apples stored in its cellar recognizable. Him standing in the piece of doorway swaying, char and ash sucking at the soles of his feet threatening to take him under the few floorboards left down past the apples and straight to hell for what he'd done. (83)

The opening phrase of this passage recalls the title of James Baldwin's essays in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), with their extended ruminations on the suffering, rage, and grief that form the crucible for black masculinity in America. In the second essay from that book, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind," Baldwin writes of

> the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life… rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own. (86)

By alluding to Baldwin's text, Bambara links Holt's memories of a fire it seems likely he set himself (based on his fear of falling "straight to hell for what he'd done") to his larger historical context, one that may not completely exonerate Holt of blame but that is necessary to self-understanding, and therefore, in Bambara's conception, to healing and growth.

Holt himself does not make these connections—he stifles his own political analysis and leaves explicit racial politics to others. He tries ineffectively to heal the loss of his first wife by rewarding himself with the "blond hair" of a white woman in his second marriage, only to find himself still lonely and more repulsed than comforted by his prize (84). Feeling hurt by a great series of losses—the loss of Pruitt-Igoe, the loss of his family, the loss of his job security and potentially his pension, and the loss of his best friend—Holt imagines steering the bus off the road or pulling out the pistol taped to the bottom of his seat and silencing the rowdy passengers with its bullets. "One more holler from the grand wizard or whatever the joker in the spangled hat was," Holt thinks, "one more cranking of a camera, one more anything and he'd snatch free the pistol taped underseat and blow their fucking heads off. All of them. The pains in the ass and the ones who hadn't yet given him any trouble. Not yet. But they all did eventually. Loyal, loving, there one minute, gone the next" (84).

The phrasing here, "there one minute, gone the next," repeats Holt's earlier description of the construction and demolition of Pruitt-Igoe, creating an unconscious understanding of the interpenetration of built space, intimate life, and the body. Though his bus travels a route in the U.S. south toward the fictional city of Claybourne, Georgia, through the conversation and thoughts of Holt and his load of different passengers Bambara maps histories of labor, migration, belonging, and displacement that are global in their scope and also intimate in their expression through particular characters' memories and experiences. At the center of this chapter is Holt himself, whose experiences as black man born before the Great Depression add a different angle and trajectory to the novel's complex historical consciousness. Neither a disillusioned radical nor an experienced activist adapting to the new political realities of the late 1970s, Holt represents another part of the black community not yet integrated into a revolutionary project, but nevertheless included in the novel's vision of a potential future, or futures, that realize liberation.

These potential futures become visible at several moments in the chapter where Bambara allows the novel's narrative to hold multiple possibilities simultaneously. At one point, "speeding past the marshes," Holt feels his desire to crash the bus through the metal rails and into the swamp with such "searing clarity" that it

> etched an imprint on the surroundings. An imprint that became magnetized, drawing substance to it, sucking plasma from the underbrush creatures, draining colors from the trees and shrubs, snatching the sound from birds, crickets, and from Fred Holt's lungs, pulling life to it for manifestation in tangible form. A complete happening it would become for any daydreamy hitch-hiker who might

> walk that way, for any of the bus passengers who might look that way, off-guard, susceptible. (80-81)

This imprint that draws life from "plasma," "color," and "sound" is strong enough that its existence becomes independent of what unfolds in the primary narrative, tracking the bus's continued journey towards Claybourne, and when another moment wrenches the bus's linear progress free from its single destination, the novel expands to accommodate the multiple futures this rupture introduces.

After finally throwing up into his "damp handkerchief" the chili that has roiled in his stomach for the whole ride, Holt clears his throat and announces "'Claybourne in five minutes, Last stop'" (85). His announcement simultaneously halts all motion, holding the passengers' "mouths agape, gestures frozen, eyes locked…arrested, as if the announcement were extraordinary, of great import," and unleashes a host of differential possibilities that Bambara introduces through a series of "or"s and "might have beens" (85-86). Holt's announcement becomes "A sonic boom, a gross tampering of the weights, a shift of the axis" that slips the "quadrants [from their] leash" and releases alternate realities that include the imprint in which Holt "did ram the bus through the railing and rode it into the marshes, stirring bacteria and blue-green algae to remember they were the earliest forms of life and new life was beginning again" (86). As Carter Mathes writes, Bambara's experimentation with sounds creates representations of political resistance that encourage readers to linger within…contingent moments of black history and politics" (137). Mathes argues that Bambara represents contingency as "a compositional space created in order to frame what may or could happen" and thus as a mode of

resisting and exceeding the limited horizon of racial equality secured by civil rights victories and the promise of liberal multiculturalism (137).

The crashed bus (which Bambara presents not as an ending, but as a return to the beginnings of life) is only one of the possibilities released into the compositional space of contingency in this chapter of *The Salt Eaters*. The others place characters in a diverse range of positions as they "com[e] unstruck from the web of time and place," released from the tethers of traditional geography (Bambara 87). For Holt, this "loosening" creates a healing scene that reconstructs both his earlier marriage and the buildings that housed this intimacy, placing "Fred and Wanda in a bedroom, oblivious to the noise of the elevator on the other side of the wall. The two of them smack up against each other like two halves of ancient fruit, succulent and sweet and no cleaving on the horizon" (Bambara 87-88). Rather than the demolished Pruitt-Igoe projects, which offered Holt a "monument one minute" only to have it "blown up a volcano the next" *The Salt Eater*s lingers in moments of contingency that make possible alternatives to this cycle, and to the futures that would simply repeat it.

CHAPTER III

FROM HANOI JANE TO WORKOUT JANE: THE DOMESTICATING POLITICS OF *JANE FONDA'S WORKOUT*

If you google "Jane Fonda" and search for specifically for images, among many more recent photographs you will eventually find a black and white picture of Fonda standing against a white wall, a small card hanging around her neck: a mugshot. Reproductions of Fonda's 1970 mugshot, in which she sports a brown shag, rather than the voluminous blonde hair she wore in earlier films and modeling shots, and raises her clenched left fist, adorn mugs and t-shirts for sale on *Etsy.com*. On Fonda's own website, shirts, sweatshirts, tote bags, mugs, and clutches featuring her mugshot (Figure 2*)* are on sale alongside movie memorabilia, Fonda's books, and DVD sets of *Jane Fonda's Workout*. The site states that proceeds from the sale of the mugshot memorabilia will benefit the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power & Potential, a non-profit organization that Fonda founded in 1995 with the goal of preventing unwanted early pregnancies in Georgia youth through sexual education and access to contraception.

Figure 2: Mug Shot Tote Bag (janefonda.com)

Modify your search terms to look up "Hanoi Jane," the moniker given to Fonda by critics of her anti-Vietnam war activism, and you'll find Hanoi Jane urinal targets, angry bumper stickers and sew-on patches naming Fonda "Traitor By Choice; Commie By Infection." These slogans are sometimes illustrated with pornographic cartoons. On eBay and Etsy you can purchase vintage t-shirts with slogans like "I'm not FOND'A Hanoi Jane" or "I'm STILL not FOND'A Hanoi Jane," if you want to emphasize the longevity of your sentiments. One version of this particular t-shirt pairs its slogan with a cartoon image of Fonda (Figure 3*)*, drawn in caricature-style with an exaggerated toothy smile, feathered hair, and hoop earrings. Wearing what appears to be a leotard and legwarmers, the cartoon-Fonda stands barefoot next to the t-shirt's slogan, both hands placed jauntily on her hips. A traditional Asian-style conical hat sits on the figure's head.[21] In the slogan's text, the "O" of "Hanoi Jane" contains the solid red five-pointed star often used to symbolize communist ideology, thus linking Fonda, Hanoi, and communism to one another with neat visual concision.

[21] I considered identifying this hat specifically as a Vietnamese *non la*, a hat often worn by rice farmers and other outdoor laborers, but following Sylvia Shin Huey Chong's analysis of late-twentieth century American Orientalism in *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (2012), I think it is more accurate to assume the form of the hat is not meant to establish racial or national specificity, but rather to obscure specificity and instead reinforce a sense of a non-distinct Asian "other" that is visually linked, through the use of the Communist red star, to communism (Chong 18).

Figure 3: Close-up of Hanoi Jane T-Shirt (BigWheelsVintage)

Considered side by side, these two images of Fonda—her 1970 mugshot reproduced on a coffee mug or tote bag and the caricature illustrating the Hanoi Jane t-shirts—represent two very different iterations of the actress's past image and persona, both of which continue to circulate and make meaning in the present. Each images is designed to appeal to people on the basis of a set of shared beliefs and to demonstrate publicly (through display on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt) a commitment to or identification with these beliefs. The purposes of these two contrasting images of Fonda, however, like the "intimate publics" they propose to bring together, are quite different.

On the one hand, when the mugshot in which Fonda raises her fist in the "Power to the People" salute is commodified and sold as an art print or fashion piece, it becomes part of the construction of a feminist past (*My Life* 216). This lineage of resistance that imagines Fonda as a foremother of contemporary feminism signals alignment with feminist beliefs—if not participation in feminist politics—through the consumption of products that allow one to *display* these values. "*Bust Magazine*, for instance, a publication that is particularly marketed to young third wave feminists, features

photographs on their subscription cards of Fonda's 1970s mug shots," although, as Emily Anderson notes, the image may be "more for the purposes of evoking camp as opposed to seriously establishing Fonda as a foremother of modern feminist movements" (316). On the other hand, the cartoon images of Hanoi Jane construct Fonda as a shared target for ongoing vitriol, an image that (in combination with its slogan) can bring people together through the act of collective misogynist rebuke, where this rebuke also hinges on the repudiation of "anti-American" sentiments, specifically communism.

It is telling that the construction of Fonda's image as part of a feminist past uses a photograph—a documentary image—while the Hanoi Jane images tend to be cartoons or illustrations. There is a claim to historical accuracy about the mugshot, for instance, that belies its decontextualized circulation in our contemporary moment. As Angela Y. Davis writes in an essay about the photographs of her that circulated in 1970-1972 (while she was in hiding from the FBI and then during her trial and her imprisonment) economies of historical images can function in multiple ways. They can, for instance, provide the "promise of visual memory of older and departed generations," while simultaneously demonstrating how "this historical memory may become ahistorical and apolitical" (Davis 38).

The black and white image of Fonda's mugshot suggests that the "arrested moment" the photograph captures belongs to a concrete and distant past, separate from the full-color iPhone vibrancy of the present (Berger qtd. in Davis 38).

Meanwhile, the caricature on the "Hanoi Jane" t-shirts makes no claims to objective accuracy. Its cartoon style is purposeful in its mocking exaggeration of Fonda's features. Rather than featuring an illustration of one of the photographs of Fonda that

became so central to her early villainization as Hanoi Jane—photographs featuring Fonda sitting on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft installation during a 1972 peace mission to Hanoi, then capital of North Vietnam—the t-shirts' caricature draws on images of Fonda popularized in the 1980s when she became the brand icon for the *Jane Fonda's Workout* series. Dressed in the leotard, legwarmers, and hoop earrings made memorable by Fonda's glamorous exercise style, the figure on the t-shirt does not resemble the 1970s image of Fonda as she looked during her support of the Winter Soldier Investigation and her work with political theater troupe, FTA (Free The Army*)*. Indeed, the image (apart from the t-shirt's text) only gestures to Fonda's antiwar protests through the inclusion of the conical bamboo hat that is meant to signal Fonda's racially traitorous sympathies with the (communist) Vietnamese.

The apparent anachronism of the t-shirt's caricature, however, correlates with the fact that the figure of "Hanoi Jane" did not come into existence in 1972, immediately after Fonda's visit to Vietnam. Rather, Hanoi Jane is primarily the product of later years, a persona created in the aftermath of U.S. military withdrawal from Vietnam in order to "displace from public memory the reality that Fonda's prominence" as an antiwar activist known well "beyond the stage and screen was underwritten by mass movements for social change" (Lembcke vii). The particular cocktail of misogyny and nationalism that the caricature of Hanoi Jane activates plays a crucial role in disavowing and discrediting the war's critics in the 1980s, and Hanoi Jane has continued to be a useful way of demonizing not only Fonda, but others seeking to protest or critique U.S. militarism from the late 1970s through the present (Burke 177; Lembcke).

One recent incident that resuscitated Hanoi Jane and (re)introduced the figure to contemporary audiences occurred after Fonda's 2017 appearance on NBC's *The Today Show.* During an interview with Fonda and Robert Redford promoting their film, *Our Souls at Night*, ex-Fox News correspondent and then-NBC host Megyn Kelly asks Fonda about her experiences with plastic surgery, and specifically about why she "isn't proud" to admit her surgeries, given "how amazing" she looks for her age, then 79 (Keveney). Fonda deflects Kelly's question, pivoting the conversation back to the film instead. Later that day and again in subsequent interviews, Fonda criticizes Kelly's question, calling it "inappropriate" and awkward and questioning Kelly's skill as an interviewer, spurring Kelly, in turn, to respond to what she calls Fonda's "poor me" routine. Declaring on the *Today* show that she (Kelly) will not be lectured on "what is and is not appropriate" by someone whose "name is synonymous with outrage," Kelly frames herself as the latest victim in Fonda's long history of duplicitous, self-serving behavior (Koblin).

Tentative but growing audience applause greets Kelly's description of Fonda as a woman whom "many of our veterans still call…'Hanoi Jane' thanks to her radio broadcasts, [during the Vietnam War] which attempted to shame American troops" (Koblin). Silence descends as Kelly shares pictures of Fonda smiling on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. Kelly narrates how Fonda called "our POWs hypocrites and liars and referred to their torture as 'understandable,'" before going on to note that while Fonda has had to apologize for some of this behavior, she "still says she 'isn't proud of America'" (Koblin). Kelly's response to Fonda went viral, with this clip and the earlier interview each receiving nearly a million views and spurring a number of articles that aimed to provided the historical background for Kelly's claims to a contemporary U.S.

network news audience largely unfamiliar with the details of the Vietnam War and Fonda's earlier activism.

In an even more recent, and a bit more understated example of Hanoi Jane popping up in national news, in the Associated Press article covering the induction of Fonda and others, including Angela Y. Davis, into the National Women's Hall of Fame in September, 2019, the author concludes with a long section titled "Opposition to Fonda." This section of the article, longer than the biographical sections on any of the inductees, documents how Fonda's selection led "Seneca Falls town supervisor, [Greg Lazarro,] to threaten to pull funding from the site" of the National Women's Hall of Fame. Lazarro's failed resolution to defund the Hall cited Fonda's activism for bringing "divisiveness to our country," with the article contextualizes by repeating the details of the "bitter criticism [the actress] received after being photographed atop an anti-aircraft gun during a 1972 visit to North Vietnam, a moment she has said she regrets" (Thompson).[22]

Like the Hanoi Jane cartoon, Fonda's mug shot reproduced as a feminist fashion statement also mythologizes the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in a way that gives outsized attention to the presence of an individual person whose iconicity displaces, or at least downplays, the existence of a mass-based movement (Lembcke 13). The mugshot's appearance of documentary accuracy is ultimately misleading, since, as Fonda herself notes, many contemporary viewers of the image not only do not know the photograph's origin story and context, but are actually uncertain about whether the image

[22] The 2019 inductees to the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York, also included Angela Y. Davis. While this article does not report objections to Davis's induction, earlier in 2019 there was controversy about Davis receiving an award recognizing her contributions to the struggle for human rights in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. Objections to giving this award to Davis centered on her support for Palestinian rights.

is "real" or not.[23] This uncertainty about the veracity of the photograph is understandable, given Fonda's image-saturated life and career as a model and actress (and the similarity of her hairstyle in the mug shot to the style she wears in the 1971 neo-noir film, *Klute*) and also because historical memory regarding the operation and outcome of many social movements of the 1960s and 1970s has been greatly shaped by mythologies about this time period that were created in later decades.

While t-shirts, bumper stickers, and Facebook groups villainizing Hanoi Jane displace the memory of U.S. military failure in Vietnam onto a convenient scapegoat, the choice to sport Fonda's mugshot as a symbol of resistance, kitschy or not, is emblematic of a different kind of mythologizing: the tendency for constructions of feminist pasts to lose sight of the specificity of the very acts of resistance they cite as iconic. It is notably ironic that a mugshot taken during Fonda's protests of a U.S. imperialist war has, over the past forty-plus years, been transformed into a commodity *cum* symbol of resistance that individuals can purchase in order to display affiliation with a certain political identity. And it is something more than ironic that this image has been taken up as a feminist symbol, first of all because Fonda herself did not identify as a feminist or seek to involve herself directly in the women's liberation movement when the image was taken,[24] and second of all, because the anti-imperialism and anti-militarism of her Vietnam-era protests fall outside the bounds of the most widely recognized forms of feminism from

[23] As Fonda writes in a short explanatory essay on her website (though not linked directly to the pages selling mug shot merchandise), "I have gotten a lot of questions about my mug shot—what's the story behind it? Is it a real mug shot?" (Fonda Mugshot).

[24] In her 2005 autobiography, *My Life So Far,* Fonda quotes her own journal entry from 1970, in which she writes, "Don't understand the women's liberation movement. There are more important things to have a movement for, it seems to me. To focus on women's issues is diversionary when so much wrong is being done in the world. Each woman should take it upon herself to be liberated and show a man what that means" (235).

the 1980s through 2019. Indeed, the history of the time period between 1980 and the present includes significant use of specific forms of feminist and LGBTQIA+ politics as justification for U.S. imperialism abroad and increasing criminalization and incarceration at home (Spade and Willse 7**)**.

It is into these confusing waters that I dive in this chapter, which primarily explores the period in Fonda's career referenced by the legwarmers and leotard worn by the caricature on the "Not Fond'a Hanoi Jane" t-shirts: aerobics Jane, fitness queen and face of *Jane Fonda's Workout*. Aerobics Jane is pointedly not taken up as a symbol of contemporary feminist resistance to patriarchal power. Rather, images of workout-era Fonda in her spandex and tights are more likely to be reproduced as part of humorous memes, GIFs, or *SNL* skits which poke fun at the style, if not so much at the popularity or utility, of these earlier exercise trends.

While scholarship on *Jane Fonda's Workout* tends to see her earlier activism as irrelevant to the development of her fitness empire, in this chapter I argue that tracing the histories of "Hanoi Jane" and "Workout Jane" alongside one another reveals important continuities that make the two figures very relevant to one another, as well as emblematic of larger historical transformations taking place in the late 1970s and 1980s. Both Hanoi Jane and Workout Jane represent modes of disciplining the speech and behavior of women, and especially of elite white women. In the more than forty years since U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, Fonda has continued to be the target of a relentless stream of misogynist criticism, occasionally directed at her from well-known right-wing public figures like William F. Buckley, Jr. (founder of the conservative magazine, *National Review*) or Donald Trump Jr., but more often emerging from working and middle-class

conservative men and/or members of particular organizations of military veterans (Burke 183). These attacks, while focusing on Fonda as an individual, receive considerable public attention and thus they continue to mark women's critiques of U.S. militarism and imperialism, in particular, as out of bounds and indicative of treachery, a layered treachery that involves the interrelated betrayal of nation, race, and gender.[25] Meanwhile, critiques of gendered violence that ignore U.S. imperial and settler colonial projects are often able to operate within a framework of reform that does not threaten the foundations—theoretical or material—of national state (and increasingly, of transnational corporate) power.

Hanoi Jane and the Jane of *Jane Fonda's Workout* are both constructed as responses to particular kinds of harm, and each figure operates as a touchstone for interrelated but rarely overlapping intimate publics. An intimate public, as Lauren Berlant describes it, is a community of strangers brought together by their shared consumption of some mass-mediated object (a television show; a celebrity; a brand of cereal; etc.); their intimacy is generated by the "expectation that the consumers of [this] particular stuff," whatever it may be, "*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (viii). Hanoi Jane and *Jane Fonda's Workout* are objects at the center of two distinct intimate publics; each figure inspires "affective…identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*" (Berlant viii).

[25] A more recent example of white female public figures receiving angry criticisms after antiwar protest involves the country-rock group, The Dixie Chicks, whose lead singer Natalie Maines said the band was "ashamed" of President George H.W. Bush and the U.S.-led Iraq War in 2003. See Erin Witte's essay, "'The Dixie Chicks' to 'The Dixie Sluts': Gender and Scapegoating in a Time of War."

Those who rage against Hanoi Jane share (or come to share)[26] an understanding of U.S. history ("a broadly common historical experience") in which U.S. soldiers serving in the Vietnam war, as well as those serving in more recent and ongoing conflicts, are victimized by those who protest U.S. militarism. In the case of Hanoi Jane, the feelings of victimization and the scale of the betrayal are greatly heightened due to the gender and racial dynamics at play. As Dean Spade and Craig Willse write, "[i]mperialism and militarism are always, among other things, sexual and gender projects that use sexual, gender, and family norms as technologies of intervention and violence" (7). Popularized in the decades following the end of the conflict, the dominant narrative about the Vietnam War in the U.S. social imaginary was "a story of the unmanning of America" that saw U.S. defeat as "an embarrassment to American visions of global sovereignty" and, concomitantly to American masculinity (Mann 5). Thus, the particular rancor that fuels hatred of Hanoi Jane is not simply about Fonda's opposition to the war, but is about how Fonda's antiwar protests deviate from the expectation that privileged white civilian women will provide aid and comfort to the soldiers who—and this is a key point—are understood to be fighting precisely on these women's behalf, whatever the actual motivations of the war may be (Burke 185).[27] The patriarchal military mandate to protect

[26] As Erin Witte and Carol Burke have written about, the continued hatred of Hanoi Jane requires the ongoing education of young people, specifically new military recruits, who otherwise tend to have no idea who Fonda is—though the series of well-publicized public actions she's participated in over the last two years might be altering this and making her more recognizable to younger generations.

[27] While in this chapter I typically refer to the antiwar movement as a singular entity, there are important variations within the ideological framing of antiwar sentiments, particularly across different movements for racial liberation. This chapter and dissertation would benefit from more precise handling of this, drawing on resources like Sandra Chong's work on black nationalist and Asian American anti-Vietnam War protests in the *Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era,* and on primary sources like the "Letter to a North Vietnamese Sister from an Afro-American Woman—Sept. 1968," collected in the "Poor Black Women's Study Papers by Poor Black Women of Mount Vernon, New York," anthologized in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* (1970).

women is, of course, formed in relation to ideologies of race and nation; in this instance, it does not extend to include Vietnamese women, many of whom were casualties of the conflict including as the victims of sexual violence at the hands of U.S. soldiers (Weaver 5). Thus, implicit in framing Fonda as a traitor is an understanding of the role that elite women are supposed play within U.S. imperial projects.

While Hanoi Jane functions to establish a community among those who feel wounded by Fonda's supposed betrayal, this wound is not an injury that is meant to be healed. In fact, the purpose of Hanoi Jane is to maintain a continually open wound, shared by all those who belong to this intimate public. As long as the injury remains unhealed, the vehement rebuke, usually couched in explicitly misogynistic language meant to put Fonda and the war's other feminized protestors in their place, can recur whenever it is needed. In contrast, *Jane Fonda's Workout* is loosely framed around the idea that Fonda and women in general are victims of a kind of diluted patriarchal violence, and that self-discipline, in the form of regular exercise and proper nutrition, can free them from this state of weakness and victimhood. As a mainstream feminine self-empowerment project, *Jane Fonda's Workout* might seem to have little in common with Hanoi Jane, especially given that the *Workout* materials seem intent on forgetting that the Vietnam War ever happened, while the figure of Hanoi Jane is specifically meant to keep a particular version of the war alive in popular memory.

However, like Hanoi Jane, the *Jane Fonda's Workout* materials are representative of the push to re-masculinize the U.S. nation and its citizens during the "large-scale renegotiation and regeneration of the interests, values, and projects of patriarchy…taking place" in post-Vietnam U.S. social relations (Jeffords xi). Susan Jeffords and Lynda E.

Boose have analyzed how action films centering hypermasculine figures like *Rambo* contributed to the "cultural reassertion of American masculinity in its invulnerable form" (Mann 5). Mirroring this cinematic emphasis on bulked-up action heroes, by the early 1980s the mellower and more introspective exercise practices popular in the seventies (like jogging, of instance) were being outmoded by fitness regimes that prioritized achieving "an American ruggedness," signified by adding musculature and conveying the external appearance of strength (McKenzie 145). *Jane Fonda's Workout* offers a feminine counterpart to "rugged," masculine fitness practices of the 1980s. It illustrates remasculinization's feminizing counterpart: the re-feminization of women and concomitant heightened policing of groups marked as deviant in relation to "traditional" forms of femininity.

Fonda's brand of commercial fitness regimes, which included exercise manuals, diet advice, brief political essays advocating ethical consumerism, and, of course, the extremely popular series of workout videos, focus on the achievement and maintenance of a newly "tough" and muscled—but nonetheless slender and graceful—form of femininity that functions to affirm the heterosexuality of the decade's male fitness trends. The *Jane Fonda's Workout* materials further contribute to the remasculinization of U.S. culture through their emphasis on women's responsibilities as wives and mothers. While the series' language of women's empowerment borrows from feminist discourse in its loose analysis of the harm done to women who internalize unrealistic beauty standards and expectations, the *Workout*'s emphasis on rigorous self-discipline alongside maternal responsibility illustrates how neoliberal emphasis on the individual's role in their own self-

maintenance can work in tandem with discourses that underscore the importance of the nuclear family unit and traditional gender roles to a well-functioning society.

The *Workout*'s utility in bringing these elements—neoliberal individualism and traditional family values—together is made evident by placing its language of personal responsibility, self-discipline, and maternal morality in juxtaposition with the longstanding myths about "immoral, neglectful, and domineering Black mothers" that were supplanted, in the 1980s, by images of "welfare queens" and pregnant, unwed teenagers (Roberts 17). The message imparted by the *Jane Fonda's Workout* exercise books exhorted mothers to be mindful, moderate consumers, and self-empowered, independent, but nevertheless irrefutably feminine women. Meanwhile, U.S. political discourse demonized various forms as dependency. Poor black women and other poor women were attributed traits like laziness, irresponsibility, and uncontrollable sexual desire. These traits were figured as irrefutable markers of pathological and heritable "unfitness" for self-government and the women possessing these traits were framed as a drain on public resources (Roberts 17).

Read in this larger context, *Jane Fonda's Workout* materials provided an important opportunity for a racialized and gendered rehabilitation of Fonda's image (as an individual), while they also served the broader cultural function of disciplining middle- and upper-class women (primarily but not only white, and primarily but not only heterosexual) during a decade that entertained both the idea that the U.S. had arrived in a post-feminist era, and powerful rhetoric focusing on the deterioration of the "traditional family" as a primary cause of national economic woes and political weakness. Because this discourse on traditional values operates through villainizing

its own set of scapegoats—particularly the black, single, often teenage mother and the so-called welfare queen—the disciplinary function of *Jane Fonda's Workout* must be understood for how it contributes the solidification of hierarchies of worthiness/unworthiness that operate in racialized and gendered ways.

While I include a great deal of biographical information about Fonda in this chapter, as well as quoting from texts she authored herself (insofar as we can distinguish Fonda's individual voice from the editorial processes involved in these texts' publication), this chapter is not about Fonda as an individual. Instead, it is about juxtaposing and historicizing several specific and distinct personas that she has been understood to embody throughout her long career, and then interpreting the cultural and political work these personas perform within American society. Though certainly she has had a part in shaping various aspects of her celebrity image, I am not attributing individual responsibility to Fonda for the creation or functioning of these personas. As Jerry Lembcke emphasizes in discussing "Hanoi Jane," attributing agency and responsibility to individuals, especially those with iconic visibility and status, obscures the fictiveness of iconicity and the larger conditions which enable it.

EARLY LIFE

Born in 1937, Jane Fonda is the second child of Frances Ford Seymour, and the first child Frances had with her second husband, the actor, Henry Fonda. Frances Ford Seymour was first married to a wealthy New York City lawyer, George T. Brokaw, who died in 1935. By August of 1936, Frances was engaged to Fonda, who had also been briefly married once before to the actress Margaret Sullivan, a partnership which ended in divorce in 1931. At the time of their marriage, Henry Fonda was a newly emerging film

star. Richard Dyer argues that "being interested in stars is being interested in how we are human now" (16). He writes,

> We're fascinated by stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres…Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed. (16)

Dyer writes that a

> film star's image is not just [their] films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about [them], as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech. (16-17)

While Fonda's film career is not the focus of this essay, her status as the daughter of a famous actor and her early visibility as a model and actress in the late 1950s and 1960s establish the initial terms of Fonda's own star image. The creation of Fonda's public image was set in motion even before she was born, due to the combination of her father's status as a celebrated film star and her mother's position as a member of wealthy east coast high society. Fonda's parents' engagement in 1936 was announced in the "Social News" section of *The New York Times.* The announcement describes how "Mrs. G.T. Brokaw," the "daughter of E.F. Seymours" and "widow of lawyer" George T. Brokaw,

has now become the fiancée of actor and "screen star," Henry Fonda, and it traces then-Frances Seymour Brokaw's lineage back to both the British aristocracy (Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset during the reign of Henry VIII) and "Major Samuel Adams, a prominent figure in the Revolutionary War and a cousin of John Adams" ("Mrs. G.T. Brokaw" 12).

As Henry Fonda's and Frances Seymour's engagement announcement illustrates, *The New York Times'* social news pages offer a useful illustration of how marriage and patriarchal gender roles (including the act of naming, i.e. Fonda's mother being identified by patronym, primarily as her father's daughter, her first husband's widow, and her second husband's intended bride) are instrumental to the intergenerational transfer of wealth within families, and to both the maintenance of class hierarchies and select forms of class mobility. For instance, the details of Frances Seymour's aristocratic heritage—both in terms of the titled British aristocracy and the less formalized American "aristocracy" of colonial elites like John Adams—are balanced by the details of Henry Fonda's emerging fame as an actor, which supplement his middle-class, mid-western upbringing to justify his entrance, via marriage, into New York high society.

The marriage did not appear to be a happy one, at least not for long. Another *New York Times* headline from 1943, which reads "Fonda Contradicts Girl: Actor-Seaman, Through Wife, Denies He is the Father of Baby," neatly demonstrates the public scrutiny of the Fonda family's private lives that was a consequence and mechanism of their celebrity. The headline also illustrates how patriotism and military service became an important part of Henry Fonda's star image during World War II, which would become important to Jane Fonda's image as an antiwar activist decades later. Furthermore, it

captures how marriage serves to define and legitimate some relationships and forms of femininity while delegitimating others. The word "girl" is used to describe and discredit the 25-year-old woman, Barbara Thompson, who claimed Henry Fonda as the father of her child, while Frances Seymour Fonda, described repeatedly as "wife," responds to the situation by asserting her matter-of-course belief in her husband's emphatic denial of the suit Miss Thompson brings against him ("Fonda Contradicts Girl" 23).[28]

Jane Fonda is born into this constellation of patriarchal gender expectations, elite class status and inheritance, and Hollywood celebrity. The newsworthiness of her parents' relationship—or more specifically, how the news items crafted about their relationship draw on and perform patriarchal grammars of gendered intimacy—illustrate Dyer's argument about how stars function as "embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives" (16). Particularly pertinent to the Fonda family's public image are the social categories that comprise state-legitimated heteronormativity: daughter, wife, widow, mother, father, husband, etc. After Henry and Frances Fonda separated in the late 1940s, Frances was institutionalized in a sanitorium in Beacon, NY, where she committed suicide in April of 1950, when Jane was 12. They were still married at the time of her death, though Frances Fonda had written her husband out of her will, leaving her estate to her mother and to

[28] In a separate article that gives more detail about Henry Fonda's denial of Barbara Thompson's paternity suit, Fonda describes Thompson as "a very lewd and lascivious person" (23). He attests to her frequent arrests for "complaints of drunkenness and immorality" and describes how she "associated with many men and had the 'opportunity' to become intimate with them" before going on to dismiss her charges as attempted extortion (23). His denial usefully hits on multiple ways to discredit women via character assassination – it is useful to remember that while these characteristics are instrumentally leveraged against white women, they're considered inherent to stereotypes of black women's characters.

Jane and Jane's younger brother, Peter.[29] In December of that year, Henry Fonda married 22-year-old Susan Blanchard, with whom he'd allegedly begun the affair that led to his separation from Frances.

This news, too, was the stuff of gossip and social news column headlines. Thus when Jane Fonda's name began to appear in newspapers and magazines during the early years of her own career as an actress and model, her public image already carried with it traces of these earlier representations of her parents, and particularly of her father. The fact that Henry Fonda was known for his service in the U.S. Navy during World War II and for his passionate support of the U.S. democratic party would be important to how his daughter's later antiwar activism would be represented and understood. "Star images have histories," Dyer writes, explaining that different and even openly contradictory elements of a celebrity's persona can circulate simultaneously, both within a given period of a star's career and at different stages of their career's progression, including after their deaths (17). The social categories that feature prominently in representations of her parents' romance and marriage—particularly those of daughter, wife, and mother—rise and fall in importance during particular periods of Fonda's career, also interacting with (and sometimes co-constituting) the new categories like "sex symbol," "activist," "traitor," and "fitness icon" that come to comprise Fonda's complex and evolving image over the later decades of the twentieth century.

PIN-UP GIRLS and *BARBARELLA*:

Fonda's own career as a model and actress took off quickly in the 1960s, aided by

[29] Jane Seymour Brokaw Fonda also had a daughter from her first marriage, Frances Brokaw, though her will notes that she did not leave any of her remaining estate to Frances because Frances had been provided for by her father's will upon his passing.

the sexy-but-wholesome "star persona that wedded her Hollywood pedigree" as Henry Fonda's daughter to "a conventional model of stardom for attractive female performers in postwar America: the pin-up girl" (Pramaggiore 16). Pin-ups are mass-produced images that most often feature conventionally attractive young women (young, white, blonde, and thin), usually in teasingly sexual but often not explicit postures and attires; the name comes from their intended use as informal decorations, pinned or pasted up for display in any number of places. Betty Grable is the subject of perhaps the most famous pin-up photograph in U.S. history (Figure 4), an image distributed to nearly five million U.S. serviceman during World War II (Westbrook 596).

Figure 4: Betty Grable's Iconic 1943 Pin-Up (Powolny)

The function of pin-ups within military contexts is particularly relevant to Fonda's public image in the 1960s and 1970s. Pin-ups were explicitly sanctioned and promoted by the U.S. military during World War II, when "the United States government and the film industry co-operated closely…in the production and distribution of millions of photographs" of Hollywood actresses and starlets, making these images a "nearly ubiquitous visual component…of the cultural landscape of war" (Westbrook 595). As

Robert Westbrook writes, pin-ups decorated not only bunks and barracks, but also "the bulkheads of ships, and the fuselages of planes," both within the United States and throughout the network of overseas U.S. military bases, the number and range of which expanded greatly during World War II (595). While the wartime high of "more than 2,000 overseas military installations" was reduced by 1949, the "accelerated expansion of [U.S.] base structures in the Pacific" and elsewhere during WWII signaled U.S. interest in establishing itself as a dominant global military power in the postwar era (Höhn and Moon 35-36). Where U.S. soldiers went in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, oftentimes images of pin-up girls went there too, their presence marking the importance of particular ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, and nation to militarism and imperialism.

John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman argue that World War II-era pin-ups were intended by the government to "encourage heterosexual fantasy" and manage anxieties about homosexuality within "the sex-segregated military" (qtd. in Westbrook 595). D'Emilio and Freedman explain that U.S. military officials believed the necessary aggressiveness of effective soldiers was linked to "healthy, heterosexual desire," and pin-ups were meant not only to help sustain these fantasies, but also to endorse masturbation as a method of thwarting "epidemics of venereal disease" (qtd. in Westbrook 595). However, Robert Westbrook claims that pin-ups performed a more important function as "icons of the private interests and obligations for which soldiers were fighting" (596). Westbrook notes how military recruitment propaganda from the period before U.S. entry into World War II relied on tropes of patriarchal protection as motivation for enlistment.

Some ads encouraged men to enlist out of their "private…obligation to the women they, as individuals, protect": their sisters, wives, and sweethearts (Westbrook 592).

Others, especially those belonging to the "prominent genre of Allied 'rape propaganda,'" urged men to enlist to protect white American women from the threat of rape by invading soldiers, often portrayed in racialized terms (e.g., "the yellow hand of lust") or cartoons drawing on traditions of racial caricature (Westbrook 592-594).[30] Thus pin-ups, with their sexual-but-not-too-sexual images of women who are framed as potential girlfriends or wives make visible the so-called "'proper' modern sexuality" that is imagined to distinguish U.S. soldiers from their enemies and to establish the superiority of U.S. national culture in relation to more "primitive" others (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 14). This focus on the proper objects of desire deflects attention from the myriad forms of sexual interaction occurring between U.S. soldiers and local inhabitants of the areas around international U.S. military bases and disavows the strategic importance of rape as an explicit strategy in many instances of modern warfare, including but not limited to those involving the U.S. (Weaver 2).[31]

Fonda was well established as an object of desire within U.S. visual culture during the 1960s. "Clearly blonde, blue-eyed, and white…Fonda played a variety of pin-up types" early in her career (Anderson 318). Emily Anderson argues that "it was Fonda's overwhelming Americanness," established by her body's appearance in images that

[30] The examples Westbrook analyzes primarily deal with U.S. fears of Japanese invasion.
[31] In *Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape and the Vietnam War*, Gina Maria Weaver writes that the testimony of American soldiers about the rapes they committed as part of their service in Vietnam has received relatively little scholarly attention in relation to the role of sexual violence in wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Latin America, among other places. She attributes this relative silence not so much to "systemic discrimination or blindness to women's issues," but to the fact that "the Vietnam War involved the United States [and] American discourse about the Vietnam War has, from the beginning, largely focused on the cost to America and its citizens…effectively discourage[ing] the acknowledgement of non-American views of the war" (2). The testimony of U.S. soldiers during the Winter Soldier Investigation that Fonda was involved with during her antiwar activism included numerous testimonies about rapes committed by U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, which adds another layer to considering Fonda's own antiwar activism and her later identification with the feminist movement.

constructed her as various ideals of white femininity (from "girl next door" to "hooker with a heart of gold") that led to "her undoing in North Vietnam," where her body's presence on an enemy anti-aircraft gun "unforgivably transgressed the borders of proper femininity, and in the process undermined American masculinity" (318). For Anderson, "when the image of Fonda's body transformed from an object to be acted upon, to a body that acted," and that acted not in support of acceptable domestic causes but questioned U.S. militarism from beyond the borders of the nation-state, she became a "treacherous pin-up" (319).

In tracing Fonda's journey from sex symbol to traitor, it is worth noting that Fonda's image had international and domestic dimensions well before her antiwar activism led to the airport arrest on her return from giving a speech in Canada and the infamous photographs taken during her visit to North Vietnam. In a 1967 article commenting on Fonda's early film career, titled "Here's What Happened to Baby Jane," an American journalist frames Fonda as a sex symbol with two very different public images, one foreign, one domestic:

> Over *here*, she sounds like the girl you dated in college, she dresses like the pretty roommate of the girl you dated in college, and most people still think of her as Henry Fonda's daughter. Over *there*…she sounds like the girls you eavesdropped on in Parisian cafés, she undresses like Brigette Bardot, and everyone knows her as the latest wife…of Roger Vadim, 38-year-old Connoisseur and Director of Beautiful Women. (Jonas 91)

While Fonda's domestic image is that of an accessible girl-next-door, youthful, collegiate, "pretty," and still her father's daughter, Fonda's international image is one of

mild cosmopolitan sexual rebellion, within the context of continued patriarchal control as the "latest" wife of a powerful older man and confirmed lothario.

Published in 1967, these are descriptions of Fonda from the period just before what she describes as her political awakening in 1968 and her subsequent entrance into activism. The article concludes with mention of the fact that Vadim and Fonda are planning to have their first child after they conclude making *Barbarella*, a film adapted from a French adult science fiction comic about a space traveler (Barbarella, played by Fonda, with Vadim directing) that involves multiple highly sexual plotlines, including the heroine surviving "torture" in a meant-to-be-fatal erotic pleasure-inducing machine (Figure 5*)*.[32] Critics' responses to *Barbarella* illustrate a common debate within Western feminism, as some reviewers understood the film primarily as an exercise in the objectification and sexual exploitation of women, while others read Fonda's performance, in particular, as a subversive or transgressive representation of female sexuality (Anderson 318).

[32] Before shooting the film, Vadim and Fonda (echoing his terms) describe *Barbarella* as rebuke of proscriptive Western morality and a celebration of innocent "eroticism" and unashamed female sexuality (Jonas 91). In her autobiography, however, Fonda describes her bulimia and reliance on Dexedrine during filming and Vadim's alcoholism and controlling behavior.

Figure 5: Jane Fonda as Barbella in Publicity Still (Bavagnoli)

Either way, films like *Barbarella* contributed to Fonda's star image, an image focused on "her body, her beauty, [and] her status as a pin-up," all of which later contributed to the difficulties she experienced "gaining legitimacy" as an activist and the backlash she received for using a platform she'd received in part by successfully commodifying her sexuality to address global political issues (Anderson 318).[33]

1968: Beginnings of Fonda's Activist Period

Fonda was busy in the 1960s, starring in "seventeen feature films in the United States and France, several Broadway plays, and a television special, while also working intermittently as a fashion model" (Pramaggiore 16). By her account, her political awakening did not really begin until close to the end of the decade, in 1968. Towards the end of the first chapter of her 2005 autobiography, *My Life So Far*, Fonda describes how

[33] As Anderson writes, "Although Fonda was an active political presence for several years before her 1972 trip, because of her body, her beauty, her status as a pin-up, she often had difficulty gaining legitimacy and was considered little more than a dilettante by many other activists as well as the greater American public" (Anderson 318).

she spent the summer after *Barbarella*'s release. That summer happened to be the momentous summer of 1968, a year that began with the Tet Offensive (North Vietnam and the Viet Cong's campaign of surprise attacks against civilian and military command centers throughout South Vietnam), a year that saw the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April and riots across 125 American cities as many urban black residents took to the streets and were met by police and National Guardsmen deployed to maintain order (Ribero 147). In June, Senator and Democratic Presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. That spring and summer protests and riots swept through cities around the world and Fonda, who was living in Paris witnessed the early days of student demonstrations, general strikes, and occupations (Les Événements de Mai) in the city's Latin Quarter before she and Vadim left the city for the quiet of the Mediterranean coast.

They left in part because Fonda was six months pregnant with her first child in the summer of 1968 and Vadim thought she should be further from the unrest sweeping through Paris. Living in a rented house near Saint Tropez with Vadim, Fonda describes her pregnancy as a period of increasing alienation from her husband and their somewhat "licentious" lifestyle.[34] She reflects on experiencing an inward turn, a "retreat into my own world, encapsulated in the cocoon of my pregnancy" (201). As Fonda frames it in *My Life So Far*, it is the physical reality of being pregnant that provided the model-actress with a long overdue opportunity for introspection and reevaluation. Finally, at the age of thirty, the importance of her body's interior—validated by the child growing inside

[34] While in earlier interviews Fonda and Vadim frame their relationship in terms of Fonda's liberation from bourgeois sexual norm, in *My Life So Far,* Fonda is forthright about the other women involved in her marriage to Vadim and cites Vadim's preference for this menage-à-trois lifestyle as a central contributing factor in the dissolution of her marriage.

her—exceeded the importance of her very public, much-photographed and much-filmed exterior.

Though she marks her pregnancy as a period of deeply personal transformation, in her autobiography Fonda explains her inward turn as also bringing her into a new awareness of various intensifying political struggles geographically and socially removed from her own situation and experiences. Describing her summer of 1968, Fonda writes:

> I spent most of my time floating on an inflatable raft in the pristine Mediterranean waters, my big belly curving towards the sun, reading (incongruously) *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. [The book] rocked me to my core. Malcolm's story opened a window onto a reality I had ignored. But the greatest revelation the book brought me was the possibility of profound human transformation. (201)

In this passage, Fonda's typically blunt, unembellished prose becomes momentarily imagistic and descriptive. She describes her "big belly curving towards the sun" and the "pristine…waters" of the Mediterranean, creating a picture for the reader that focuses on the solitude of her pregnant body (201). As Fonda notes in her reflections, this was an idyllic but simultaneously discordant image: a nearly-nine-months pregnant wealthy white American film star, sunbathing alone in the Mediterranean sea, while reading one of the most widely circulated texts about the black male experience of racist oppression in the United States, a text written by a man who had been assassinated just over three years earlier.

A period of nearly forty years spans Fonda's reading of Malcolm X's 1965 autobiography it in 1968 to the moment of Fonda recalling and transcribing this episode for her own autobiography in 2005. This period is one of dramatic renegotiations in the

processes and formations of global political and economic power. In *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed describes how, during this same period, literature became institutionalized "as a privileged apparatus for knowing difference," which is precisely how Fonda describes her 1968 encounter with Malcolm X's text (xvi). She writes, "[t]hat summer in Saint Tropez, I began to search my soul to see which kind of white person I was. While theoretically I didn't think I was a racist, I hadn't had enough contact with black people to know with certainty. That would change. Malcolm had allowed me for the first time to have a glimpse into what racism feels like to a black man" (202).

Fonda's account of the transformative effects of reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* relies on an implicit understanding of how literature, and particularly "minoritized" literature, can function to educate and alter its readers. It positions literature, and specifically autobiography, as a way of bridging the presumed-to-be-unassimilable experiences of differently racialized subjects. In this episode from Fonda's *My Life So Far*, the content of categories of racial difference—e.g. "white" or "black"—is inherent and unquestioned, and the suggestion is that literature can create a window that allows members of one identity category to "see" into the experiences of another identity category, ultimately contributing to a more complete understanding of what it means to be human. Melamed argues that this understanding of how literature participates in the construction of racial meanings, and the amelioration of racial "misunderstandings" emerges within the context of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century neoliberal multiculturalism. She opposes this framework for analyzing literature

to a stance that critically interrogates the functions of literature in the constant production and reproduction of racial meanings.

What Melamed's work makes clear is that the assumption that specific literary texts offer windows into experiences of racial alterity, thus making this knowledge available to readers across a range of social locations, emerges within a specific historical context (post-WWII). While Melamed describes how literature becomes a "privileged apparatus for knowing difference," Lauren Berlant has analyzed how specific cultural forms, including literary texts, become apparatuses for *knowing sameness*. In her introduction to *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Berlant writes, "the autobiographical isn't personal…In the contemporary consumer public…all sorts of narratives are read as biographies of collective experience. The personal is general. Publics presume intimacy" (vii). The preface to Fonda's *My Life So Far* illustrates the salience of Berlant's "nonintuitive" presupposition that "the personal is general" (vii). Describing the motivations that led her to write the book, Fonda writes:

> Coming to see my various individual struggles within a broader societal context enabled me to understand that much of my journey was a universal one for women—played out in different ways and with different outcomes perhaps, but with common core experiences…I hope that other women might see something of their own experiences in what I have to say about how a girl can lose touch with herself, her body, and have to struggle—hard—to get herself, her voice back… (viii).

Fonda's conclusion that "much of [her] journey was a universal one for women" borrows one of the primary structures of self-understanding associated with twentieth century feminism and women's liberation: the idea that women's individual experiences unfold within a collectively shared, albeit heterogeneous, experience of gender.[35]

Later in her pregnancy, confined to her to bed due the risk of miscarriage, Fonda describes the impact of the images she saw "on French television showing damage caused by American bombers [in Vietnam] that, en route back to their aircraft carriers, unloaded bombs they hadn't already dropped, sometimes hitting schools, hospitals, and churches" (*My Life* 192). Chong describes how, within the U.S., the Vietnam War was becoming the primary focus of a growing television news industry in the late 1960s (38). Having "established its authority and prominence by its coverage of the civil rights movement in the 1950s," television and television news, in particular, had begun to posit itself as a "national medium" whose "monopoly on realism, especially in representing seemingly unmediated spectacles of black suffering for the white (i.e. national) gaze" elevated it above print media (Chong 38). As the Vietnam War started to receive more media attention in the late 1960s, thanks in part to the Tet Offensive in 1968 and belated revelations of the My Lai Massacre later that year, "the Vietnam War began to take the place of the civil rights movement as the content in this equation between news apparatus and the body politic, with equally abject spectacles of oriental suffering" (Chong 38).

Fonda's move back to the United States was motivated by both *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and televised images of Vietnamese suffering at the hands of the U.S. military, but her timing, returning at the end of the 1960s, coincided with the

[35] This is important to the analysis at the end of this chapter of how Fonda frames both American and Vietnamese women as victims of "*Playboy* culture" in the introduction to her first exercise manual.

national antiwar movement gathering power. Fonda had participated in fundraisers for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the early 1960s, but as she describes herself,

> in the years since I'd been living outside the United States, there had been a sea change in the civil rights movement. The nonviolent strategy that had been its foundation was based on the assumption that there was a latent conscience in America that, when appealed to, would step up and put an end to segregation. What had become apparent to blacks and to white civil rights workers alike was that neither the segregationist South nor the northern white liberal establishment was ready to integrate. Yes, laws had changed. But the new laws did little to alter the segregationists' pathological hatred of integration. The liberal establishment, with some exceptions, seemed to support the movement but refrained from taking strong enough action to protect civil rights workers from violence or to uphold the law. Apparently the Democratic party had been too dependent on racist Dixiecrats to dare to rock the boat seriously. But too much had happened and too much blood had been shed for the activists to settle for liberal tokenism. (*My Life* 172)

Though she was briefly involved with the Black Panther Party following her return to the states, her support of the Panthers "consisted wholly of raising bail money," and the increasing militancy of the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, as well as their wholly justified concerns about infiltration by undercover agents, made domestic protests for racial justice a less viable avenue for Fonda's growing activism (*My Life* 222).

Though Fonda's activism ultimately largely consisted of touring with FTA, and organizing, fundraising for and speaking out on behalf of organizations like Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the Winter Soldier Investigation, her antiwar work was actually spurred into motion by her early contacts with other political movements operating in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly the American Indian Movement. In 1969 she visited members of the Indians of All Tribes organization during their fourteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island; in 1970, she visited Native activists near Seattle, Washington, who had reclaimed the decommissioned Fort Lawton as an urban Indian cultural center; As she writes, "[i]t was not a Vietnam War protest but my trips to Alcatraz and Fort Lawton that morphed me from a noun to a verb. A verb is active and less ego-oriented. Being a verb means being defined by action, not by title" (222).

Later that same year Fonda would be arrested at an airport in Cleveland while returning from a speaking engagement in Canada. In an attempt to discredit Fonda and disrupt her antiwar protests, authorities accused her of drug-smuggling and the mugshots from this arrest—featuring Fonda's distinctive brunette shag haircut and upraised fist, were widely circulated and ultimately backfired somewhat by drumming up interest in her political speaking engagements. Due to her involvement with the Black Panthers, AIM, and her increasingly vocal antiwar protests, Fonda was a target of the National Security Administration's "Project Minaret" and the FBI's notorious counter-intelligence programs, known as COINTELPRO. In *My Life So Far*, Fonda quotes extensively from her FBI files (which she obtained via the Freedom of Information Act), explaining that transcripts of her telephone calls in 1970 were distributed to President Nixon, Secretary

of State Henry Kissinger, and other top government officials. However, the FBI never officially went forward with the charges of sedition they hoped to level at her (256).

Scapegoats, "Betrayal," and the Creation of Hanoi Jane

When Jane Fonda traveled to Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam, in 1972, "more than three hundred other American peace activists had already been there," which helps explain why Fonda's visit, at the time, was greeted with little fanfare in the domestic press (Lembcke 12-13). A few weeks after her return, in August of 1972, the *New York Times* published a very short article noting that the Veterans of Foreign Wars "accused Jane Fonda, the actress, and the former Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, of being 'traitorous meddlers' in United States foreign policy and recommended that they be prosecuted" (9). However, the widespread and virulent outrage against Fonda, on account of her visit to Hanoi, would not emerge until years later, and it would be built out of details of her visit that were not seen as significant enough to deserve comprehensive coverage in the press at the time.

The bulk of Fonda's antiwar activism revolved around the traveling theater troupe, Free the Army, usually shortened to F.T.A, a play on the soldiers' expression, "Fuck the Army," and the Army's slogan of offering "Fun, Travel, and Adventure" (Burke 185). Fonda co-founded the F.T.A. with Donald Sutherland and Jules Feiffer. Parodying the United Service Organization's (USO) entertainment of U.S. troops at military bases around the world, F.T.A. "used music, dance, and theater to poke fun at military leaders and criticize U.S. policy in Vietnam" (Lembcke 2). Quickly banned from performing on bases, F.T.A. organized with "dissident GI groups and antiwar activists" to perform for soldiers at "off-base sites in the United States and Pacific Rim countries" (Lembcke 2).

When the story of the My Lai massacre broke in the *New York Times* in 1969, a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) solicited Fonda's support for the Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI), their campaign to publicize, via public hearing, the other war crimes and atrocities committed by the U.S. Army and its allies in Vietnam, as well as in Laos and Cambodia (*My Life* 260). One of the WSI's primary goals was to refute the Army's claim that the My Lai massacre was an isolated, aberrant incident caused by a single Lieutenant and the men he commanded (*My Life* 260).

It was her involvement with the WSI that would lead to Fonda's arrest in 1970. Fonda, who had just wrapped shooting the film *Klute,* began a six-week speaking tour that took her to fifty-four college campuses around the U.S. and Canada (*My Life* 261). When she was reentering the United States after giving her first speech in Ontario, Canada, Fonda was stopped by a customs official at the Cleveland International Airport. After being held overnight, Fonda was charged with drug smuggling and assaulting an airport official, then was let go after paying $5500 in bonds to secure her release (*My Life* 263). The actress's arrest on drug smuggling charges made headlines around the country and news stories were often accompanied by images of Fonda handcuffed to a deputy sheriff or by a mug shot, in which she was seen raising her hand in a "Power to the People" fist (261). Far from discouraging mainstream support of Fonda, her widely publicized arrest drummed up attendance at the rest of her speaking tour, even as many conservative politicians and other members of the military criticized her actions, often framing her as a clueless sex symbol gone rogue. Overall, at the time, the response to Fonda's arrest in 1970 was more sensationalized than her visit to Hanoi in 1972, and responses to each incident revealed wide support for Fonda's actions, as well as criticism.

(It is also noteworthy that critical responses to Fonda's activism were strongest when those actions took place outside the U.S., first in Canada and then in Hanoi.)

Given that opposition to the Vietnam War was widespread and well-documented throughout the conflict's long duration, it is worth asking *why* Fonda's image, following the end of the war, was in need of rehabilitation in the first place. As multiple scholars have noted, Fonda's public opposition to the war in Vietnam was actually indicative of how mainstream the protests of U.S. involvement in Vietnam were throughout the 1960s and 1970s, rather than being indicative of Fonda holding radical, unpopular political views (Lembcke vii; Burke 177; Witte 11). Thus the answer to this question of why Fonda's image needed rehabilitation has more to do with how the U.S. responded to not winning the war, and a constellation of other distinct but interrelated political and economic challenges, than it does with her protests themselves.

In *My Life So Far*, Fonda traces the genesis of Hanoi Jane "mythmaking" back to 1973, "after U.S. POWs had returned home" to a "lavish" welcome known as Operation Homecoming (325). For the Pentagon and the Nixon administration, the return of POWs functioned as a small substitute for victory in the war itself, and the widely publicized narratives of prisoners tortured at the hands of North Vietnamese soldiers began to displace protestors' emphasis on crimes committed against Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian civilians. During her visit to Hanoi, Fonda made a number of radio broadcasts, primarily addressed to U.S. pilots and documenting the damage done to villages and irrigation dikes by U.S. bombings. She also met with a small number of American prisoners held there, and she upon her return to the U.S., she attested to their "healthy and fit" appearance and reported the soldiers' own testimony at the time about having

received good treatment while in captivity (*My Life* 314). Thus, discrediting the reports of Fonda and other peace activists who attested to war crimes committed by the United States and challenged claims of systematic torture on the part of the North Vietnamese became crucial to establishing the authority and veracity of the POW torture narratives (Lembcke 34).

Jerry Lembcke explains that the turn to POW captivity narratives as a method of neutralizing and discrediting the war's critics and opponents draws strength from the captivity narrative's history as the United States' "first literary form" (36). Historically, Lembcke writes, captivity narratives, construct

> the dialectical tensions that defined what was American and what was not. At one pole, the image of 'them,' a racialized figure with a nomadic, libidinous, matriarchal, and pagan way of life, the attraction to which forced Puritans to recognize the 'them' in themselves. At the other pole, was 'us,' a godly but fearful people besieged by the beasts beyond the gates and beset with doubt about the Puritan will to resist the wild within. The ultimate threat to the settlements was on the inside, the inability to ward off Indian encroachments, but, as well, the failure to suppress the impulse to Indianism from within its own hearts and homes. The America birthed by this narrative was born embattled, and the American born with the values of discipline, self-denial, austerity, and subordination to authority inscribed in his genes was born a warrior—hard and male. (36)

The POW narratives popularized during the final years of the war and then in the decade to follow portrayed the soldiers in captivity as victims of the North Vietnamese, but also

as victims of the war's protestors, who were constructed as antisoldiers—lacking in self-discipline and respect for authority—despite the widespread antiwar sentiments held by many members of the armed forces.

Thus, "[r]econceived at a safe distance from images of either napalmed Vietnamese children or returning American body bags, the problem of Vietnam was no longer the excessive deployment of militarized values but the failure to deploy them strongly enough (Boose 72, qtd. in Mann). As this narrative took hold, it helped to establish a deep culture of aggrievement in which men, particularly soldiers, could be understood as simultaneously embodying American embattled masculinity, and as having been betrayed—victimized—first by the public, who had undercut support for the war, and further, by the politicians who, in this face of this opposition, had failed to provide the support necessary for victory (Mann 6).

This sense of aggrievement and betrayal was felt not only in response to U.S. failure to win the Vietnam War, but also in response to other economic, political, and cultural changes occurring across American society. Lembcke writes that in the late 1970s and early 1980s (following U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975),

> [t]he gap between rich and poor opened to record widths as New Deal labor gains were rolled back and social service programs were cut. In a search for explanations of their declining quality of life, millions of Americans were attracted to the demagogic rhetoric of the political Right that pointed to the defeat in Vietnam and the diminished U.S. global and economic supremacy that followed as the source of the problem. (4)

In addition to managing continued domestic economic stratification, the U.S. government was looking to reestablish its self-image as a supreme global power. Doing so would require a narrative of military defeat that could, paradoxically, continue to avow both the unmatched power of the U.S. military and the righteousness of the choices that justified the nation's continued use of force in imperial endeavors.

Beginning with stories shared by returning POWs, this narrative would emerge through reframing the widespread antiwar protests as betrayals not only of U.S. ideals, but of U.S. soldiers, both collectively and individually. Through presenting Vietnam veterans as victims of the war's opponents and their "anti-American" sentiments, the sense of national shame around having been proved fallible at the hands of the supposedly ill-equipped and disorganized North Vietnamese was largely transformed into a culture of aggrievement with expressly gendered dimensions. Susan Jeffords analyzes how mythologies of the Vietnam era created through later representations of the war helped achieve what she calls "the remasculinization of America" (xi). The figure of the Vietnam veteran was central to this project. Jeffords writes, "[r]ejected by an American society that came to see these men as emblems of loss, moral failure, or national decline, Vietnam representation could effectively portray [the war's veterans] as 'victims' of society, government, and the war itself" (xiv). The "most effective contribution" of this project of remasculinization was that it "provided 'evidence' of a group of men who were themselves victims, on a par with women, blacks, and other disenfranchised groups. Consequently, it could be argued that (white) men were not oppressors but instead, along with women and men of color, themselves victims" of oppression (Jeffords xiv).

In this context, the figure of Hanoi Jane functions in multiple ways. By recalling a complex scene of gendered and racialized betrayal—the figure of the U.S. soldier, tortured while imprisoned by the inhumane North Vietnamese, whose captivity is, in the first place, a result of the feminization of the home front—Hanoi Jane functions as a perennially open wound for those who share this world view. The rage expressed by those who share the sense of having been injured by Hanoi Jane is typically expressed in explicitly misogynist language, often paired with racist illustrations of Vietnamese soldiers (or civilians) and anti-communist sentiments. Thus, Hanoi Jane also functions to discipline the speech of those who would critique U.S. military or imperial power, and especially to discipline the speech of elite white women, who, due to their intimacy with and privileged status in relation to white patriarchal power, are expected to be willingly or submissively complicit in those projects, rather than outspokenly critical of them. This discipline comes both in the form of a warning ("do this, and here's how you can expect to be treated!") and through casting doubt on the speaker's authority in the first place.

Thus, Fonda provided a particularly useful scapegoat for those looking to shape historical narratives of the Vietnam era in a way that, first of all, undercuts and trivializes the legitimacy of the war's protestors; second, minimizes memories of the movement's mass base by focusing on individual actions rather than collective forms of protest; and third, paves the way for political rhetoric demanding a return to "traditional family values" that, throughout the 1980s, will effectively mobilize support for a variety of neoliberal economic and political principles. Beyond targeting Fonda as an individual, the figure of Hanoi Jane was one example of a strengthening "politics of vengeance" that appealed to many of the "thousands made vulnerable by the deteriorating condition of

their work and community lives" throughout the economic transformations of the 1970s and 1980s (Lembcke 4).

Post-War Period, Neoliberalism, and *The Workout*

After the end of the Vietnam War, Fonda and her then-husband, Tom Hayden (one of the co-founders of the group, Students for a Democratic Society) turned their attention to domestic U.S. politics and Fonda returned more actively to her film career, starring in three films between 1976-1977, three more in 1978, and six films between 1979-1982, when she appeared in *9 to 5* with Dolly Parton and Lily Tomlin. In 1979 Fonda also started a small, three-studio exercise business with her friend and trainer, Leni Cazden. Opening a fitness business was new territory for Fonda, who was in the midst of reestablishing her film career after her years of much publicized protest. Film, politics, and coincidence, shaped by larger historical circumstance, led to the initial development of Fonda's exercise brand: Fonda fractured her foot while filming *The China Syndrome* in 1978 and had to replace her daily ballet classes with another form of exercise. Fonda's injury occurred as the more casual and introspective fitness trends of the 1970s were giving way to increasingly "tough," rigorous, and overtly masculine forms of exercise that would characterize U.S. fitness practices in the 1980s. These shifts in fitness culture helped to manage national anxieties about the United States' apparent "softness" and weakness which, in the mid-1970s, were heightened by economic recession, military failure in Vietnam, and the significant expansion of Asia Pacific American and Latinx immigrant populations following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (McKenzie 11).

Fonda's political motivations for creating her fitness business also respond to this post-Vietnam historical context. She opened her exercise studios as a way to support the Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED). CED was a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to collective economic welfare that Fonda co-founded with her then-husband, activist and politician Tom Hayden, following his close but ultimately unsuccessful senate run in California in 1976. Thus, what would become the *Jane Fonda's Workout* empire, a world-wide fitness sensation, began as a small "fundraising venture to support…a pro-union, antipoverty…political reform organization" (Lembcke 130). For Fonda and Hayden the late 1970s and the formation of CED were an attempt to carry the political momentum of earlier decades forward into the 1980s. This would prove challenging, however, as the late 1970s and 1980s saw intense conservative countermobilizations in response to the progressive social movements of earlier decades, as well as the ascendance of neoliberal political and economic principles throughout the U.S and around the globe.

These conditions made it more difficult to mount substantial redistributive efforts aimed at leveling disparities in wealth and income, "political power, cultural capital, pleasure, and freedom" but provided excellent conditions for business ventures launched by those already in possession of wealth, cultural capital, and far-reaching name recognition (Duggan xvii). This is especially true of business ventures like *Jane Fonda's Workout* that were well-positioned to capitalize on the new conditions of precarity initiated by drastic funding cuts to public social services, the demonization of dependency, and a growing neoliberal understanding that health and well-being are matters of individual responsibility and private enterprise that can be demonstrated by

displays of rigorous self-discipline and entrepreneurship. By the mid-1990s, Fonda's fitness series had become a global commodity and her videos even travelled back to Ho Chi Minh City—formerly Saigon (the capital of South Vietnam prior to North Vietnamese victory over the U.S. and South Vietnam in the Vietnam War)—which had entered into trade with global capitalist economies following the dissolution of the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1991 (Leshkowich 50).

Jane Fonda's Workout was also well-timed in relation to the development of home video technology. Fonda's first exercise video, titled *Jane Fonda's Workout,* was created and distributed initially in 1982 and it sold an unprecedented seventeen million copies. It remains "to this day the biggest-selling home video of all time" (*So Far* 394). As Fonda writes in *My Life So Far*, *Jane Fonda's Workout* "helped create the home video industry" (394). In the early 1980s, Fonda notes, most people did not own VCRs, which were expensive. Fonda hypothesizes that home workout videos and other self-help videos, which were designed for repeated near-daily use, rather than the rare occasional viewing, helped to popularize this technology by making the initial investment in a VCR seem worthwhile (394). Fonda remarks on the "serendipitous" timing of her workout videos' release, noting that her product offered people something "they really want[ed] but couldn't yet get anywhere else" (194). More than this though, the consumer desire for this particular product met the needs of a changing cultural and political landscape characterized by shrinking public resources, anxieties about restoring the United States' compromised and weakened national character following the Vietnam war and mid-century social movements, and a renewed emphasis on the individual as a key unit of social organization and national strength.

Throughout the 1980s, assessments of "fit" and "unfit" bodies increasingly occur at the intersection of popular and political cultures, the stuff of talk shows and fitness videos as well as matters of public policy. The sexual and reproductive politics of Fonda's immensely popular home video workouts and exercise books is an important example of this. Media studies scholars, particularly scholars who study the rise of reality TV, have begun to theorize television's role in generating popular beliefs about the importance of self-governance and entrepreneurial citizenship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Writing about the United States in their book, *Better Living Through Reality TV? Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*, Laurie Ouellette and James Hey point out that "TV's experiments in private governing have emerged in the context of the State's retreat from formalized affirmative action, anti-discrimination, and conflict resolution programs" (8). Analyzing the "current intersection of TV, media, and government," Ouellette and Hey argue that reality television is a cultural technology whose "guidelines and regimens are practical, everyday technologies of the self…[meant] to be applied through common exercises in which we are 'put to the test' and experiment in living our lives as we do" (15). In examining the *Jane Fonda's Workout* books and home videos within the context of welfare reform in the 1980s, I extend this analysis backwards, historically, and I contextualize it in relation to the rising popularity of in-home VCRs [Video Cassette Recorders].

This transforming political landscape favors a model of government that relies heavily on what Ouellette and Hey describe as an "entrepreneurial ethic of self-care." This entrepreneurial ethic is marked by an increasing turn away from state-sponsored social services and towards private, market-based and market-managed versions of self-

care to be initiated by individual citizens with their own resources and on their own behalf. The unexpected success and popularity of *Jane Fonda's Workout* shows this ethic gaining strength throughout the 1980s, as Fonda's business grows beyond its initial purpose of supporting economic democracy and becomes, instead, a world-wide exercise brand promoting women's individual fitness practiced within the privacy of their own homes, and a commodity exported to a growing number of international U.S. trading partners. In linking trends in reality TV to shifts in government policy, Ouellette and Hey argue that the explosion of popular reality television shows in the mid-1990s demonstrates "television becoming more useful to a rationality of governing that emphasizes self-empowerment as a condition of citizenship" (7). Considering the entangled trending popularity of both *Jane Fonda's Workout* and home video technology allows us to see an earlier moment in this history.

The introductory chapters to the first *Jane Fonda's Workout* book characterize the exercise manual's purpose in language very similar to what Ouellette and Hey use to describe the technologies of the self operating within reality TV. As a preface to the exercise manual portions of her book, Fonda emphasizes rigor, vigor, daily commitment, and, repeatedly, the importance of self-discipline. For instance, in a chapter titled "The Positive Approach," Fonda describes feeling "alive and revitalized" after forcing herself to workout following a full day of filming. Writing about the daily ballet classes that were a staple of her pre-fitness class life, Fonda says, "It was hard to explain this or to describe how good I felt about being disciplined….After ballet class I would not even feel like eating or drinking before I went to bed. The more I practiced discipline in this one area, the more discipline I was able to exert on myself in others" (21-22). This

discipline is at the core of her fitness philosophy, a philosophy that emphasizes the possibility of women's self-reliance in a way that again reveals the powerful racial and class assumptions undergirding its ostensibly "universal" fitness program.

Furthermore, the combined ideals of self-discipline and traditional maternal responsibility espoused in Fonda's workout materials also function to reinforce the narratives and stereotypes that stigmatize dependence as resulting from a hereditary lack of self-control. "Responsible" and "healthy" heterosexual reproduction is at the center of welfare reform debates throughout the late 1970s and 1980s and reading Fonda's exercise manuals in relation to this more overtly political reproductive discourse demonstrates how this strand of women's fitness culture contributes to the reproduction of whiteness and heterosexuality as necessary components of fitness for citizenship. In her essay "Revolutionary Feminism: An Anti-Racist Agenda," black feminist theorist and cultural critic bell hooks describes how specific forms of white feminism in the late 1980s and early 1990s actively strengthen and maintain systemic racial inequality. She writes,

> Coming in the wake of civil rights struggle, of black power movements which were demanding cultural revolution, [and] a sharing of the nation's material resources as well as an end to white supremacy, [the] contemporary white women's liberation movement was easily co-opted to serve the interests of white patriarchy by reconsolidating white power, by keeping all the resources in the family. (hooks 98)

The concept of "family," where family refers to the heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family unit is a familiar instrument of racial politics in the United States and a crucial element of Reagan's efforts to dismantle public social services.

Reagan's focus on the breakdown of family relations as key to the growth of welfare dependency builds on democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous 1965 document, known as the "Moynihan Report" and titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Moynihan claims that "the family is the basic social unit of American life" and argues that the percentage of African American families headed by a single, female provider is responsible for the continued poverty of certain African American communities in relation to those of other racial groups. Referring in part to Moynihan, scholar Dorothy Roberts, in her book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, writes "[B]lack motherhood has borne the weight of centuries of disgrace manufactured in both popular culture and academic circles" (21). Roberts argues that the demonization of black mothers and subsequent justification for state and private regulation of black reproduction is not intended primarily to limit the number of black children, but rather to perpetuate "the view that racial inequality is caused by Black people themselves and not by an unjust social order" (21). As Wahneema Lubiano writes, "[t]he lesson implied by the *Moynihan Report*…is that the welfare-dependent single mother is finally the synecdoche, the shortest possible shorthand, for the pathology of poor, urban, black culture." (335)

For Reagan, the "fit" citizen is the self-ruling, self-reliant citizen, and though his speeches are often careful not to explicitly specify the race of citizenship, his reliance on figures such as the "welfare queen" build on centuries-long racist mythologies that characterize black mothers as pathologically deviant or corrupting. As the "unit of measurement" for political value becomes the individual, and individuals are held increasingly responsible for their own well-being, Reagan's rhetoric constructs fragments

of the population as "unhealthy" and therefore "undeserving" of social support. As Roberts writes, "[b]y regarding welfare benefits as an undeserved subsidy, the law allows states to treat recipients as subjects whose behavior may be modified to fit current social policy" (226). Thus the limited government Reagan describes is only limited for individuals who have proven their worth: fit citizens earn the right to minimal government interference; unfit citizens, on the other hand, may be managed in various ways by the state or, increasingly, by private entities, for as long as their behavior fails to conform to societal standards for self-rule and self-reliance.

Jane Fonda's first exercise book, originally published in 1981 and titled *Jane Fonda's Workout Book*, also offers a vision of a movement toward self-rule, where this self-rule is related to women's physical strength and liberation from internalized notions of feminine disempowerment. Though framed universally, Fonda's vision for empowering women is about rejecting forms of internalized weakness, passivity, and femininity that have been available almost exclusively to middle- and upper-class white women. In fact, more than being exclusively available to elite white women, these qualities have been part of differentiating racial superiority from racial inferiority, both within the shifting category of "whiteness" and between whiteness and other racial categorizations.

Looking at historical developments in popular and scientific American and European writings on diet, health, and body size reveals the longstanding historical function of these discourses in differentiating between "proper" citizens and racial Others. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), Sandra Strings notes how longstanding associations of fatness with blackness have had the

double effect of further subordinating and degrading the bodies of black women, while simultaneously having a disciplinary effect on the bodies of white women. Strings traces the origins of fatphobia back to two "critical historical developments: the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism."[36] Analyzing numerous examples of eighteenth-century racial theorizing, particularly "[r]acial scientific rhetoric about slavery," Strings shows how European thinkers—many of whom had never been to Africa—began to link the imagined corpulence of African bodies, especially African women's bodies, to the supposed greed, laziness, and indolence of "savage" African peoples.

Strings argues that as the association between blackness and larger body size strengthened and also came to be understood as representative of racial inferiority, the concept of body size as a register for individual and collective (im)morality was also emerging in forms of Protestant religious discourse that suggested "overeating was ungodly." In other words, while "gluttony and fatness were becoming associated with African women in scientific racial literature," European "arbiters of taste and the purveyors of morality" were busy ascribing the "the values of delicacy [and] discipline," and the slimmer physiques thought to be the embodied proof of these personal qualities, to the aristocratic European, feminine ideal (Strings). Thus, Strings writes, "the synchronized repression of 'savage' blackness and the generation of disciplined whiteness" worked concomitantly to punish some specific forms of embodiment and to encourage and reward others. Tracing these histories forward to the twentieth century, Strings argues that anti-fat bias colludes with and amplifies anti-black racism in order to

[36] I read *Fearing the Black Body* as an unpaginated e-book and therefore cannot include page numbers.

police and dehumanize black women. Concurrently, anxieties about the associations of fatness with "uncivilized" racial Others motivates the disciplined pursuit of thinness among women looking to secure elite status.

Drawing out implications of Strings' claims, "discipline" alone is an insufficient concept for understanding how the discourses and practices of embodied self-management pertaining to elite white femininity relate to the reproduction of racial and gender hierarchies. Thinking of the effect that discourses on body size, diet, and fitness have as merely disciplinary of white women underplays elite white women's own investment in the maintenance of racial and class superiority. Regardless of individual intention or ambition, this framework underplays the significance of white femininity and white cis women's reproduction to the maintenance of white supremacy.

Analyzing *Jane Fonda's Workout* materials from this perspective reveals the deep entanglement and co-constitution of racial and gendered identities and hierarchies, and the relationship of these identities to conceptions of citizenship. The "apolitical," domestic—rather than public—function of white femininity is important here, as black feminists and other women of color theorists have long disagreed with the conventional political/apolitical distinction and have analyzed how white femininity functions to maintain white supremacy. Additionally, recent theorists of neoliberal political power have noted that the analytic usefulness of this conceptualization of politics becomes increasingly doubtful precisely during the period of Fonda's career that sees her transformation from antiwar activist to home-video aerobics guru.

It is easy to see Fonda's workout business as a retreat from politics writ large, but actually this period of her career represents a retreat *into* a domestic and domesticating

form of political speech that is continually permitted for white women. While the content of this type of speech is often framed as apolitical or non-political based on traditional understandings of white femininity as constructed in opposition to the masculine and public sphere of politics, these types of speech are sanctioned precisely because they do not threaten white heteropatriarchal dominance, but rather help to secure it.

As a new(er) entry in this canon of texts that address the meaning of body size, and specifically women's body size, *Jane Fonda's Workout* varies slightly from most of its predecessors in how it frames the problem of excess weight. In the prologue to the 1981 *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* and in the book's first section, titled "A Body Abused," Fonda identifies several broad cultural realities that create personal—but also, importantly, *general*—experiences as responsible for her distorted relationship to her own body and the similar distortions dealt with by other women.

In a sentence that succinctly reveals the imbrication of standards of physical appearance and patterns of racial hierarchizing**,** Fonda begins her book by writing: "Like a great many women, I am a product of a culture that says thin is better, blond is beautiful, and buxom is best" (9). In addition to demonstrating how standards of beauty are often part of projects of racial definition and differentiation, this sentence also usefully illustrates the potentially confusing or contradictory language often used to describe the "acceptable" or "desirable" body sizes for women, as "thin" and "buxom" are not synonyms, but rather are nearer to antonyms.

A prescription towards thinness will likely be more familiar to most of us in this historical moment, decades into an obesity "epidemic" (one need only watch fifteen minutes worth of television advertising to encounter at least one product designed to

encourage weight loss, in one form or another). However, at different points throughout U.S. history (and notably in the late nineteenth century, as I will discuss later in this chapter), there has been equal or greater concern about the detrimental effects of underweight on different members of the population, most often, specifically, on elite white women.

With its dual emphases on maintaining a "healthy" weight and also on achieving a visible—but not unbecoming—amount of musculature/physical strength, *Jane Fonda's Workout* is a good example of how concerns about women's bodies that are either "too fat" or "too thin" are not at all contradictory. Rather, they are both part of a larger, flexible project of biopolitical power—that is, a form of power that utilizes the management and discipline of individual bodies as part of a larger politics of shaping populations—that adapts in relation to the needs of particular historical moments.

One "new" feature of *Jane Fonda's Workout* in relation to this tradition is its guise of feminine empowerment, or how it utilizes the language of the "body harmed" that was instrumental to the women's liberation movement, and particularly to feminist efforts to politicize domestic and sexual violence as public health issues, rather than private family matters. In fact, the *Workout* frames individual efforts to overcome unhealthy expectations regarding body size and beauty as an important feminine familial responsibility. Heterosexuality, respectability, and domesticity are central principles of the fitness program articulated throughout the *Jane Fonda's Workout* materials. These three qualities come together most obviously in the exercise books, all of which emphasize the importance of women's physical fitness to managing the corporeal

strangeness and uncertainty of pregnancy, and, subsequently, to performing responsible motherhood.

The earliest exercise book, the original *Jane Fonda's Workout*, published in 1981, is dedicated to Fonda's first daughter, Vanessa. Fonda writes, "[i]t wasn't until I was thirty, and pregnant for the first time, that I began to change the way I treated myself. As the baby grew inside me, I began to realize that my body needed to be listened to and strengthened, not ignored and weakened" (9). The centrality of motherhood as a primary motivation for women to engage in aerobic activity would become even more apparent in later books in the series, as Fonda partners with her own birth coach, Femmy De Lyser, to publish *Jane Fonda's Workout Book For Pregnancy, Birth, and Recovery* (Figure 6) in 1982, and then *Jane Fonda's New Pregnancy Workout and Total Birth Program* (Figure 7) in 1989.

Figure 6: Cover of Fonda's 1982 Workout Book for Mothers

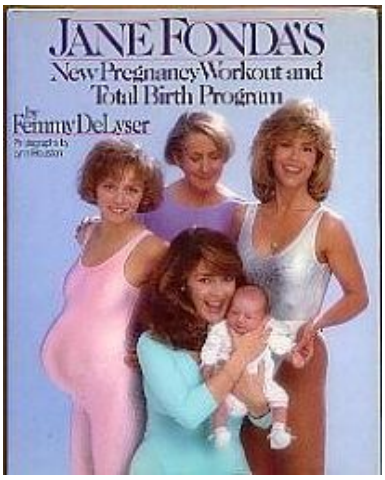

Figure 7: Cover of Fonda's 1989 Book for Mothers

Fonda's autobiographical reflections in the prologue to the original workout book describe how becoming pregnant led her, for the first time, to the realization that she needed to reject the desire to conform to "the sought-after female image," and also to acquire the knowledge and discipline necessary to forego "depend[ing]" on doctors to cure [her]," so that she could learn to rely "on [her]self to stay well" (9). The self-reliance Fonda encourages, however, does not actually represent independence from the medical profession. Rather, it is a self-reliance that shifts responsibility for learning and adhering to the current accepted tenets of nutritional and physical health from the medical profession to the individual. In this, *Jane Fonda's Workout* documents the reconfiguration of the belief, prevalent since the nineteenth century, "that the bodies of elite women needed to be regulated by medicine" to ensure that their "reproductive capacity" is not "threatened due to their unwise choices," within the emerging neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility for self-management as an expression or requirement of good citizenship (Strings).

The intersection of these two ideologies is especially apparent in the *Jane Fonda's Workout* books' sections on nutritional and dietary advice, in which the

imperative of regulating elite women's reproduction is framed as the mother's own responsibility, though the knowledge and practices mothers are responsible for internalizing must still be those sanctioned by medical and/or nutritional science. Charlotte Biltekoff has described how, although "its primary aim may be to improve health, the process of teaching people to 'eat right' inevitably involves shaping certain kinds of subjects, and citizens, and shoring up the identity and social boundaries of the ever-threatened American middle-class" (4). Biltekoff writes that

> [d]ietary thinking in the late twentieth century…may have had a greater impact on the construction of class at this time than at any other point in the history of modern dietary reform because health practices had become more significant to identity and subjectivity, eating habits were considered more central to health, and individuals bore such an extensive burden of responsibility for not only their own health but also the health of the social order, the environment, the planet, and the future. (99)

In *Jane Fonda's Workout* books, learning to eat right is described as a route to individual vitality and attractiveness, but it is furthermore framed as a social obligation for women, who are responsible for the nutritional wellbeing of their families, and through their families, for the overall wellbeing and strength of the nation (27).

In a section titled "Waking Up Nutritionally" in the original 1981 workout book, Fonda opens by articulating the importance of learning to "eat properly for health and beauty" and then goes on to emphasize how women—as mothers and wives—are not only responsible for their own nutritional health, but for that of their husbands and children as well (27). In a section of the text intercut with intimate family snapshots,

Fonda describes her approach to managing her family's nutritional health. She writes about balancing her children's desire for sweets and her "real Irish meat-and-potatoes man" husband and his preference for "hearty" meals, with the knowledge she has obtained from a trusted nutritionist about "how to eat to improve health and stamina" (29). Distancing herself from what she terms the "alfalfa sprout fringe-element" of the alternative foods movement, Fonda cites "balance and moderation," and a little bit of well-meaning maternal deception, as her strategies for instituting proper eating habits without offputting her children or undercutting her husband's masculinity: "I don't make any big deal about it," she writes, "[a]nd I don't tell them when I sneak bran or wheat into their scrambled eggs or whip a raw egg into their orange juice" (29).

The photographs placed throughout this section also contribute to the *Workout*'s emphasis on heterosexuality, respectability, and domesticity. They include, on facing pages, two intimate family portraits of mother, father, and newborn baby: first, an image of Fonda with Roger Vadim and Vanessa (born in 1968) and then Fonda with second husband, Tom Hayden, and their son, Troy (born in 1973). While these photographs suggest Fonda's transition away from the glamor and artificiality of her first marriage into the apparently more natural, down to earth, way of life represented by her marriage to Hayden, they simultaneously convey continuity of heteronormative gender relations (and upper middle-class status) as ordering features of respectable family life. In the first photograph (Figure 8), taken by the French photojournalism agency, Gamma, likely for publication in the French press, the couple and their daughter are pictured in bed, leaning against a decorative headboard, each parent looking lovingly down at the infant.

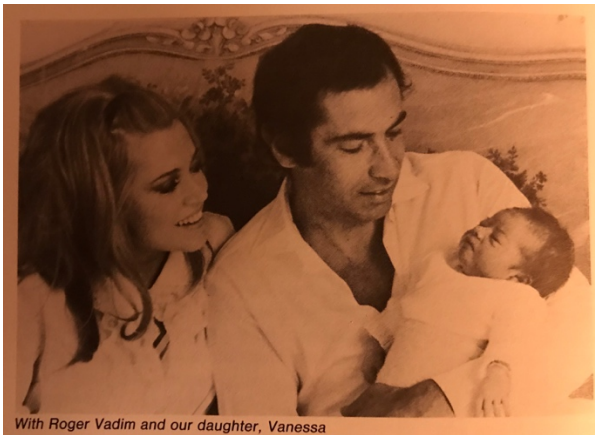

Figure 8: Fonda with Vadim and Daughter Vanessa, 1968 (Fonda 28)

Vadim holds the baby in one arm. Beside him, wearing a white blouse with a delicately lacy collar, Fonda, whose long, blonde hair is artfully swept back, her eyes heavy with shadow and embellished with long lashes, gazes into her daughter's face (28).

In the second photograph (Figure 9), Fonda and Hayden appear to be sitting outside, perhaps on a porch (a screen door is visible in the background of the image).

Figure 9: Fonda with Hayden and Son Troy, 1973 (Fonda 29)

Wearing a loose-knit sweater and little makeup, Fonda holds infant Troy in her lap. Mother and baby both smile directly towards the camera, their eyes engaging the viewer. Fonda's hair is darker and her bangs are longer and looser than those seen in her 1970 mug shot. Hayden sits beside them, his positioning (lower and left-of-center) resembling Fonda's in the first photograph; like Fonda in that image, he smiles at Troy, rather than

looking out at the camera. The photographs convey the same progression as the section's narration, in terms of Fonda's increasing agency (denoted by her direct engagement with the viewer in the second image) and her transforming set of values regarding appearance and health (evident in her more natural self-presentation, compared with her heavily made-up appearance in the first photograph).

While visually confirming the personal transition Fonda describes in the text, the photographs perform another important function: they maintain the emphasis on motherhood, within the context of a heterosexual nuclear family unit, that is present in the workout materials from the first book's dedication to Fonda's daughter onwards. This emphasis on motherhood generates a sense of obligation regarding health and nutrition (i.e., one must be healthy to be a good mother and to be responsible for one's children's health) that gives moral authority to what otherwise might easily be viewed as a thoroughly narcissistic dedication to outward appearances. By framing eating "right" and exercising sufficiently as forms of maternal duty, the *Jane Fonda's Workout* books bring together the focus on personal responsibility central to 1980s austerity politics with a traditionally patriarchal understanding of women's role as mothers.

This emphasis on women's place within the heteronormative nuclear family—and on the dangers posed to society by irresponsible mothers—is an animating force within New Right and evangelical religious discourse during this same period. Thus the *Workout* texts bring together the self-centered individualism of the 1980s with the era's counterinsurgent focus on traditional family values and limited government as facilitating freedom and as antidotal to social and economic woes. Take for instance the rhetoric of longtime conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, one of the most ardent opponents of the

Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and a powerful critic of the women's liberation movement. Celebrating the defeat of the ERA in 1979, Schlafly describes the movement of conservative women who organized to oppose the bill as "the most powerful, positive force in America today…because we have been able to give the bureaucrats and the politicians a stunning defeat" (qtd. in Miller 278).[37] Rather than describing this as a "stunning defeat" to feminist supporters of the amendment, Schlafly frames vanquishing the ERA as a victory over "bureaucrats and politicians" whose goal of legislating equality would have interfered with the freedoms of individual Americans.

The defeat of the ERA (as Audre Lorde notes in her essay "Learning from the '60s") was one early sign of the powerful conservative countermobilization in the United States beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. The Reagan era push for so-called "limited government" as essential to individual freedom was an effective way to neutralize and even reverse the political gains achieved through civil rights legislation. Eric Miller argues that in relation to feminism, Schlafly effectively used these principles of "positive" freedom, a freedom "based in self-mastery and the overcoming of desire," in combination with an emphasis on the God-given nature of traditional binary sex and gender roles, to criticize the women's liberation movement for interfering with individual freedoms (279). Chief among these freedoms, for Schlafly, was a woman's freedom to *choose* a traditional role as wife and mother within the patriarchal nuclear family, a role conceived of as the highest form of female individual fulfillment (Miller 282-283).

The resonance of these principles with the mission and practices of *Jane Fonda's Workout,* which frames its philosophy as "The Positive Approach," is clear (Fonda 21).

[37] The ERA was initially defeated in 1979, but the deadline for ratifying the amendment was extended to 1982, a deadline that "came and went without any further progress" (Miller 278)

Furthermore, by framing exercise and nutrition as appropriate responses to a diluted form of patriarchal oppression—i.e. the internalization of negative self-image from a nebulous variety of cultural sources—the *Workout* is effectively able to propose that conquering this oppression is a matter of self-mastery, self-discipline, and individual choice. This is true not only for American women, but also for women around the world who have been affected by the export of what Fonda describes as "*Playboy* culture" (20).

In one of the original 1981 *Jane Fonda's Workout* book's very few references to the Vietnam War and Fonda's earlier activism, Fonda writes about seeing a slideshow on Vietnamese history and culture put together by her then-"future husband," Tom Hayden (19). Fonda describes "one slide that I will never forget" of a "huge billboard in Saigon (the capital of South Vietnam, prior to reunification at the end of the war and its renaming as Ho Chi Minh City) showing a "larger-than-life Asian woman in a Playboy Bunny type of pose" and advertising the services of "an American plastic surgeon whose specialty was changing Vietnamese women's eyes from their natural almond shape to the rounder shape of the Caucasian eye," as well as operations to "enlarge breasts and buttocks" (20). Fonda notes that these surgeries were sought by "prostitutes" looking to increase their prices with "American tricks" and also were performed on "women in 'high society' such as the wives of Generals Thieu and Ky" (20).

Fonda's description of Vietnamese sex workers and high society wives seeking cosmetic surgery draws on the "racialized and sexualized images of Vietnamese women…instrumental in providing a framework for U.S. citizens in which to understand their relationship with Viet Nam" during the war (Bui 852). As Diem-My T. Bui writes, this framework "made Vietnamese women…legible" to an American public largely

unfamiliar with Vietnam by drawing on a "long tradition of orientalism" whose various tropes—including "prostitute/lover, dragon lady, and china doll"—share the trait of "reducing [Asian women's] characterizations' to their corporeality" and sexuality (857). "These women," Fonda writes,

> literally had their faces and bodies Americanized…The women of Vietnam had become victims of the same *Playboy* culture that had played havoc with me. I had used pills and near-starvation diets rather than surgery, but we had both gone against our own natures and bodies to achieve an imposed ideal of beauty. God knows what it did to their minds. I know what it did to mine. I was shocked into the realization that I myself had played an unwitting role as a movie star and sex symbol in perpetrating the stereotypes that affected women all over the world (20)

In this passage, Vietnamese women are not so much silent casualties of the larger geopolitical maneuvering of the Vietnam War as they are "victims," alongside Fonda, of "the same *Playboy* culture that had played havoc" on her earlier years (Fonda 20). Building on the wartime representations of Vietnamese women "as passive, victimized subjects in the war," Fonda's description continues "the hypervisibility of their bodies as a racialized and sexualized spectacle…framed for a Western audience" (Figure 10) now trying to make sense not of the war, but of its domestic aftermath (Bui 871).[38]

[38] Following "Lisa Lowe's argument that the discourse of orientalism is heterogenous and overlapping," Bui outlines how multiple orientalist tropes, including ones figuring Vietnamese women as "political power players" are present in U.S. representations of the Vietnam War and its aftermath (854; 871).

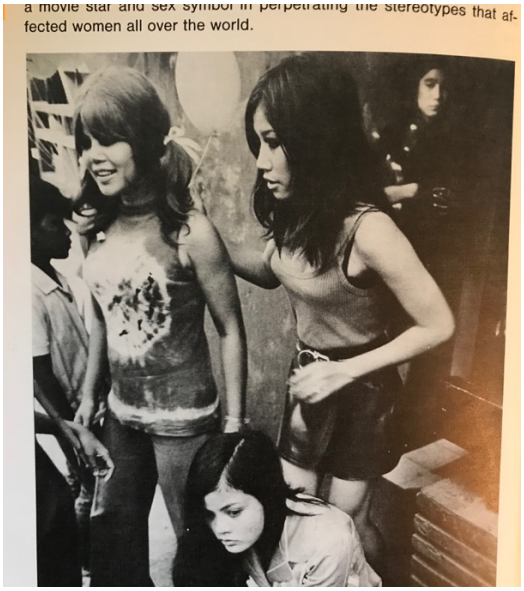

Figure 10: Uncredited photo of Vietnamese Women (Fonda 20)

While Fonda reflects on her "unwitting role…in perpetrating the stereotypes that affected women all over the world," the "positive approach" of *Jane Fonda's Workout* is framed as directly ameliorative of the larger conditions of "*Playboy* culture" and Fonda's individual contributions to the export of its values during earlier periods of her career (Fonda 20). However, as Ann Marie Leshkowich's study of workout and health club culture in Ho Chi Minh City in the mid-1990s demonstrates, products like *Jane Fonda's Workout* become part of the reconfiguration of American imperialist-capitalist relations, rather than marking a break from them. These relations are empowered in part (and in particular contexts) by the synchronicity between embodied practices imagined to demonstrate individual self-discipline and self-mastery, the commodification of these practices and beliefs in products like *Jane Fonda's Workout*, and the global spread of neoliberal political and economic principles that frame freedom as consisting, primarily, of conditions that facilitate the free movement of capital.

Given the controversies that followed Fonda, especially as cultural memory of the Vietnam era became more antagonistic towards the war's protestors throughout the 1980s, she might seem an unlikely figure to become the face and brand-name of a wildly popular women's fitness empire during the same period. However, the historical function of writings about feminine diet and etiquette, combined with an emerging neoliberal emphasis on self-management and personal responsibility and the post-Vietnam emphasis on recuperating a hard-bodied U.S. national image, made *Jane Fonda's Workout* a fitting vehicle for the financial success and mainstream embrace of someone who, throughout the decade, was also regularly being publicly accused of treason. As an object of simultaneous admiration and hatred for nearly half a century, Fonda is a useful representation of the deep divisions across American culture regarding the meaning of values like "freedom," and "progress."

Fonda's entrepreneurial success with *Jane Fonda's Workout*, then, operates not so much in contrast to her villainization as Hanoi Jane, but as complementary to it. As a representation of the racialized feminization of betrayal, Hanoi Jane helps to frame the protest or opposition of U.S. military intervention as anti-American and as a threat to national sovereignty. The longevity and intensity behind the hatred leveled at Fonda due to the mythology of Hanoi Jane may also signal the dangerousness of a truly traitorous white femininity. As the persona's repeated invocation in U.S. culture through to the present-day demonstrates, the politics of aggrievement mobilized in the aftermath of the Vietnam War—a politics that imagined the war primarily as a trauma for the United States inflicted not by the North Vietnamese and their allies, but by the nation's own departure from its "original" sources of strength—continue to be very effective.

The misogynist vitriol directed at Hanoi Jane may seem like fringe politics (or might have seemed that way a few years ago), but as a disciplinary figure delegitimizing and punishing dissent embodied by deviant female sexuality, Hanoi Jane can be read alongside the figure of the welfare queen, who is also imagined as a threat to the nation. *Jane Fonda's Workout* complements these figures by offering the solution to both of them: a product that markets a reformed and domesticated vision of feminine strength achieved through independence, self-discipline, and responsible motherhood, and a product that neatly capitalizes on the sense that women's mild-but-universal gender oppression is an obstacle one can (and should) overcome through individual self-mastery.

CHAPTER IV

UNGENDERING, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND REORIENTING THE INTRO TO WOMEN'S STUDIES CLASSROOM

Scenario

It is the first week of class in an Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies course. On the second day of class, students nearly fill the large lecture hall. The professor introduces the first unit's concept: the social construction of gender, and specifically, this week, the social construction of femininity and the sign/ifier at the center of this: "woman." The professor discusses how sex and gender are hegemonically constructed as binary systems, meaning systems comprised of two, and no more than two, distinct entities that together comprise a whole. As the professor continues to explain how the two parts of a binary are defined against one another, such that male opposes female, and masculinity opposes femininity, a student near the back of the large lecture hall raises their hand and the professor notices and invites their response.

The student says that we need to account for the historical ungendering of black women in the United States, begun by transatlantic slavery, and how the different labor expectations placed on black women, and the legal ownership of black women's sexuality by white men has altered black women's relationship to gender in a way that is both historical and ongoing. The professor acknowledges the student's point and applauds them for introducing this advanced idea in the middle of an introductory lecture before scrolling ahead through the day's presentation slides to stop on one that defines the term "intersectionality." The professor introduces this concept in answer to the

student's question before scrolling back to the slide that was up when the student made their comment and continuing the day's prepared lecture.

This interaction highlights one aspect of a basic and longstanding tension at the heart of the discipline (or disciplines) of women's studies, women's and gender studies, or women's, gender, and sexuality studies, as the shared departmental homes of these fields are often variously called.[39]This longstanding tension emerges from the question of how to integrate racial difference—and specifically, in this instance, blackness—into women's studies' theory, praxis, and pedagogy.[40] In the classroom scenario we are exploring here, this tension becomes visible around two distinct theoretical vocabularies developed within black feminist theory. One, intersectionality, has gained disciplinary (within women's studies), institutional (within the academy), and, in recent years, even widespread public recognition, and has come to serve as a kind of shorthand for the necessity of considering multiple dimensions of social difference. The other, ungendering, has inspired its own intellectual genealogy (or genealogies) in the distinct but deeply interrelated fields of black feminist theory, black studies, and black queer and trans* studies.

[39] I use Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) as that is the name for this department at the large, public university at which I've done my doctoral work and my teaching. I alternately use the more concise "Women's Studies" as it is the origins of this disciplinary formation that I am primarily addressing. Since Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments are often the institutional homes of the field of queer studies and, more recently, trans* studies, there are certainly more issues worthy of addressing vis-à-vis how the concept of ungendering might fit into these fields as well. I think in some ways ungendering offers a more capacious horizon to both queer and trans studies than some of women's studies foundational epistemological commitments. I appreciate Cáel M. Keegan's essay, "Getting Disciplined: What's Queer about Trans* Studies Now?" (2018) for its sharp analysis of how trans* studies must navigate being in opposition to different aspects of its two disciplinary neighbors, queer studies and women's studies.

[40] In the imagined situation described above, these tensions are most clearly between women's studies and black feminism, but similar tensions exist in women's studies' interactions with indigenous and native feminisms, and with queer and particularly with trans* theory.

This scenario is a condensed reimagining of a number of moments that I have witnessed and/or participated in as a graduate student, graduate teaching assistant, and instructor of record in WGSS spaces. Though inspired by a particular interaction very much like the one described above, my version of this scene is also emblematic (to me) of a whole genre of pedagogical negotiations repeatedly played out between students, instructors, and curricula**,** and my hope is that its dynamics will be recognizable to other people, including undergraduate and graduate students, TAs, instructors, and professors, working in and thinking critically about women's studies' spaces. Part of what is being contested in this scene is the order of the pedagogical narrative that will govern this classroom space.

By pedagogical narrative, I mean a story of how we teach, or more specifically, the sequences that structure how we teach: the story of what we imagine needs to be known first, in order to understand other things—that are usually framed as more complex—later on. In this situation, the student asks for the class to begin with the concept of ungendering and the professor, identifying ungendering as an advanced idea, reroutes the student's query through reference to intersectionality, which is identified as (and becomes, through the process of this identification) an "introductory" concept, one better suited to a 100-level course. In this essay, I engage the imaginative possibility that rather than incorporating, assimilating, or rerouting the student's call to begin this introductory course with the ungendering of black women into the already-determined curriculum via reference to intersectionality, that the course actually did begin here, with the accounting for which the student calls.

This comes back to the long-critiqued and troubled-over but still unvanquished premise of women's studies: that there can be a category, "woman," capable of grounding the discipline without first attending to this category's own rootedness both in a particular episteme—the dominant episteme of Western, rationalist modernity—and in the myriad specific circumstances that undo, or at least challenge, the category's coherence as referring to the shared condition of all women. As I will explain in this chapter, the concept of intersectionality has become one of women's studies' primary responses (if not *the* primary response) to criticisms calling on the field to account for differences between women. Ungendering, on the other hand, continues to have an important place in the ongoing development of particular strands of black feminist, black queer, and black trans* theorizations of gender and sexuality. The term "ungendering" is part of a larger theoretical vocabulary that black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers began to articulate in the 1980s. There is a compelling symmetry between the purpose that Spillers imagined for that vocabulary, vis à vis the then-just-institutionalizing discipline of Women's Studies, and this student's call to reorient the contemporary twenty-first century introductory WGSS classroom and curriculum.

What if this introductory course began with Spillers' historical, theoretical, and political intervention into the emerging field of women's studies, through her theorization of ungendering, and her articulation of alternative ways of thinking through issues of gender and power in the United States. What could this mean? What could it look like? In my approach to taking up these questions, this essay mirrors a simple and generative exercise that a colleague of mine introduced me to while we were leading discussion sections for an introductory WGSS course: making a practice of asking students to

imagine things differently. For example, during our unit on reproductive justice, my colleague had students design their own cities and communities organized around principles of reproductive justice drawn from their interpretations of assigned readings and podcasts. How would these places be organized? What spaces and what ideas would exist or cease to exist? What services would be offered and to whom? What I've learned through using this exercise in my own classes and my own thinking is that being asked to imagine things differently can usefully reveal some of the deep and often unconscious attachments which form between individuals and the beliefs, values, and/or structures most successfully naturalized in the present.

In this vein, this essay draws inspiration from Jennifer C. Nash's most recent book, *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), which takes up Claire Hemmings's critiques of the political grammar of feminist theory in order to investigate women's studies' "*racialized* attachments and narratives," especially those related to uses of "intersectionality" within this disciplinary space (13). In *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Hemmings argues that "invested attention to silences in the history of feminist theory," alongside critical interruptions of the dominant narrative forms through which feminism comes to understand itself, might "break open" these stories in potentially transformative ways (10). The insights of performance studies, and black performance studies in particular, on how to "strategically use improvisation" to "work…against the notion that categories of identity, including racial ones, are fixed" or determinative are also critical to this work of interrupting and transforming feminism's dominant narrative forms (Colbert 275).

With these influences in mind, my purpose is not to argue that what *should* happen across WGSS classrooms is the institutionalization of ungendering as a replacement or precursor to intersectionality in introductory curricula. Rather, I want to explore one set of possibilities that could emerge if the dominant pedagogical narrative that positions "intersectionality" as a gateway concept for introducing students in low-level WGSS courses to the multidimensional (rather than single-issue) analysis of difference and power were critically interrupted. The need for this kind of interruption emerges not from any quality inherent to intersectionality as an heuristic on its own, but from the broader historical and institutional contexts in which the analytic has been taken up, particularly in the discipline of women's studies. To this end, I begin this chapter by returning to the essay most frequently cited as the initial source of the term, Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1991 article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." I go back to Crenshaw's essay not to present a corrective reading of it, but to analyze the pressures and influences that Crenshaw identifies in 1991 as crucial to her introduction and use of intersectional analysis.

I then draw on Nash's work in *Black Feminism Reimagined* to explain how intersectionality fit into the project of a specific form of antiracist feminism that, Nash argues, was central to the discipline of women's studies in its formative period during the late 1970s and 1980s. Next I transition into an analysis of Hortense Spillers' concept of "ungendering," which challenged the terms of the version of antiracist feminism that was then gaining power as the discipline's primary mode of conceptualizing women's studies' relationship to racism. I argue that there are important similarities between Spillers' addresses to the then-in-the-process-of-institutionalizing discipline of Women's Studies

in the 1980s, and the student's call to restructure the pedagogical narrative ordering the introductory WGSS curriculum in 2019. After analyzing excerpts from Spillers' work in the 1980s, particularly her essays "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," I explore how beginning with Spillers' concept of "ungendering" could positively alter and reorient some common existing curricular and intellectual commitments in the field of Women's Studies. In doing this, I draw on scholarship in black feminist theory and black queer and trans* studies that has substantively engaged with Spillers' work over the past three decades.

INTERSECTIONALITY

The term intersectionality is most often credited to black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who used the term in her 1991 essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color."[41] Crenshaw opens that essay with a layered evaluation of the present state of identity-based politics. She notes that identity politics has been a source of "strength, community, and intellectual development," as well as an effective political strategy, for "[women,]…African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians" (1242). Crenshaw explains that one frequent critique of identity politics is that it "fails to transcend difference," thus leading away from, rather than towards, the post-racial, post-feminist "liberatory objective" of emptying categories such as "race" and "gender" of "any social significance" (1242). In contrast to this criticism, Crenshaw argues that the principle weakness of identity politics is "rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or

[41] Crenshaw notes that she actually introduced the term two years earlier, in her 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," published in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* journal.

ignores intragroup differences" (1242). These ideas would have been be familiar to readers engaged with multiracial feminist literature from the preceding decade, including, for instance, Audre Lorde's many writings on the politics of difference, the anthologies *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), and texts like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).

Indeed, Crenshaw is careful to avoid presenting her work as if it appears out of nowhere, instead deliberately situating her essay within several dynamic and ongoing intellectual conversations. In the essay's third footnote, Crenshaw states that "this article arises out of and is inspired by two emerging scholarly discourses" (1242). She then goes on to list over thirty citations grouped into what Crenshaw ultimately labels as three different bodies of knowledge: first, critical race theory; "a second, less formally linked body of legal scholarship investigat[ing] the connections between race and gender"; and, lastly, "a broader literature examining the interactions of race and gender in other contexts" (1242-1243). In similar fashion, Crenshaw is careful to nuance her position as a black feminist scholar, writing in the essay's first footnote that she constructs her "Black feminist stance" both as a critique of feminisms that "purport to speak *for* women of color through [their] invocation of the term 'woman'" and as "part of a broader collective effort among feminists of color to include analyses of race and other factors such as class, sexuality, and age" (1244). Crenshaw clarifies "at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered as some new, totalizing theory of identity" nor as the only framework "suitable for analyzing violence against women of color" (1244).

She then proceeds to analyze the structural problems women of color face in relation to rape and battering, before going into a thorough exploration of the situation of women of color vis-à-vis the often "conflicting political agendas" of feminist and antiracist activists, especially as these groups attempt to address domestic and sexual violence. She concludes her essay with analysis of what she terms "representational intersectionality," meaning both how images of women of color are "produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color" (1283). Crenshaw's analysis is dense with examples, most of them contemporary and touching on a wide range of interrelated subjects, from how the Marriage Fraud Amendments of 1986 affected immigrant women's vulnerability to and experiences of domestic abuse to how the 1990 obscenity trial of the hip hop group 2 Live Crew was understood through an either/or framework that allowed recognition only of the misogyny of the group's lyrics *or* the cultural value of African American expressivity.

Throughout the essay, Crenshaw critiques analyses that rely on an "inert…juxtaposition" of race and gender and argues instead for the necessity of understanding that "racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing, that Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both" (1283). She concludes by reaffirming intersectionality's specific purpose "as a way of framing various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color," while also noting that the analytic "might be more broadly useful to mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the

ongoing necessity of group politics" (1296). Gesturing to the larger political and intellectual contexts of her work, Crenshaw argues that one "vulgarized" outcome of postmodern arguments about the social construction of identity categories is the conclusion that, "since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, Blacks or women, and thus it makes no sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them" (1296). She notes that this thesis has been selectively embraced by U.S. Supreme Court conservatives in order to argue that affirmative action policies involving measures that call on race or gender categories (for instance, hiring quotas) are themselves based on racist or sexist assumptions that erroneously essentialize racial or gendered identities (1296).

Crenshaw writes specifically about the 1990 case, *Metro Broadcasting Inc. v FCC*, in which the Supreme Court narrowly ruled that the FCC's minority preference policies did not violate the equal protections clause of the Fifth Amendment.[42] This case was decided by a 5-4 majority, with Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, and Chief Justice William Rehnquist dissenting. The dissenting opinion, primarily written by O'Connor, begins by reaffirming that "[a]t the heart of the Constitution's guarantee of equal protection lies the simple command that the Government must treat citizens 'as *individuals*, not as simply components of a racial, religious, sexual, or national class…Social scientists may debate how peoples' thoughts or behaviors reflect their background, but the Constitution provides that the Government

[42] The Fifth Amendment creates a number of rights related to criminal proceedings, including clauses addressing double jeopardy (protecting individuals against being tried in federal court for the same crime more than once), self-incrimination, and "due process." The Due Process Clause states that no person shall be "deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation" (Constitution).

may not allocate benefits or burdens among individuals based on the assumption that race or ethnicity determines how they act or think" *(Metro Broadcasting Inc. v. FCC).* The Constitution is invoked here as a way of dismissing the work of "social scientists," who are imagined to be mired in a debate that the Constitution has, from a Conservative political standpoint, *a priori* decided once and for all: true individualism is imagined as antithetical to collective identity.

The Court's dissenting opinion also points to precedent in cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which interpreted the Fifth Amendment's Due Process Clause as prohibiting the Federal Government from using "race classifications" to maintain segregated schools. This precedent helps give power to the argument that affirmative action policies which rely on specific social categorizations of identity actually contradict the terms of earlier Court-related civil rights victories that were achieved by prohibiting legal discrimination on the basis of race. Furthermore, the minority opinion in this case imagines racial classifications themselves to be divisive, stigmatizing, and hostile to versions of equality centered on individual opportunity and merit. As the Court's dissent in *Metro Broadcasting Inc. v FCC* states regarding racial classifications, "[r]acial classifications, whether providing benefits to or burdening particular racial or ethnic groups, may stigmatize those groups singled out for different treatment and may create considerable tension with the Nation's widely shared commitment to evaluating individuals upon their individual merit."

Crenshaw's early work on intersectionality responds to this almost paradoxical situation. On the one hand, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the terms of identity-based political organizing faced increasing protest for being politically and theoretically

retrograde in a post-racial era of transcendent individualism; on the other hand, as non-dominant groups continued to rely on aspects of identity in framing their political work, these groups largely failed to respond to the layered heterogeneity of the collectivities they were attempting to organize and represent. These tensions continue to play out in the decades following the original publication of "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" in 1991, and intersectionality has received considerable attention (and been subject to ongoing protest and controversy) both within and outside the academy over the last few years.

In fact, in September of 2015, Crenshaw published a short piece in the Washington Post, "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait," and in December, 2016, shortly after Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump in that year's U.S. presidential election, Crenshaw recorded a TED talk titled "The Urgency of Intersectionality" that has received nearly 1.5 million views. As intersectionality has become a more widely recognized term across U.S. popular and political culture over the last several years, it continues to navigate tensions that stretch back to the conflicts it was initially introduced to address. On the one hand, intersectionality is "loaded with both the promise and pressure to be perhaps the only ethnically pure form of left politics," and it is frequently invoked as a necessity for progressive feminist work (Nash and Garcia-Rojas). On the other hand, for critics of the supposed mandate of "political correctness" in all areas of U.S. culture, especially politics and the academy, intersectionality is quickly derided as signaling a "brand of feminism" or left-wing politics in which "victimhood is sorted by category" and progress is sought via "endless, obsessive, identity-based infighting" (Wilhelm).

In the decades since the publication of "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," intersectionality has also become a cornerstone of women's studies scholarship and pedagogy. Much has been written about the many uses and labors of intersectionality in a variety of institutional spaces within the academy, but particularly in women's studies' classrooms, women's studies' departments, and within the "diversity and inclusion"-related initiatives of college and university administrations (Nash 2019; Berger and Guidroz 2009; McCall 2005; Ferguson 2012; Ahmed 2012; Brown 1997; Carbado 2013; Hancock 2016). In *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019), Nash maps the terrain of what she calls the "intersectionality wars." A series of contentious and ongoing debates about the authentic, proper, and/or true origins, meanings, uses, and intellectual ownership/possession of this analytic, the intersectionality wars are the result of a complex combination of forces and interactions within the field of women's studies, the university at large, and the historical circumstances shaping and shaped by them both.

These forces and interactions include intersectionality's place in women's studies' recent "inward turn": the discipline's introspective investigation of the outcomes of its institutionalization, comprised primarily of scholars' concerns about their field's flaws, failures, and futures (Nash 12). According to Nash, it is within this institutional context that intersectionality "has been most emphatically called upon to do corrective ecological work" (2). Nash notes that many black feminist scholars are critical of how intersectionality's "travels" across disciplines and diversity initiatives, travels that frequently "conscript" black women into performing both academic and administrative labor, have emptied the analytic of its critical power (67-68). However, Nash argues, in

their legitimate concern over intersectionality's uses and misuses, these scholars often downplay the political and institutional contexts that have enabled intersectionality's "status as 'buzzword,'" instead locating the reasons for the term's institutional proliferation either in qualities intrinsic to the heuristic itself (like "vagueness" or "flexibility") or in the appropriative mis-readings of the term's source texts (67).

A good example of the analytic's central role in the discipline of women's studies is the 2009 anthology, *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender*, a text that begins with the following epigraph (itself a quotation from sociologist and political scientist Leslie McCall's essay "The Complexity of Intersectionality," published in *Signs* in 2005): "One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (qtd. in Berger and Guidroz 1). McCall's description of intersectionality as a contribution originating in and belonging to women's studies generally, rather than black feminism, specifically, is representative of the kind of disappearing of black women's intellectual labor that motivates the desire to insist on intersectionality's origins in black feminist thought and defend the term against similar appropriations or misuses.

The essays in *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender* bear out Crenshaw's closing hypothesis in her 1991 essay that intersectionality "might be…broadly useful to mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" and Nash's claim that intersectionality has been called upon to do "a variety of political and theoretical work," especially in women's studies but also throughout the university (Crenshaw 1296; Nash

2). As Michele Berger and Kathleen Guidroz, the book's editors, write, "[r]esearch using the intersectional approach broadly extends across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that wherever one looks in women's and gender studies and across much of the academy, intersectionality is being theorized, applied, or debated" (Berger and Guidroz 1).

My argument focuses on what Nash describes as intersectionality's disciplinary function in relation to feminist scholarship and the larger field of women's studies. One important aspect of the scenario that I began this chapter with is the role that intersectionality plays in the interaction between the student and the professor. When the student asks for the course to account for the historical and contemporary differences that make hegemonic frameworks not only for understanding gender *but also* for deconstructing gender inadequate to the lived experiences of black women, the professor's response involves a turn to intersectionality, as the route through which the experiences of black women become legible in this intellectual/pedagogical space.

This is a common occurrence in feminist scholarship, as well as in women's studies classrooms. In her analysis of the "*racialized* attachments and narratives" at work in women's studies, Nash examines how women's studies has "constructed black feminism as a form of discipline inflicted on the field" and how, as a response to this discipline, intersectionality has been "obsessively signaled…as precisely what is required to remedy feminism's histories of racism and exclusion" (13). Indeed, the title of *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class, and Gender* bears out this framing of intersectionality as remedy, or at least as catalyst for needed transformation. Thus, she argues, attention to the "complicated and contentious

relationship between intersectionality and women's studies…allows a window into the discipline's longer and fraught relationship with black feminist studies, and with black feminists" (2). In taking up intersectionality as a corrective to academic feminism's exclusionary past and present, the field presses both the analytic *and* the black feminist scholars whose presence is often conflated with the concept into ongoing service as, simultaneously, women's studies' disciplinarians and proof of the field's progress through successful disciplining.

Returning to the decades preceding the publication of Crenshaw's now-foundational 1991 article, Nash describes how the newly institutionalizing discipline of women's studies formed itself around a vision of a very specific form of antiracism. Focusing on the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), which was founded in 1977, and which Nash describes as women's studies' "institutional home, its organizing force, and as a critical factor in feminism's institutional histories," Nash documents how the NWSA's early commitment to a "deeply particular" kind of antiracist feminism has shaped women's studies in the decades since the field's founding (84). Analyzing the NWSA's annual conferences, Nash argues that in its formative years, the NWSA imagined its primary labor to be cultivating a commitment to a version of antiracist feminism that required "a rigorous form of self-labor" (Nash 85). She writes, "the annual meetings often featured prominent black feminist scholar-activists exposing the prevalence of racism in women's studies and challenging so-called white feminists to engage in the labor of reforming themselves" (Nash 85). While white feminists were called upon to remediate themselves, black women were "imagined to be the agents of remediation," assisting white women in the project of improving or perfecting their

feminist selves (Nash 88). Thus via their very presence in women's studies spaces, black women both demonstrated the discipline's commitment to leaving behind its racist past and symbolized "the possibilities of a multiracial, egalitarian feminist future" (Nash 88).

From this perspective, part of how women's studies has constructed black feminism's primary function within in the field has to do with preserving a central role for white women—even if that role consists mostly of a continual excising or exorcising of feminism's racist past—by deferring the actualization of an equitable multiracial feminist future, a future which is perpetually projected onto a horizon of possibility, rather than present reality. The form of antiracist feminism that Nash documents as central to the mission of the NWSA from the late 1970s to early 1990s is only one example of how feminist discourses during this period were approaching issues of racism, classism, imperialism, and other forms of oppression.

The significant body of multiracial feminist literature and theory published during these years includes *This Bridge Called By Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983),[43] edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga; *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women* (1988), edited by Beth E. Brant (Degonwadonti); Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987); *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (1984) by Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith[44]; *Making Waves: An Anthology of*

[43] As the unnumbered pages of front matter to the 1983 edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* note, the book was originally published in 1981 by Persephone Press, "a white women's press of Watertown, Massachusetts…[that] ceased operation in the Spring of 1983," at which point *This Bridge Called My Back* "had already gone out of print." After "many months of negotiations," Anzaldúa and Moraga were able to regain control of the rights to the book and the second edition was published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press of New York.

[44] More anthologies dedicated to Chicana and Asian American feminisms begin to appear in the later 1990s, including *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature* (1993), edited by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero; *Making New Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women* (1998),

Writings by and about Asian American Women (1989), edited by Diane Yen-Mei Wong and Asian Women United of California;[45] *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989) by Vietnamese scholar and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha; *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), edited by Anzaldúa; and *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings, An Anthology* (1990), edited by Janet Zandy.

This list, itself not comprehensive, highlights only anthologies and monographs and does not include essays, novels, fiction, poetry, or other forms of literary production that would provide an even fuller picture of women of color, working class, and other forms of coalitional feminist publications from this period. This broader context of the dynamic and varied forms of feminist thought being produced during these years helps to make clear that the scene Nash describes in her analysis of NWSA's role in the early institutional formation of women's studies was only one of many possible early trajectories for the discipline. Black feminist writers and scholars who were addressing the role of racism in academic feminism, including most notably Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, were also creating work for journals, anthologies, and other publications dedicated specifically to writings by women of color, work which did not have to engage directly with the concerns of white women.

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edited by Elaine Kim and Lilia V. Villanueva; and *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire* (1997), edited by Sonia Shah. The 1990s also sees the founding of *TransSisters: A Journal of Transsexual Feminism* (published from 1993-1995) and a number of other important publications including trans*-focused issues in the journals *GLQ, Social Text,* and *Sexualities*. *Trans/Forming Feminisms: Trans/feminist Voices Speak Out*, "[t]he first anthology of explicitly transfeminist writing which was edited by Krista Scott-Dixon was published in 2006 (Stryker and Bettcher 11).

[45] Asian Women United (AWU) of California is an organization that was founded in 1976 by Asian American women in the San Francisco Bay Area. AWU became an official non-profit organization in 1981 and currently describes its mission as seeking "to explore the many facets of Asian American women's experiences and varied cultural heritages through publications and video productions." https://www.asianwomenunited.org/about/

There are several reasons why it makes sense that addressing racism as a crucial feminist labor of the self would become a central commitment of women's studies during the field's early years. In part, this is reflective of the broader characterization of the 1970s and 1980s as decades in which the collectivist energies driving earlier social movements were transformed into more individually focused (even termed narcissistic) frameworks for understanding both the burden of responsibility for, and the mechanisms of, social change.[46] It also makes sense that Anglo-American feminists likely would have had a harder time conceiving of their role in a scene of multiracial women's coalition building purposefully not centered, in one way or another, around either their most immediate concerns or their prejudices.

Nash's analysis of how intersectionality has been called upon to "correct" the oversights and errors of academic feminism is particularly useful to understanding how the term functions in the classroom scenario we are analyzing here. One result of this pattern that is made very apparent in the classroom example is how the conditions that encourage intersectionality's central role in women's studies also tend to position the concept as representative or paradigmatic of black feminist thought, thus narrowing and rigidifying the terms through which the heterogeneous field of black feminist theory is able to express itself/become legible in many women's studies spaces.

[46] In her 1983 conversation with Claudia Tate, Bambara describes the energy of the 1970s and 1980s, in relation to the 1960s, in the following way: The energy of the seventies is very different from that of the previous decade. There [is] a different agenda and a different mode of struggle. The demystification of American-style "democracy," the bold analytical and passionate attention to our condition, status, and process—the whole experience of that era led us to a peculiar spot in time, the seventies. Some say it's been a period of retreat, amnesia, of withdrawal into narcissism. I'm not so sure. I'd say the seventies is characterized by a refocusing on the self, which is, after all, the main instrument for self, group, and social transformation" (49).

In my analysis, this is part of what happens when the professor skips forward to a slide defining intersectionality in response to the student's call to attend to the ungendering of black women. The specificity of the student's intervention is lost, as the distinct genealogy of black feminist thought that their language invokes is translated through the analytic that, Nash argues, has become the primary symbol of "black feminism" and "black women" in women's studies. The point here is not to indict the imaginary professor in this scenario, but to explore the co-constitutive intellectual and institutional histories that make a moment like this not only possible, but likely.

In the preface to *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (2003), Spillers writes that these essays (including "Interstices" and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe") "sprang up in response to two concurrent curricular developments that have played a dramatic role in altering the humanities academy…[:]…the post-nineteen sixties emergence of 'Black Studies," on the one hand, and 'Women's Studies,' on the other" (ix). In her description of these newly emerging intellectual formations, Spillers is careful to emphasize the contingent nature of their arrival:

> a field, never given in the fullness of its time, finds and situates itself on its feet, on the occasions of *practice* and *performance,* inasmuch as it depends on discursive positions staked out against the apparently more settled terrain, moment by uncertain moment. If we think of the new field as a yawning in the chain of historical necessity, then its appearance is neither guaranteed, on the one hand, nor foreclosed, on the other, but answers to certain conditions that cannot be predicted beforehand. (x)

Spillers lingers on this moment of transition, in which the insurgent demands, originating in social movements, for changes to the material and ideological conditions governing the production and dissemination of university-backed knowledge, become elements incorporated into the "apparently more settled terrain" that their former demands had defined themselves against (x). "Paradoxically," she writes,

> the curricular objects that emerged in the late sixties and beyond drew attention to the emphases, the texts, the propositions that had been excluded by the traditional configurations of humanistic inquiry, but both Black Studies and Women's Studies must now go beyond what was perceived as their historic mission in order to escape the frozen postures of closure that actually substitute for knowledge. (x)

In other words, having achieved the partial reconfiguration of the traditional arrangements of knowledge production that overtly disavowed and disallowed the intellectual agency of those challenging the "objectivity" of western humanism, the new fields of Black Studies and Women's Studies now find themselves in a new position. Having demanded inclusion, they must now avoid arrest in what Spillers describes as the "frozen postures of closure that actually substitute for knowledge" (x).

To this end, in her addresses to Women's Studies and to Anglo-American feminists throughout the 1980s, Spillers warns against the hazards of unconsciously mimicking the universalizing gestures of dominant discourse and thus reproducing in altered form the same kinds of epistemic violence. In her own work, Spillers outlines an alternative set of commitments and questions for this inchoate-but-rapidly-solidifying discipline. Spillers' essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," usefully illustrates how she was responding to the wider geography of feminist thought in the early eighties. In

1982, Spillers, then an associate professor of English at Haverford College, wrote "Interstices," to deliver at the Barnard College conference on women's sexuality. The conference, titled "Towards of a Politics of Sexuality" and focused on exploring the "tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure…in women's lives," is one of the most well-known events in the feminist "sex wars" (Vance 1).

The so-called sex wars, which took place throughout the 1980s, were a series of conflicts that most visibly seemed to be about pornography, but actually encompassed a wide range of issues related to gender, sexuality, the state, and the various political purposes and visions of different feminist scholars, artists, and activists (Nash 36). In part occasioned by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin's anti-pornography organizing and their attempts, along with the group *Women Against Pornography*, to pass anti-porn legislation via appeals to civil rights law, the sex wars seemed to divide feminists into two mutually exclusive camps. These camps pitted the anti-pornography feminists, including MacKinnon and Dworkin, but also Adrienne Rich, Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan, and Susan Brownmiller, against the so-called pro-sex feminists, which included the organizers and participants in the 1982 Barnard Conference, where Dorothy Allison, hattie gossett, Alice Echols, Gayle Rubin, Kate Millett, Amber Hollibaugh, Cherríe Moraga, Joan Nestle, and Hortense Spillers were among the nearly thirty participants (Vance x-xv).

Anti-pornography feminists appealing to the state to make the production and dissemination of pornography illegal certainly aligns in a number of ways with one of the primary objectives of feminist organizing in the mid-to-late twentieth century: the goal of achieving "recognition of the harm of sexual violence and the consistent sanctioning of

perpetrators" (Bumiller xvii). However, the "growing recognition of sexual violence as a public health crisis" coincided with the expanding influence of neoliberal principles across U.S. politics, including, crucially, both cutbacks to welfare and social service resources and the "expansion of the regulatory functions of the state" in the form of state-funded crisis, new sex crimes units within policing and prosecutorial offices, and other organizations, both public and private, that were empowered to respond to intimate violence as one on a long list of social problems (Bumiller 4-6). As Kristin Bumiller describes, the feminist agenda focused on addressing sexual violence thus fed into a "cycle of new fears of societal dangers" that helped create popular support for a strengthening "crime control agenda" that, in turn, helped legitimate the dramatic rise in U.S. incarceration rates from the late 1970s onwards (Bumiller 6). In part because feminists had successfully politicized sexual violence, the expanding carceral state, as well as harsher punishments for perpetrators and increased surveillance and regulation of victims, could be framed as victories achieved in the pursuit of safety and security (Bumiller 6).

While this larger political-historical context was not necessarily fully visible to feminists belonging to either side of the anti-pornography v. pro-sex divide, feminists of color were clear in their critiques of the unequal and dangerous outcomes of the increasing criminalization of sexual violence. They were also clear in their critiques of the inadequacies of feminist theorizing around issues of sexual violence that failed to account for both the increased vulnerability of women of color raped or assaulted by white men and the weaponization of false rape accusations as an (often lethal) instrument in the criminalization and control of men of color, and black men, in particular. As

Angela Y. Davis states in "Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist," an essay from her 1981 book, *Women, Race, and Class*,

> During the early stages of the contemporary anti-rape movement, few feminist theorists seriously analyzed the special circumstances surrounding the Black woman as rape victim. The historical knot binding Black women—systematically abused and violated by white men—to Black men—maimed and murdered because of the racist manipulation of the rape charge—has just begun to be acknowledged to any significant extent. (173)

Thus the Barnard Conference on the politics of women's sexuality, with its dual themes of "pleasure and danger," was taking place within a broader political context in which public recognition of sexual violence as a danger (alongside other dangers like drug use, criminality, and AIDs) empowered deeply racialized New Right discourses that framed these social problems as resulting from attacks on the "traditional" family, pathological and intergenerational dependency, and the erosion of foundational "American" values like freedom and independence.

For this reason, among others, the term "pro-sex feminist" is really an inadequate characterization of the diverse positions articulated by the scholars and activists who opposed the aims and tactics of groups like *Women Against Pornography*. As Nash notes, "casting…the widely circulating and complex debates about pornography as a 'war' suggests that feminists defined themselves exclusively as 'for' or 'against,'" thus eliding the myriad forms of feminist engagement with pornography and sexuality that sought to create a "complex analysis of pornography's meanings, pleasures, and cultural significance" (37). The essays in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*

(1984), the anthology that collects many of the pieces presented at the 1982 Barnard Conference, attest to this complexity and demonstrate the wide range of positions, concerns, and theoretical and political commitments articulated by the conference's participants. However, as Spillers addresses in her paper, the conference's guiding thematics also illustrate the limitations that bound this diversity, especially in relation to the field's commitment to theorizing a universalized concept of women's sexuality that does not address women's different relationships to sex, gender, and sexuality under white supremacy.

Briefly analyzing the questions around which the conference was organized, which are included in the anthology's titular essay, written by the book's editor and conference co-organizer, Carol S. Vance, helps to contextualize the interventions Spillers makes in her essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," and also the later essay in which she introduces the concept of ungendering, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In the introductory essay to *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Vance writes,

> Since the nineteenth century, feminist theorists have disagreed on how to improve women's sexual situation and, even more basically, on what women want sexually…Throughout one hundred years of intermittent but intense dialogue among theorists, organizers, and activists run a host of questions to which we do not fully know the answers, despite the progress we have made. (2)

Vance's host of questions include the following:

- Are male and female sexual natures essentially different, or the product of specific historical and cultural conditions?

- Has women's sexuality been muted by repression, or is it wholly different from men's?
- Does the source of sexual danger to women lie in an intrinsically violent male nature, or in the patriarchal conditions that socialize male sexuality to aggression and female sexuality to compliance and submission?
- How can male sexual violence be reduced or eliminated?
- How does the procreative possibility of sex enter into women's experience of sexuality?
- Should feminism be promoting maximum or minimum differentiation in the sexual sphere, and what shape should either vision take? (2)

Today, many of these questions may appear passé and conservative, especially in their repeated commitment to the categories of "male" and "female," their apparent conception of women and men as universalized or undifferentiated groups, their tacit reliance on a heterosexual framework, and the absence of reference to other categories of identity including race, class, gender identity and ability.

While Vance writes that, "[s]ince the nineteenth century, feminist theorists have disagreed on how to improve women's sexual situation and, even more basically, on what women want sexually…," Spillers' contribution to the conference calls into question the field of assumed agreement within feminist theory that gives phrases like "women's sexual situation" and "what women want sexually" shared ground on which to operate (Vance 2). In "Interstices," which Spillers delivered at the conference in 1982 before its publication in the 1984 anthology, Spillers interrogates the historical and theoretical preconditions for theorizing women's sexuality. Noting that she has been invited to the

conference to discuss a specific topic—black women's sexuality—Spillers asks whether the necessary conditions are in place to take on this task.

Taking stock of the field of feminist theory as it exists in 1982, Spillers argues that these preconditions have yet to be met. Reflecting on the context of the Barnard Conference 25 years later, in 2012, Spillers says,

> I was supposed to talk about black women, and the sexuality of black women. And I thought, you know what, before I can get to the subject of the sexuality of black women I didn't see a vocabulary that would make it possible to entertain the sexuality of black women in any way that was other than traumatic. Before you could have a conversation about the sexuality of black women you had to clear the static, clear the field of static. (Spillers et al 300-301)

I hear in the student's call for their Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies class to address the ungendering of black women—as a precondition for engaging the social construction of sex and gender—an echo of the call that Spillers addressed to her colleagues in 1982 (and again in print in 1984), an echo that sounds the depths of both our distance and proximity, in this moment, to that earlier one. They are both calls to clear the field of static.

In our classroom example, as in Spillers' earlier work, the preconditions for theorizing sex, gender, and sexuality are being called into question. In the present instance, this question is a matter of leaving out a key conceptual and material process ("ungendering") that has a name; in the past example, Spillers addresses the absence of a theoretical vocabulary that is up to the task of analyzing the subject ("a politics of sexuality" and specifically of black women's sexuality) set before it. As we shall see,

Spillers goes on to link these silences and lacunae in feminist discourse specifically to feminist theory's ongoing, often unarticulated and under-historicized, relationship to patriarchal acts of naming—literal, symbolic, and theoretical; historical and contemporary.

In her contribution to *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Spillers writes, "[a]cross the terrain of feminist thought, the drama of sexuality is a dialectic with at least one missing set of terms" (Spillers 153). Rather than entering into the debate on women's sexuality that Vance describes as ongoing since "the nineteenth century," Spillers emphasizes the importance of accounting for a longer historical trajectory. Just as Crenshaw addresses how the legal categories marking racial difference, on the one hand, and sexual difference, on the other, make women of color uniquely invisible and speechless, Spillers too notes "with quiet dismay," how, in "the descriptive language of affirmative-action advertisements, or even certain feminist analyses…'The collective and individual 'I' lapses into a cul-de-sac, falls into the great black hole of meaning, wherein there are only 'women,' and 'minorities,' 'blacks' and 'other'" (156). In analyzing these contemporary circumstances, however, Spillers emphasizes their origins in the legal and economic codifications of slavery that made black women's commodification under property relations their primary form of social categorization, not only preceding black women's belonging to a stable category of gender, but throwing any claims to a stable, universal, and binary system of gender into crisis.

Because of this crisis, Spillers writes, it is a misunderstanding to see black women's relative invisibility as a condition of their present "apprenticeship as…inferior social subject[s]" (156). Instead, Spillers claims, the inability of contemporary discourses

to name black women, or to provide black women with a vocabulary to use in speaking for themselves, relates to their historical position not as marginalized women, but as "the principle point of passage between the human and non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and 'other'" (155).[47] Spillers notes that artist Judy Chicago's famous mixed media installation, *The Dinner Party,* often described as "the most monumental work of the 1970s feminist art movement," offers a useful example of how the "lexical gaps" she describes within feminist theory "manifest along a range of symbolic behavior in reference to black women" (Gerhard 15; Spillers 156).

The Dinner Party consists of a triangular banquet table adorned with thirty-nine individually crafted place settings, each "commemorat[ing] a woman of historical significance," and each—with one exception—featuring "an oversized china plate carved and glazed" in the shape of a vulva (Gerhard 15).[48] Speaking of this exception, Spillers writes that *The Dinner Party*,

> had a place set at table for the black female. Sojourner Truth is their representative symbol, and as the female figures around Truth are imagined through ingenious variations on the vagina, Truth's representation is inscribed by three faces. As Alice Walker comments: 'There is of course a case to be made for

[47] Here Spillers refers to the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrum*, established in the English colonies prior to the founding of the United States, in order to ensure that the children of enslaved women, regardless of the identity of their fathers, would carry their mother's condition of enslavement.
[48] In *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (2013), Jane F. Gerhard does not include that Sojourner Truth's plate does not have a vulva on it, instead stating that every plate does represent its historically significant female inspiration with a vulva, thus repeating in feminist historicst scholarship the symbolic elision of black women's sexuality that Spillers writes about in 1982.

being ‘personified’ by a face rather than by a vagina, but that is not what this show [was] about. (157)

Chicago explains the centrality of the form of the vulva within the *The Dinner Party* as emerging out of her acceptance and celebration of this often hidden, denigrated, and despised element of cisgender women’s genitalia. “I don’t have cunt hatred,” Chicago says, and “[m]y work starts with an assumption about feeling okay about being female and universalizing from there” (qtd. in Gerhard 27). In Spillers’ analysis, “[b]y effacing the genitals” from the only place setting prepared for the single representative of black womanhood invited to the party, “Chicago not only abrogates the disturbing sexuality of her subject, but might well suggest that her sexual being did not exist to be denied in the first place” (157). The use of three faces, rather than a vulva, on Sojourner Truth’s place setting thus reveals the limits of Chicago’s “feeling okay about being female” and collapses the claim to universality in upon itself.

For Spillers, the missing vulva is like “the lexical gaps” in feminist theory that make it impossible, as of yet, to address black women’s sexuality; in both cases, articulation is forestalled by “[t]he missing word—the interstice—both as that which allows us to speak about and that which enables us to speak at all” (156). “Sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered,” Spillers writes, and Anglo-American “[f]eminist thinking often appropriates the term in its own will to discursive power in a sweeping, patriarchist, symbolic gesture that reduces the human universe of women to its own image” (158-159). This will to discursive power is present in Chicago’s claim to have worked from her own experience outward toward universality, without acknowledging or perhaps even being conscious of how this constitution of the universal

comes into being only through its relation to the continued denial of (or inability to conceive/imagine) the very existence of black women as occupying space in that universal. From Spillers' perspective, this is not a matter of feminism's failure to create an expansive enough universal—rather, it is a failure to recognize (or correctly interpret) the historical and contemporary positioning of black women as what Spillers calls "vestibular" to culture, occupying a space whose instability vis-à-vis gender is actually indicative of how not only one's belonging to a gender, but one's belonging to the status of human, can be contingently bestowed or denied (155).

Like the questions that Vance describes as guiding the Barnard conference's exploration of pleasure and danger (questions that focus on binary difference between universalized male and female experiences of sexuality), *The Dinner Party*'s emphasis on the vulva as a symbol for universal womanhood could be seen as a relic of the feminist past, a time from which we have successfully progressed. Setting aside for a second the question of whether or not we have witnessed this kind of progress, establishing a more capacious universal capable of recognizing and including more numerous forms of difference does not answer the larger questions raised by Spillers' critique. This is one of the reasons why this chapter's opening scenario has stayed with me as an unresolved moment, despite the professor's turn to assimilate the student's call to address the ungendering of black women into the course's focus on intersectionality.

In asking whether the progress necessary to avoid the repeated cul-de-sacs or "frozen postures of closure that substitute for knowledge" has been achieved, it may be useful to think about the knitted pink "pussy hats" that were one of the most visible symbols of women's objections to the inauguration of President Trump in 2016. *The*

Dinner Party, which debuted in 1979 and today is a permanent exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City, is associated with "cultural feminism," a form of feminism often criticized for relinquishing political struggle to end sex and gender discrimination in favor of establishing an alternative counterculture based on an essentialist set of "traditional" women's values.[49] The pussy hats, on the other hand, were mobilized in the public and seemingly overtly political space of the Women's March, and like *The Dinner Party,* their appearance "has been praised, damned, celebrated, and denounced" (Gerhard 15).[50] Like *The Dinner Party,* at least one representative pussy hat now resides in a museum, on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Russell).

One of Spillers' pointed critiques of *The Dinner Party*, and likewise of the early grammar of feminist theory, is that the artwork and the theory unconsciously participate in a classic gesture of dominant symbolic power: that is, in the reproducing of itself in its own image. She writes, "[s]ymbolic power, like the genetic parent, begets symbolic power, takes pleasure in proliferation. Feminist discourse, to extend the figure, keeps talking, or reproducing itself, tending to do so in its own image, on the basis of initiating symbolic gestures, against which it might struggle, or with which it tacitly seeks alignment by way of various conceptual regimes" (169). Returning to the situation of black women vis-à-vis the modes of dominant symbolic power in early Western

[49] Historian of radical feminism, Alice Echols used the term "cultural feminism," in her presentation at the 1982 Barnard Conference to identify a form of feminism that had "devolved" from its "radical feminist roots" in favor of equating "women's liberation with the nurturance of a female counter culture" and a commitment to "preserving rather than challenging gender differences" (*Pleasure* 51). Though cultural feminism is often viewed as "less political" than other forms of feminism, it is important to note that Echols saw the anti-pornography feminist movement as part of cultural feminism, and the anti-pornography movement engaged in explicit political activism as well as legislative work.

[50] See for instance the contrasting perspectives on the pussy hats in Tamela J. Gordan's essay, "Pussy Hats: The Confederate Flag for White Feminists," (https://medium.com/@shewritestolive/pussy-hats-the-confederate-flag-for-white-feminists-7a21352b2f5e) versus in Katie Kelaidis's piece, "My Feminism Will Not Be Intersectional," (https://www.clydefitchreport.com/2018/01/intersectional-feminism-pussy-hat/).

modernity, Spillers notes that black women were simultaneously denied the kinship attachments to their offspring that define normative "motherhood" *and* figured as passing on to their children the "condition" of in- or lesser-humanity that marked them as objects of property.

Since "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" (Spillers 159). Thus the historical and contemporary situation of black women "differs in both degree and kind" from that of "Anglo-American women" (159). In the specific moment that Spillers is writing into in the 1980s, Women's Studies is gaining formal recognition within the academy and finding itself newly in possession of a voice that can speak with the academy's authority (however contested). As feminist discourse assumes this new agency, Spillers argues that many of its critiques of patriarchal power unconsciously reproduce the "sweeping, patriarchist, symbolic gesture that reduces the human universe of women to its own image," and thus fail to interrogate the "hidden and impermissible" origins of its own analytical power (157-158).

The pussy hats met with considerable criticism as symbolizing the narrow and self-interested vision of primarily white, middle-class, and cisgender women's political response specifically to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, especially given that post-election voter data indicated that over 50% of white women voters cast their ballots for Trump, rather than Hillary Clinton (Nash 133). Particularly relevant to the classroom

example we've been considering is that these criticisms often framed white cis women's centering of their own interests, represented by the hats' cheeky but limited engagement with sexism, as their failure to be good "intersectional" feminists, thus affirming intersectionality as the necessary corrective for such behavior (Brewer and Dundes 50; Nash 135). In an essay titled "Concerned, Meet Terrified: Intersectional Feminism and the Women's March," sociologists Sierra Brewer and Lauren Dundes describe how wearers of the pussy hats seemed to identify as the primary and specific source of their outrage Trump's explicit and unapologetic sexism and misogyny, particularly his dismissal as just "locker room talk" of the leaked 2005 comments in which he "bragg[ed] that male celebrities can do anything they want to women with impunity, including…to 'Grab them by the pussy'" (Brewer and Dundes 49).[51]

Drawing on Spillers' analysis, it is important to understand critiques of the pussy hats as not being *only* about their failed universalism (i.e. not all women have pussies and not all pussies are pink, and we need a more inclusive, diverse, intersectional feminism). Rather, the very visibility of the pussy hats as a symbol of women's protest participates in a similar occluding of feminist or women's politics that do not fit into what Spillers describes, in 1982, as "the theme of domination and subordination" (158). Put another way, in their response to the patriarchal sexual domination of women by men, the pussy hats represent simultaneously: a struggle against the "initiating symbolic gesture" of male dominance; an affirmation of its binary terms, male and female; and a repetition of its

[51] Early in this article the authors position intersectionality as the corrective to the pussy hats' centering of white cis women's politics: "This paper provides context for the dissension between white and Black feminists, including historical background about the role of race in feminism. We explore African American interviewees' perceptions that white women focused on Trump more so than on broader issues of social justice, views that highlight the importance of *intersectionality*" (Brewer and Dundes 50).

universalizing gesture and will to dominance. In symbolizing their protest through the recreation of their own image, the pussy hats not only subordinate other forms of difference but respond to sexism in a syntax that renders the kind of difference embodied by black women impossible to represent.

Thus the single-issue feminist politics of 2016 inherit the same fundamental problematics Spillers identified in the 1980s, but they also inherit the vocabulary Spillers created to address these issues and the work of scholars who have engaged this vocabulary over the past three-plus decades. In "'Whatcha Gonna Do?' Revising 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book': A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan," (2007), Saidiya Hartman describes Spillers' work in this 1987 essay as "questioning the purchase of gender as an analytic category" (303). For Hartman, a key insight of Spillers' work is the importance of not only protesting patriarchal power, but tracing the origins of this power back to early modernity and asking about the roles of gender and sexuality in the larger project of naming the human and inhuman. As she does in "Interstices" in 1982, in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Baby," Spillers considers how the historical reality of the enslavement of African people in the United States relates to the contemporary academic exploration of sexuality and gender, and the current racialized and gendered configurations of U.S. society.

Considering how gender categorization was subordinate to logics of property under the dominant legal and symbolic systems that attempted to naturalize slavery, Spillers writes that, for black women, "gender had no social or legal efficacy," nor had

kinship, as logics of property relied on the negation of kinship ties, genetic or otherwise, in order to secure the claims of "undenied" ownership (221). She writes,

> That sexuality, as a term of implied relatedness, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master's family to the captive enclave. Under these circumstances, the customary aspects of sexuality, including "reproduction," "motherhood," "pleasure," and "desire," are all thrown in crisis. (Spillers 221)

Spillers' emphasis on how *all* "customary aspects of sexuality…are thrown into crisis" under a system of enslavement is a rejection of the evolving discourses prevalent is U.S. society from the era of slavery onwards that imagine black sexuality and the black family as scenes of dangerous disorder, deviance, and/or pathology, in contrast to (either explicitly or tacitly) white normalcy.

Spillers argues that the symbolic order instantiated through the kidnap, transport, and enslavement of Africans, and the concurrent seizure of lands from the indigenous peoples of northern America—two structures associated with the expansion if not the foundation of Western modernity—is still the dominant representational and epistemic framework structuring contemporary U.S. society. As evidence of this, Spillers analyzes the language in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, and links its descriptive strategies to pre-Emancipation legal frameworks that performed the legitimation of slavery through the contingent and unstable negation of African and African American kinship systems and general humanity. [52] In his report, Moynihan links the struggles of poor and working-class

[52] At the time that he wrote the report, Moynihan, a sociologist with a PhD in history, was serving as the Assistant Secretary of Labor in Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. He later went on to serve as an

African Americans, particularly African American men, to the predominance of female-headed households in poor black communities. In a sub-section titled "Almost One-Fourth of Negro Families are Headed by Females," Moynihan writes that, as "a direct result" of high rates of "divorce, separation, and desertion, a very large percent of Negro families are headed by females" (9).

Moynihan reads this departure from the U.S. patriarchal norm of male-headed households (and, via analogy, male-headed nations - as Moynihan writes, "Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs") as deviant, aberrant, and harmful. Infamously describing African American familial relations as a "tangle of pathology," Moynihan writes that "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well" (18). As Spillers notes, Moynihan's analysis relies on a symbolic economy in which black women's "overachievement" not only metaphorically castrates black men, but also leads to the transmission of this damaging matriarchal "pathology" intergenerationally within the black community through black women's reproduction.

Spillers' analysis of the Moynihan report and her critique of feminist analyses that universalize patriarchal domination, even with the intended purpose of deconstructing or resisting its power, has been important to the development of black queer, feminist, and trans* analyses of gender and sexuality. In particular, Spillers' work has been generative for scholars who emphasize that there is no universally experienced heteronormativity

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advisor to Republican President Richard Nixon and then became a democratic senator for the state of New York. Interestingly, his successor in the New York State Senate was Hillary Clinton.

but instead, as Cathy Cohen argues in her essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (1997), an always already racialized heteronormativity that operates in relation to the counter-normativity of black sexuality. While these principles have become central to much work in black studies, black feminist theory, and black queer and trans* studies, they tellingly have not become foundational within the broader scope of Women's Studies, which, as we have explored, has relied on intersectionality as its primary framework for integrating racial difference into the study of gender and sexuality.[53] The opportunity to reorient the discipline, even if only slightly, is present in every syllabus, lesson plan, classroom interaction, assignment, and assessment, and rather than feeling the need to reinvent the wheel, Women's Studies can engage with and cede space to the already existing work in these areas.

In imagining how an introductory WGSS-course built around the concept of ungendering, rather than or in addition to intersectionality, might look, focusing on one or two key points from Spillers' work, as they've been developed by later scholars or by Spillers herself in her more recent work may be helpful. One important intervention that Spillers makes into the early intellectual commitments of women's studies concerns the role of "the domestic" as an essential metaphor within the production of binary patriarchal gender, and, subsequently, within the mid-to-late twentieth-century feminist discourses theorizing and seeking liberation from domesticity's limits and claims.

[53] Though this chapter focuses on Women's Studies, not Queer Studies, it is useful to place Spillers' essays in a longer tradition of black queer and lesbian feminist theorizing that critiques the fields of sexuality studies and queer studies while also establishing its own intellectual trajectories and political visions. This tradition could include The Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" (1977), Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), the poetry, essays, and speeches of Audre Lorde and June Jordan, and later works like Evelyn Hammonds' "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" (1994), M. Jacqui Alexander's "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas" (1994), and, more recently, Jennifer Nash's "Black Anality" (2014), and Sharon Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012).

Building on women-of-color and working-class feminist critiques of middle-class white feminist analyses (like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*) that ignore how the domestic labor of women of color contributes to the "freedom" of white women seeking liberation from the burdens of this work and/or greater access to higher status employment in the male-dominated public sphere, Spillers unravels how domesticity functions, both historically and in the present, as a crucial space for the racialized production of femininity.

If claims to belonging within the gendered category "woman" rely on a specific relationship to domesticity (even if that relationship is one of protest or critique), then, Spillers, argues, black women's historical experiences of belonging first, within the dominant order, to the commodified class of property, place them outside of the two supposedly complete categories of binary gender. She writes, "[t]he human cargo of a slave vessel—in the effacement and remission of African family and proper names—contravenes notions of the domestic" (214). Drawing on an archive of images and documents related to the transatlantic slave trade, Spillers analyzes an image of a slave galley, with its "representative *personae* etched into the drawing like so many cartoon figures," and she reads this image alongside the written calculations in which slave traders estimated their vessels' capacity for human cargo on the basis of the space to be allotted to each captive body (214). "The owner of the slave ship *Brookes*," Spillers writes, "had recommended that 'five females be reckoned as four males, and three boys or girls as equal to two grown persons'" (214). While these calculations do, on one level, "reveal the application of the gender rule to the material conditions of passage," Spillers writes,

> [b]ut I would suggest that "gendering" takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subjects over a wider ground of human and social purposes. Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those subjects that it covers in a particular place. (214)

In locating the "confines of the domestic" as the conceptual and material space where gendering takes occurs, and contrasting this with the slave ship, as a space that enacts ungendering, Spillers underscores the need for feminist analyses that do not merely critique the "confines" of the domestic, but instead recognize how the cultural fictions that imbue domesticity with power gain their strength through their ability to situate subjects in or outside of particular places, on the basis of their patronyms (both literal and symbolic) or lack thereof. Spillers' work thus upends histories and herstories that figure the domestic as a space apart from the public or the political, in much the same way that it challenges the purchase of gender itself as an analytic category (214).

Returning to Spillers' claim that "sexuality, as a term of implied relatedness, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement," and therefore also only dubiously useful or accurate to the contemporary arrangements still governed or undergirded by this originary grammar, an introductory WGSS syllabus could be usefully reoriented around Spillers' subsequent conclusion that such circumstances throw the "customary aspects of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire,'" into "crisis" (221). Introducing "customary aspects" of sexuality or gender not as stable entities to be deconstructed but

as concepts in crisis, or concepts being used to generate, sustain, and/or resolve specific cultural and political crises, might be a useful entry point for Women's Studies pedagogy, provided one could avoid reifying the common and powerful reactionary stance that sees "deviance" from traditional values as a traumatic crisis that victimizes those bearing the burden of fighting for the supposedly natural, often framed as god-given ways of inhabiting gender, sexuality, and family.

Writing about the "imperative" but "notoriously difficult" work of teaching effectively about race and racism in the American university in an essay for *Radical Teacher*, Abena Ampofoa Asare describes how she develops syllabi that aim to "propel…students into a novel mental terrain where the racial categories we inherit and inhabit are neither inevitable nor natural, but instead are created and recreated by our national, economic, political, social, and cultural choices" (17). Asare notes that students often assimilate the knowledge that race is a social construction *not* as information that contradicts the cultural commonsense understanding that "there are fundamentally different types of human beings who can be known and sorted according to miscellanea of phenotypical features including skin color, hair texture, nose shape, skull size, and genitalia," but instead as "another of academe's curious mores – perhaps intellectually astute, but with little to no practical value" (18-19). Similarly, for many of my students (and for me and my fellow instructors), the realization that sex and gender are socially constructed stands in stark contrast to the dominant ordering of the physical and ideological worlds around them.

To work against the "tenacity of biological notions of race," Asare crafts syllabi that aim to expose how race ideologies shift across time and space, beginning with units that

take on the construction of race in different U.S. contexts before "[c]onsidering how race is understood and defined differently across national borders," with the goal of getting students to perceive "the limitation of racial frameworks hitherto perceived as inevitable or universal" (21).[54] An Ungendering Syllabus would have similar goals and could benefit from a similar approach in its construction. Prescribing a model syllabus that might be up to the task of making ungendering a foundational analytic for introductory Women's Studies courses is beyond the scope of this essay, especially since the craft of designing good syllabi (not to mention effectively implementing them in a classroom) has so much to do with the particular skills, expertise, intellectual training, and individual disposition of individual instructors, as they intersect with the skills, expertise, intellectual curiosity, and individual dispositions of varying student populations in different academic and curricular settings.

It does seem to me that many of the myriad highly visible crises dominating our political, cultural, and economic landscape today could be usefully approached through Spillers' analysis of how domesticity and family operate metaphorically and materially to legitimate the humanity of some and negate the humanity of others. Beyond the examples she includes from the period of legal enslavement and from the mid-to-late twentieth century, Spillers and others who theorize the interrelation of gender, sexuality, race, and nation across various historical periods (and geographic locales) provide models for disorienting both students and instructors from the specific forms of racial and gendered

[54] Asare emphasizes constructing units that ultimately comprise a comparative approach, for example, in a U.S. context, challenging "the imagination of Blackness as an essential and eternal category," then exploring "the invention and re-invention of Whiteness as an exclusive marker of citizenship," before going on to analyze "the racialization of Native American identity in US history" and interrogating "how the model minority stereotype obscures histories and experiences of difference within the expansive community racialized as 'Asian' in America" (20-21).

essentialism characteristic of different iterations of the U.S. "national political and social order" (Asare 23).

A crucial implication of Spillers' theorizing, fleshed out in the later work of those who engage her ideas, is that we arrive at gender legibility or illegibility through a set of historically contingent processes that can operate in different, even contradictory ways depending on the specific circumstances and conditions in which these processes occur; simultaneously, explicit in Spillers' concept of ungendering is the crucial role that racialized violence plays in the construction of gender and sexuality, such that race, gender, and sexuality must understood co-constitutively, rather than additively. The longer historical frame that Spillers centers in her work, a historical frame crucial to her concept of "ungendering," invites women's studies to think through the implications of the afterlives of slavery and also invites connections to indigenous feminist critiques of the field that do not operate solely through an intersectional framework, but rather consider the ongoing nature of settler colonialism and how it shapes native people's relationships to sex, gender, and sexuality.[55] Spillers is not the first, last, nor necessarily the most forceful voice articulating and rearticulating these insights, but as the student's call on her concept of ungendering indicates, Women's Studies as a field has yet to be fully accountable to the challenges her work has raised and the invitations it has issued.

[55] See, for example, "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy" (2013), by Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, published in *Feminist Formations* Vol. 25 Issue 1.

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