



BLACK FEMINISM: ARTICULATING POSITIONS

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Abstract: *Black Feminist Poetics has been an important issue of concern for scholars for quite some time now. There have been productive arguments in the arena, also keen insights concerning the phenomenon of blackness. Cultural imperatives and diverse strategies have been on view. The aim of the said theoretics has been to fill black citational absences, also to strive to gain recognition in the academe for black feminist theorizing. The effort is to overcome institutional reluctance and academic diffidence in this regard. There have been barriers of colour, race, class and gender as also myopic view regarding black feminism, when their Western counterparts articulate positions of 'postfeminism'. The intention is to present alternate perspectives concerning affect and sexuality immanent in Black Feminist Theoretics as also the concept of the queer.*

Keywords: *queer negativity, postfeminism, citational absences, cultural imperatives.*

Scholars in humanities have been engaging with Black Feminism(s) for quite some time now, and seriously too. What is discernible is their expressing diverse positions in this regard, and producing a considerable corpus of scholarship in the process. Present perspective largely follows what Nikol Alexander-Floyd termed as “Post-Black feminist era.” (“Disappearing Acts,” 2012, 01). This “era” witnessed arguments that were productive, where Black Feminist Poetics “folded into the cultural imperatives and interpretive strategies of a new millennium in which black women and their literature are no longer in vogue in the academy or anywhere else” (duCille, 2010, 33). The struggle was against numerous factors. James Bliss catalogues them:

Indeed, the combined forces of citational absence, practices of hiring and promotion, and restricted access to modes of publication and distribution, and thereby to larger structures of intelligibility within the academy, have helped prevent Black feminist theorizing from being recognized as theory (“Hope Against Hope,” 2015, 87).

Earlier, Carole Boyce Davies had explained the scenario. She said: “many scholars in the academy [still] participate in the devaluing of Black women who are writers and theorists by not recognizing them or engaging their ideas” (*Black Women, Writing, and, Identity*, 1994, 55).

There have been other barriers also, ranging from institutional reluctance to academic diffidence. More scholars would have engaged themselves with the poetics of Black Feminism. This has been duly discussed by Nellie Y. McKay and Nell Irvin Painter in their respective studies. Black Feminism has been viewed myopically and codified as ‘resistance to theory’, and “theory” has been shrunk to a few post-structuralist insights (Mc Dowell, 1995, 169). This has been explained by Deborah E. McDowell in “Transferences: Black Feminist Thinking-----The ‘Practice’ of Theory” (1995). The debate turns recursive and we regress to arguing “Theory” and “Practice” again, which McDowell explains as a hermeneutic that “is often racialized and gendered, especially in discussions of black feminist thinking, which, with precious few exceptions, gets constructed as ‘practice’ or ‘politics’, the negative obverse of ‘theory’”(157-58).

Theory slid from “Linguistic Turn” to “Affective Turn” and Western Theorists persisted with their old habits of continuing to harbour “racial demons” resulting in “Scattered engagements with Black

women's literatures" (Bliss 88). McDowell developed on this issue in detail. Elizabeth Abel has also expressed herself on this issue in "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation" (1993). Earliest Black feminist critics went wayward, delving into such domains like the female body, eroticism, sensuality and allied emotions. This has been discussed by Barbara Christian in "Does Theory Play Well in the Classroom?" (1985)


The intention here is not to mock at affect theory but to present alternative on thinking regarding affect and sexuality immanent in Black Feminist Theoretics. Crux of the matter here is the problematic ties among gender, colour, and 'sexuality'. This calls for reorienting relations between race and colour. So, instead of approaching Colour as an identity, differentiated from gendered sexuality, it can be seen as "a production of bodily (not biological) difference at the nexus of violence and sexuality (Sexton, *Amalgamation*, 2008, 09).

Here Blackness emblemizes "New World" subjugations, instead of a cultural collectivity. Contextually speaking, Blackness is seen as free/ usurped space where "gender and sexuality lose their coherence as normative categories" (Jackson, 2011, 359). Here, Joan Scott's explanation can be helpful. She said: "... gender...names...not the assignment of roles to physically different bodies, but the attribution of meaning to something that always eludes definition." (Scott, *Fantasy of Feminist History*, 2011, 06). This is reminiscent of Lacan's concept of "Sexuation" (see Butler et al., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 2000, 06). Alternately, there is on view Tim Dean's construction of "Sexuality" viewed as identity/ orientation "conforming to the processes of normalization that regulate desire into social categories for disciplinary purposes" ("Lacan and Queer Theory," 2003, 247).

Sexuality and gender are already extant presences, rather strategies on sundry planes like political and social to order methodical libidos and physicalities transgressing categories that "lose their coherence" (Dean, 248). It needs to be comprehended that Blackness ruptures categorisation that could have formed a class since it is a prohibition, structurally speaking for the natives. It could be for others a process that is incomplete, as also fraught with consequences. Roderick Ferguson, in this sense explained that "Blacks might be heterosexual (or homosexual) but never heteronormative (or homonormative)" (*Aberrations in Black*, 2003, 87). Ontologically speaking, Blackness is deemed to be before the pair of "Gender/ Sexuality" (87). It is not argued that "Race" is prior to sexualities and genders. This tries to explain that Blackness is a way of appraising categories, articulated as its shadow. Black Feminism in its radical form has been presenting such insights.

Here the problem is twofold. Suffering of the Blacks has to be articulated in a humane manner, wherein its subjects may be immersed. A totality of societal relations needs to be theorised, starting with the earlier status of Black females, conceptualizing enslavements in various registers, like the libido economic and politico-economic. The concept of "Slavery needs to be revisited to be re-theorized as also to account for whiteness as structuring present day world." Here, Eugene Genovese has stressed on theorizing such concepts as the unconscious, race, gender, and others, explaining it as "The World the Slaves Made," to be appraised from theoretics of Black Feminism (*Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1974). Thus, historically speaking, it is in the context of slavery that we come across Blackness simultaneously endangering Human as a concept that is archetypal. It is a categorisation that gives rise to Blackness. Inclusion or exclusion of Blackness is inclusion or exclusion of the human. Black as slave is primeval possibility for the emergence of human as free subject. Exclusion of Black is the prevalent social structure of human beings, and violence to it ushers the non-human. Lewis Gordon explained it as "The Anti-Black World," an allied agenda for research in studies on Black as well as chronicling of the world of the Atlantic. Charles Mills and Denise Ferreira da Silva have discussed the arrival of the 'Human subject'.

Hortense Spillers while discussing slavery as an institution explained it in the following manner: "slavery's critical agency in Western self-conceptualization . . . is nothing short of foundational and... the quintessential 'slave' is not a male, but a female" (*Black, White, and in Colour*, 2003,



17, 215). This leads us to a reappraisal of Black Feminism, its interaction with and comprehension of societal relations. Lee Edelman prioritizes white male, rather gay instead of another subject, explaining it as “particular,” which “excludes” alternative identarian categories and positions of subject. Black woman happens to be not another specific position. Slavoj Žižek termed it as “Universal Singularity ... a kind of direct short circuit between the singular and the universal, bypassing the particular” (*In Defense of Lost Causes*, 2008, 17). It could even be advocated that Black woman is envisioned as an abstraction and she intersects and interacts in diverse ways, through what Frank Wilderson explained as a “structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions” (*Red, White and Black*, 2010, 58). The situation is aptly summed up in the *Combahee River Collective*: “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (15).

Subject position of Black woman theorized from a vantage point appears utopian, wherein hope seems to be belied. The project appears enmeshed well into the future. If utopian is defined as a place not existing on this earth, then such theorizing of the said subject-position remains utopian. It is also a comment on the present day world, where slavery persists, and as a potent force. We may be skeptical about slavery as an event occurring in history, but it has survived as legacy of an accumulation of advantages/disadvantages. However Sexton opines differently. He says:

But what if slavery does not die, as it were, because it is immortal, but rather because it is non-mortal, because it has never lived, at least not in the psychic life of power? What if the source of slavery’s longevity is not its resilience in the face of opposition but the obscurity of its existence? Not the accumulation of its political capital, but the illegibility of its grammar? (“Curtain,”¹⁶)

The idea behind Black Feminist Poetics is that the World as it exists is a place that needs basal alterations, hence the attempt is to “rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment” (Lorde, “Black,” 229).

Audre Lorde in epigraph to “Black” explains the aspiration. It is “to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it” (13). Lorde would like the ending of discrimination on the basis of colour or as Saidiya Hartman said: “more than the desire for inclusion within the limited set of possibilities that the national project provides...because...social structure’s inexorable investment in certain notions of the subject and subjection stalls such emancipatory politics” (Hartman, 183). This is to have faith in “emancipatory politics” to burden “language of freedom that no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation” (Hartman, 185). This is also replicated by Sharon Holland who explained it as follows:

the place of slavery in queer studies work has yet to be reckoned with...
because the boundary-breaking futurity in which queer studies finds its subject
would balk if such subject were held to a transhistorical vision of time... a
Black temporality, a reproduction without futurity that offers... a radically
different text for female empowerment (Holland, 62).

It is in consonance with Holland’s critique of Black Feminist Poetics where she explained that a text itself lends to such critiquing. Holland, of course was theorising Black Feminism as it corresponds with queer studies rather than merely taking up theoretics of Black Feminism in her erudite study entitled *The Erotic Life of Racism*, wherein she succinctly explained that such a critique occupies “interstitial and charged space between critical race theory and queer theory” (8). She further tries analytics that can serve as “the bridge between theories of race and theories of sexuality in all of their diverse complexity” (32). Holland visualized gender, race, sexuality as a sort of Gordian knot consisting of sundry strands of all these impacting theory and politics. According to Kara Keeling a critical perspectivation is needed for such insights to understand “the politics thought

proper to each ... inseparable from those of the other... envisioning black politics as queer politics and vice-versa”(Keeling, 567). Such queer studies in tandem with black feminist poetics have been extant (see *Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (1986). Recently, Cathy Cohen has exhorted students of ethnic and queer studies to think of “queer” ahead of gendered identarian crisis to comprehend queer positionalities constructing Blackness (Cohen, 128).

Ann duCille presented the insight that black feminism must theorise only Black women and their preoccupations. She said: “it’s time to light out for other territories, because nothing----- least of all the fictions of white male authors----- should be beyond our reach or ‘shellacked’ against our critical gaze” (duCille, “The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory,” 32). duCille also attempted section-wise analysis as also espousing of pitfalls in such analyses. She said: “one of the dangers of standing at an intersection... is the likelihood of being run over by oncoming traffic” (duCille, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanour and Black Feminist Studies,” 593). Such awareness of dangers ahead help us maintain focus by restricting our travelling in only one direction. Also, black feminist poetics is not lacking in theoretical sophistication.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs in “Speculative Poetics” (2011) explains that female writers who discuss black feminist poetics commingle diverse and contradictory elements in their works, consisting of imaginative and speculative elements as also the fantastic. She says that such a writer “draws on both horror and utopia” in a way that “hinges on the stakes of reproduction and the possibilities of productive relationality on different terms” (141). Gumbs reads Audre Lorde’s poems’ “Preface” in relation to such insights concerning Black Feminist Poetics. She explains that these Black female authors imagine diverse types of kinships extending to many generations. Furthermore, this stands in contrast with the perspective of non-blacks who do not perceive such generational claims of these people as also maternal ties of black females. Gumbs explains that they deny the black people both filial and maternal ties stretching across many generations. She says that such a kinship among blacks is queer and envisages a future different from others and labels it as unreal and utopian as also the constant threat to the crumbling of status quo in a universe which is not only against Blacks and against Black women, but also against queer. Gumbs explains it as the element of horror present in the works of these Black authors. She further explains that both these elements are present together and in juxtaposition in the writings of the Blacks. They are simultaneous in their works and differentiate them in their “queer Black feminist futurity” (133). Gumbs is influenced by José Esteban Muñoz’s study *Cruising Utopia* (2009), wherein Muñoz explained that “for queer young people of colour to even survive, to even imagine that they would exist within the future is quite a queer proposition in the face of state and hate violence used to erase them from the planet as themselves” (133). Gumbs may partly agree with Lee Edelman’s study *No Future* since the latter explained it as “hell and Hitchcock polemic,” but Gumbs agreeing to include the element of horror in black feminist writings at least partly agrees with Edelman’s expression of the death wish and negativity in black feminist works. Edelman said: “queers should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction” (16). Gumbs diverges a little from Edelman. She says: “conservatives have been telling us the truth all along. Black women are queers raising up an underworld that threatens the light of a capitalist day. Black lesbians will destroy the American family. Our kind are dangerous because we show that there is something better beyond the tick of capital where life breaks down into differentially billable hours”(132). Gumbs’s perspectivisation of the issue and her divergences regarding queer future of black feminist writings as well as her differences with Edelman’s insights concerning death drive and agreement regarding the elements of horror in black feminist works provides a disjuncture which is instructive and also seems to repudiate if not cancel out the utopianism of Black Feminist literature. It highlights literature’s ambivalence and explains that the present is the best, past was unsatisfactory, and future is uncertain and yet to arrive and present is here itself. Dissonance of analysis of literature of different cultures and subcultures is also highlighted and efforts are being made, herein, regarding reconciliation of politics with subject positions. It is an



attempt to bring together the pragmatic and performative alongwith systemic structuration, with a view to attempting to reconcile the forces of abject slavery of the past with the future, with an effort of making it utopian.

Gumbs reduces the significance of both queer and negative to implicitly explain difficulties when attempts are made to blend horror with the utopic, since it means envisioning utopic from the perspective of the death of the community. Herein, the domain of political thought attempts to exclude pessimism. Joshua Dienstag has studied pessimism as a way of theorizing the political in his study entitled *Pessimism* (2006). He says: “pessimists are often admired for their style, or respected for the critiques they offer, their apparent lack of a ‘positive project’ is made to appear as a badge of second-rank philosophical status. They interest us; but, it is believed, they cannot possibly orient us” (3). Gumbs in her paper “Speculative Poetics” attempts “looking at the two rhetorically impossible claims: ‘Black maternity’ and ‘queer intergenerationality’ together” in Black feminist speculative fiction (131). It is possible to have “queer intergenerationality” in a setting which is critical as well as political where a position of queer futurity presents the liberal concept of “it gets better” alongwith an uncertain future with a tag of “queer of color youth who cannot afford despair.” Of course, there is the delimiting of the structure where “black intergenerationality” and “black maternity” cannot cohere at ‘antiblackness’ and delimiting of vision which fails to project queer future as also queer negative.

Toni Morrison in her piece “A Slow Walk of Trees” discusses the issue of ‘affect’. There are replications in her dialectic regarding optimism as well as pessimism and the resonances of the two. She describes disputes and difficulties in orienting black feminist studies vis-a-vis the affective as well as the political. Joy James in his paper “Afrarealism and the Black Matrix” described it as a refusing of the present day world and aspiring for a better or different world. Bliss summarizes the scenario: “what is characterized as hopeless, pessimistic, nihilistic, or cynical offers instead a hope against hope, the possibility of politics not simply as hope for a different or better world, but as the ardent refusal of this world” (83).

Morrison while discussing pessimism and optimism among the Blacks provides instances from accounts by her grandparents, recorded in her essay “A Slow Walk of Trees”, (Grandmother’s version) presenting portraits of grandparents and then her own parents and siblings, with description of people of her community in the 1970s. Morrison’s account of her grandparents is important for highlighting pessimism and optimism in the black community. According to Morrison, “grandfather was an unreconstructed black pessimist who, when at age five . . . heard from the old folks that the Emancipation Proclamation was coming . . . crawled under the bed” (03). This reflects pessimism of the community wherein they harbour a disbelief regarding the promises made by the whites: “habitual response to the promises of white people: horror and an instinctive yearning for safety” (03). It was grandmother of Morrison who held the opposite view. She was optimistic. As Morrison says: “grandmother was of a quite different frame of mind and believed that all things could be improved by faith in Jesus and an effort of the will” (04). Morrison has explained the familial and the communitarian “through the lenses of the matrimonial, the reproductive, and the intergenerational that seem to foreclose an analysis that exceeds the limits of the oedipal family” (Bliss 93). Morrison analyses Afro optimism and pessimism by detailing history of her own family in the ambit of a family, which like the present times is nuclear. It is in the family that grandfather exhibits pessimism which overrides his inner expectations of finding the world better one day. Morrison paid more attention to her grandfather’s inclination towards music and his playing upon the violin skilfully. She analyses violins against the Blacks in the contemporary and imagines her grandfather’s reactions:

If he were here now, my grandfather, he would shake his head, close his eyes, and pull out his violin—too polite to say, ‘I told you so.’ And his wife would pay attention to the music but not to the sadness in her husband’s eyes, for she would see what she expected to see—not the occasional historical



repetition,
up into the
change (05).

but, like the slow walk of certain species of trees from the flatlands
mountains, she would see the signs of irrevocable and permanent

Morrison says that her grannies sing to agree: “it could well be that her grandfather, in his connection to performance, agreed with his wife because, after all, he did hold on to his violin” (14).

Earlier on Cornel West presented a formulation that is in consonance with Morrison’s account of her grandparents. West says: “black radicalism hopes against hope if only to hold out the dream of freedom in a never-never land... in order to survive in the deplorable present” (10-11). According to West, “Black radicalism is survival and sustenance in anticipatory opposition” to his later concept of “Black nihilism” (10) explained in his later study *Race Matters*. Bliss discusses the possibility of “something beautiful or generative or sustaining in the pessimistic and the negative” (94) which he names as “unreconstructed Black pessimism” and “the violin as contradictory” (94). This according to him “closes the gap between pessimism and possibility” (94). He even goes further to say, “embracing horror, embracing pessimism, might also create space for thinking beyond the nuclear family” (94). He envisages black feminist poetics that “follows neither the father nor the mother, but that embraces the sorts of queer kinship networks that have always shaped Black life in the New World” (94). Ferguson in his study *Aberrations in Black* (2003) presents an elaborate explanation regarding “the Black Family” and its career, intellectual disciplines of literature and sociology. Here Gumbs is helpful who says: “Blackness is already external to patriarchy, a haunting presence that the (white) patriarchal structures characterize as antithetical and destructive of the norms they were built to perpetuate” (“Speculative Poetics” 142). Edelman discussed ‘Reproductive Futurity, envisioning ‘the Child’, there is “a Black, and therefore deviant, future” (“No Future,” 85). This is markedly different from proposition of optimists who say that it is young people who are always optimistic, since they “can’t afford pessimism” (Bliss 94). It is the opinion of critics that “figure of young queer people of colour is insufficient for thinking the distinctions between Black queers and non-Black queers of colour” (Bliss 94). It is politicizing coalitions that undercuts the uniqueness of ‘Antiblackness,’ not so much white racism, rather burgeoning of possibilities that are negative for human beings both individually and collectively. Furthermore, idea of queer futurity is undercut through a “politics of scarcity at the level of subjectivity that mischaracterizes the entire question of futurity” (Desideri and Harney, “Fate Work,” 169). The idea of young blacks not being able to “afford pessimism understands current forms of being inadequate rather than overabundant” (170). So it is Edelman’s study that recognizes overwhelming presence of futures for kids were queer as well as victims of racism, regarding whom Munoz says that “they are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (Munoz 96). It has also been said by Munoz and others that Blacks who were victims of state violence are symbol of “futurity-as-hope and hope-as-futurity” (Bliss 95). Bliss elaborates it as “focusing on the spectacle of state and state-sanctioned Black queer death obscures the structuring violences that accrue around Black queer survival” (Bliss 95). Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton in “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy” (2003) distinguished “between spectacular and structuring violence” (170). Gumbs in “Speculative Poetics: Audre Lorde as Prologue for Queer Black Futurism” (2011) interpreted Lorde’s works as “instructive in demonstrating the multiple ways that premature death is something other than the foreclosure of futurity as such” (131). Gumbs in the “Preface” “alluded to the manner of Lorde’s expressions continually appearing in her works, both as protest and as “a sacred repetition, a strategy to survive into the present” (“Speculative Poetics,” 132). It is in “The Shape of My Impact” that Gumbs explains her experience of being refused medical leave when she was on a teaching assignment at Hunter College, observing that “Black feminists are a trouble more useful as dead invocation than as live troublemakers, raising concerns in faculty meetings. And those institutions continue to make money and garner prestige of their once affiliated now dead faculty members” (“Shape” n. pag. Web. 29 Oct . 2012). Gumbs explains both perspectives regarding future: one exists as “sacred repetition,” while the other presents “future as dead

indication,” whereby optimism collapsing into futurity is complicated through a “politics of scarcity” (“The Black Imagination,” 135). Hence there are multiple ways of ascending into and living in the envisaged future, but here the problem is that ‘this future’ is scarred with antiblackness, for all Blacks. Kara Keeling in her study of Edelman with insights from Frantz Fanon explained that “from within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all” (Keeling 578). The foremost question for Blacks is to envision and accept “a black future,” which is presently not included in the queer, since it sidesteps from violence by the non blacks, only presenting select ‘acts of violence.’

Here insight from Joy James is helpful who defines “Afrarealism”: “Afrarealism names a resistant mode of Black feminist theorizing attuned to the beauty of survival and a practice of politics that is “terrifyingly beautiful because it is violently transcendent” (128). It is further elaborated that “There must be room to think about the beauty and pleasure in confronting the real” (pocorganize, Youtube web, 15 Mar.2012. Pocorganize).


“The real” concerning Afrarealism must be perspectivized in the idiom of Lacan “which both resists symbolization and is the condition of possibility for symbolization itself” as explained by Žižek et.al in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (2000). Žižek’s last essay in *Contingency, Hegemony* (2000), entitled “Holding the Place” is noteworthy. Žižek says

The Lacanian Real is . . . not simply a technical term for the neutral limit of conceptualization . . . The Real is neither pre-social nor a social effect—the point is, rather, that the Social itself is constituted by the exclusion of some traumatic Real. What is ‘outside the Social’ is not some positive *a priori* symbolic form/norm, merely its negative founding gesture itself (311).

Žižekian “Real” is similar to Hortense Spillers’s “interstice... the Black woman fallen into the great black hole of meaning (*Black, White and in Color*, 2003). Here, futurity alone does not possess beauty and optimism does not possess possibility. Such a comprehension of possibility and beauty in poetics of black feminism is in league with queer negativity since both express politics from the vantage of subjectivity of the blacks. However, it is done symptomatically by queer negativity, but James did it by openly claiming it. If we have violin playing by a pessimist, there can also be reproduction with bleak prospects regarding futurity which can be termed as a ‘Black Future’. Exclusion from politics, theoretics explaining optimism a walk among the trees and hopelessness as pessimism, then the sufferings vis-a-vis real turn out to be an utopia of black feminism.

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