CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Colloquy

REFUSING THE GOD TRICK: Engaging Black Women's Knowledge

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During my graduate school experience, I learned a great deal that was not a part of the formal curriculum. The courses I took with amazing professors played an important part in preparing me for the career trajectory I have followed. Yet lessons from the *informal curriculum* also had a profound impact, especially on the way I think about the ideologies, social relations, power dynamics, and practices shaping the production, validation, reception, and circulation of anthropological knowledge. During those years at Stanford, St. Clair Drake was a major source of knowledge and inspiration. He retired after my first year, but I continued to work with him and learned a great deal from the many conversations we had.

Drake's style of teaching resembled storytelling and counter-storytelling. A Pan-Africanist trained in social anthropology but not at all confined to the discipline's boundaries, he was a griot with awe-inspiring erudition, a walking encyclopedia on Africa and the African diaspora, along with many other subjects. Combining perspectives from studies of the sociology of knowledge, intellectual history, race relations, and anti- and postcolonial politics, he proffered observations of anthropology's intellectual substance and its workings within departments, academic job markets, professional associations, funding agencies, publication outlets,

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and contexts of practical application, problem-solving, and advocacy that gave his students much to digest. It has taken decades for me to appreciate much of what he taught about the politics of knowledge, contestations over theory, what and whose work is deemed to be of significance, and the fraught relationship Africans on the continent and throughout the diaspora have had to anthropology as objects of study, interlocutors, and producers of knowledge. His stories and seminal essays (e.g., Drake 1974, 1978, 1990) on the history of Black scholars in anthropology inspired me to work with colleagues to rescue Black anthropologists, including Drake himself, from oblivion and erasure from collective memory, syllabi, and citations (Harrison 2013, Harrison and Harrison 1999).

Over the years, I have built on what I learned from Drake. One inadvertent lesson concerns the gendered gaps in his stories and writings. Although he was always a source of support for me and spoke highly of the contributions that Vera Green, Sheila Walker, and other Black women colleagues have made to anthropology and Black studies, he remained silent about the African independence advocate Eslanda Goode Robeson (wife of the internationally renowned performing artist and leftist activist Paul Robeson). "Essie" studied social anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE) and later at Hartford Seminary Foundation during the 1930s and 1940s (Ransby 2013). Contrary to what is often published about her, she never completed her PhD. Yet she became famous as an independent thinker because of *African Journey* (Robeson 1945) with its decolonized representations of sub-Saharan Africans, her extensive journalistic writings on domestic and world affairs, and her courageous 1953 testimony before Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous investigating committee during the Cold War witch hunts.

The silence that really provokes me to think more deeply about gender biases and racialized gendered effects in academia and in Black scholarship itself concerns Elizabeth Stubbs Davis, W. Allison Davis's wife. Like Robeson, she was not included in Drake's stories, essays, and lists of African American pioneers in anthropology, although Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham were. He acknowledged Davis's participation in the 1930s *Deep South* biracial research team, of which he, too, was a part (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 2009). The book's preface describes her as a skillful ethnographer responsible for collecting all the data on Black women and for gathering and interpreting the evidence on the Black class system and miscegenation. She made a substantial contribution to that classic book on class and race (conceptualized in terms of caste) among African Americans and whites in Jim Crow–era Mississippi, but she was not listed as one of the co-authors.

When I read David Varel's (2018) *The Lost Black Scholar: Resurrecting Allison Davis in American Social Thought*, I was shocked to find out how serious Drake's silence had been. Varel's research reveals that Elizabeth Davis had studied anthropology at Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, and LSE, and had been a PhD candidate before settling into a middle-class life as a housewife and mother. According to Varel, she provided much more than emotional and domestic support to her husband. She formed a vital part of an intellectual partnership that made Allison Davis's career possible. Her thinking was submerged under her husband's scholarship. Drake contributed to her invisibility as an anthropologist despite his having played an important role breaking the ground for reclaiming African American and global African scholars. This erasure occurred even though he often illuminated the role of non-university-based "para-intellectuals" whose discursive practices—whether reflected in publications, archival documents, or orally transmitted narratives—can influence the work of formally credentialed or recognized scholars.

Silencing of this sort has skewed representations of the Black radical tradition. W. E. B. Du Bois's contradictory pro-feminism resulted in his obscuring of Anna Julia Cooper and Ida Wells-Barnett—now reclaimed as foremothers of sociology—in his writings, despite their considerable achievements as scholar-activists (James 1997). A masculinist bias also appears in Cedric Robinson's perspective on racial capitalism and the radical Black intellectuals who interrogated it (Robinson 2000). There is a conspicuous neglect of women like Claudia Jones, whose contributions deserve diligent attention (Davies 2016).

Responses to the pervasive gender, racial, and national biases that have limited the mapping and navigation of "glocal" epistemological landscapes have led to research, publication, and social media projects that attempt to revitalize anthropology and the wider interdisciplinary terrain of which it forms a part. Among these interventions range initiatives that resurrect past and present-day scholars whose (former) invisibility and inaccessibility have made recognizing and seriously engaging them much less likely in teaching and scholarship (e.g., Anderson 2019; Baker 1998; Bay et al. 2015; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Harrison 2008; Harrison and Harrison 1999; Harrison, Johnson-Simon, and Williams 2018; Marable and Mullings 2009; Morris 2015; McClaurin 2001; Varel 2018).[1]

Parallel concerns have also emerged in other parts of the African diaspora. In Brazil and Cuba, the recent upsurge in publications and cyber-writing on/by Black women has expanded interest in the varieties and commonalities of feminist consciousness and collective action that exist throughout the Americas. Recently published compilations of the writings of the late social anthropologist and Black

movement activist Lélia Gonzalez (2018) and the activist philosopher Sueli Carneiro (2019) have made the social and political thought of these Black Brazilian feminists more readily available to Brazilian and other Lusophone audiences. Overcoming the language barriers that restrict the circulation of knowledge, a growing number of translations has accelerated the mobility of Black women's texts. Books from a number of leading U.S. Black feminists are now available in Portuguese and other languages, and collections of essays by and on Afro-Latin American feminists have been translated into English (Alvarez and Caldwell 2016; Alvarez, Caldwell, and Laó-Montes 2016; Rubiera Castillo and Martiatu Terry 2020). Black feminist anthropologists are playing a leading role in some of these important collaborations and in interpreting the conceptual, theoretical, and political contributions of Afro-Latin American feminists (Caldwell 2019; Smith 2016; Machado and Perry 2021; Perry and Sotero 2019).

These endeavors are occurring across a wide array of fields, and they are making it easier for more of us to bring non-canonical ideas and authors into the conversations, reading practices, and writing regimens of larger numbers of scholars and scholars in training. The burgeoning availability of print and electronic publications and of video-recorded lectures that fill long-standing gaps and work against the grain of peripheralization make inexcusable the continuation of learned ignorance and the failure to recognize and respect Black women's intellectual agency as documentarians, social analysts, and theorists.

Some of these recent trends are aligned with more far-reaching paradigm shifts. These ventures seek to move the (inter)disciplines toward remaking knowledge and its relations of production, exchange, reception, and dissemination under conditions that depart from the logics and values of the "cognitive empire" (Santos 2018). Leading proponents within world anthropologies discourse call attention to anthropology's (or anthropologies') place within this context (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy are implicated in the precepts, practices, and institutions of this imperial regime, whose overlapping hierarchies and intermeshed axes of inequality have disproportionate effects on racially subjected men, women, and non-binary/transgendered persons within spheres of social science.

For most of its history, the cognitive empire's authority has relied on "Western cultural narratives" about objectivity and universality, purportedly achieved through infinite vision from an unmarked, unlocatable, and disembodied position, conventionally the pedestal of privileged Western masculinity (Haraway 1988, 583). Working against this myth, Donna Haraway argues in favor of situated

knowledges grounded in embodied, locatable partial perspectives. Partiality is not the same as "relativism . . . a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally" (Haraway 1988, 384). Instead, partial perspectives are located in webs of shared conversations and political solidarities (Haraway 1988, 384). Haraway's argument resonates with Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2018) thinking on ecologies of knowledges and intercultural translation as closely related procedures advancing the most promising features of the epistemologies of the South—and ultimately those of a decolonial pluriversality extending across the North/South divide. To work toward these goals, we must refuse to accept the optical illusions and myths of the "god trick" (Haraway 1988, 582, 587).

The god trick's epistemological violence inflicts disproportionate injuries on racially subjected women. At a moment when anti-Blackness and white supremacy lie at the center of public debate, and when we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in racial capitalism (Robinson 2000), it is imperative that—with our increasing awareness of the gendered aspects of these sites of interrelated racialization—we unapologetically take Black women's intellectual realities and experiences into account. By so doing, we will achieve a better understanding of our vulnerabilities and our refusals in the face of pervasive forms and intensities of "misogynoir" (Bailey 2010).

Despite the inhibiting aspects of the social sciences' status quo, this proves an exciting moment with new possibilities for reckoning with the state and status of Black women's scholarship within national and global hierarchies of knowledge and divisions of intellectual labor. It is to our collective advantage as a discipline that Black women move out of the shadows into the light. Black women should not be confined to compartments or boxes that fail to do justice to who we are as complex thinkers contributing, for instance, to vital craftings of theory that potentially shift paradigms toward "ex-centric," non-hegemonic modes of knowing the world, its imperatives, and possibilities (Harrison 2016). Black women's contributions may also have implications and applications for re-envisioning policy as a tool for solving urgent problems and enhancing planetary well-being.

Given the abundant corpus of Black women's scholarship, there is no excuse for its gross underengagement. Such underengagement manifests not only in the absence of citations. It is also exhibited in perfunctory rituals of citation that implicitly assign authors to a peripheral status. We all know of instances when authors are cited, included in indexes, and even mentioned in texts without being seriously engaged or accurately represented. Having measurable quantities of data points in the Social Science Citation Index may indicate some level of name rec-

ognition, but that alone proves insufficient if citational recognition does not have the meanings and effects that the #CiteBlackWomen Movement and kindred initiatives aim to accomplish—the valorization of our scholarship.

Cursory glances, careless misreadings, insensitive misrecognitions, and perfunctory gestures toward inclusiveness are not uncommon. These problematic practices indicate that the cited work is not being taken seriously, nor given a close reading attentive to the nuances, complexities, underpinnings, and implications of the argument. When citations are earnestly constructive and fair, they may call our attention to a variety of different things. Authors may cite a publication because of its geographical focus, topical or thematic emphasis, methodological framework, or theoretical significance—or limitations—which are not necessarily problematic. When the overall effects of cumulative citations restrict readers' attention to basic descriptive features and rarely reflect more nuanced, multifocal interpretations of the texts, readers might infer that the cited authors perform fieldwork but not "theory-work" (a concept from Comaroff and Comaroff 2016). This is a concern that Black women sometimes share about how their work is read and referenced. Related to this is the perception that Black women are not expected to do more than consume and apply other scholars' theory. When they theorize in ways that depart from or contest the thinking of scholars assumed to be authorities on the subject matter, Black women risk being subjected to "whitesplaining," with its "enduring tragedies for contemporary Black thought" (Asubiaro-Dada 2020). Contestation over knowledge, particularly theoretical claims and the evidence informing them, is *GendeRaced*, shaped by the inextricable entanglement of these axes of difference and power (Carles and Jubany-Baucells 2010; Lavie 2018, 24).

Patterns of underengagement and contestation, misrecognized as intellectual collegiality, need to be redressed lest they sustain conditions that insidiously assign Black women to zones of epistemological death. On a more optimistic note, a more convivial (Nyamnjoh 2020) synergy can be built. To move toward that outcome, a great deal must be unlearned, so that a genuine ethic of care, respect, and accountability might be embodied and practiced.

ABSTRACT

Drawing on African diasporic, feminist, and decolonial streams of thought, this essay addresses gendered and racialized biases, gaps, and silences that depreciate Black women's epistemological agency. The essay examines the significance of a proliferation of recent publications, including translations, that are bringing the intellectual contributions of Black women in the Americas to new audiences. This growing trend,

which resonates with the objectives of #CiteBlackWomen, forms an integral part of a more comprehensive project seeking to reconstitute knowledge under conditions that break away from the prevailing cognitive empire. The Western cultural narratives, myths, and sleights of hand buttressing this regime inflict an epistemological violence that harms Black women. [Black feminisms; African diaspora; race and gender; intellectual history; translations; epistemic decolonization]

NOTES

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1. See also the Cite Black Women Collective at https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/.

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