WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO ANYWAY: MUSINGS ON THE JOY IN STRUGGLE, DIASPORIC LITERARY THEORIES, AND BLACK FEMINISMS

The point is, and it is an important point, that there is joy in the struggle...

Barbara Christian

I hear you saying: "We need nuts and bolts action. We need to ask questions that at first glance may seem to have nothing to do with scholarship but are central to our survival." "Somebody forgot to tell Somebody Something," you say, "pass it on." Then the questions: "But What do We think We are Doing Anyway?" "But Who Do you Really Belong To? Black Studies or Women's Studies?" What about the "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive in the Academy?" Then, most poignantly, Why this "Race for Theory"? Now, under your breath, in simultaneous curiosity and disbelief, "Are you to revel in this beautiful-ugly language that seems to empty blood and depth out of literary scenes, to displace human subjects, even as it renders some intriguing insights through the manipulation of esoteric analytic tools? Beautiful Ugly, I ask? "Yes," you tell me, "Beautiful Ugly." "To whom are we accountable? And what social relations are in/scribing us?" you ask. "Does history teach us anything about the relationship between ideas, language and practice?" "What do we want to do anyway and for whom do we think we're doing it?" A dizzying array of questions you pose to literary critics—your peers and your progeny—colleagues, students, sister-friends. I answer you in my work with visions of how I plan to expand and challenge African American and Diaspora Studies, explanations of "What I am Trying to Do Anyway." But in the midst of my answer, I am interrupted by mis-citings. They trouble me, speaking to the need for clarification of the political significance of black women theorizing...black women literary theorists.

Many of us shared, learned from, and were influenced by Barbara Christian's life and work. Black Women Novelists, the Development of a Tradition launched a

1 The title of this essay is an inversion of an earlier essay by Christian. I have used it in a call and response (antiphonal) fashion to invoke the conversation I see myself having with her in and through my own work with which she was actively involved.
5 Barbara Christian, "But Who Do You Really Belong to — Black Studies or Women's Studies?," Women's Studies Nov 1989.
6 Christian, "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(S) Survive in the Academy, ".
WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO ANYWAY

pivotal set of introductory essays that catalyzed critical international dialogue about the emerging and submerged work of black women writers (even if those writers Christian took up were primarily African American). In a sense the work was a meta-text: the literary traditions it excavated and spoke of, the craft, beauty, and authorial insights it uncovered, Christian mirrored in the courageous and thoughtful construction of this book intended to help fill the void of scholarly work on black women’s literature in the early 1980’s. The groundbreaking strides Christian applauded were the very strides she mirrored, for Black Women Novelists has become part of the black feminist literary-critical tradition. It answered what at the time seemed an overwhelming concentration on black male writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and the sixties male poets. But for me, the significance of this book lay not in its unmasking the deleterious historical stereotypes shaping discourses of black women’s ontology but rather in Christian’s careful attention to black women’s insistence on redefining ourselves on our own terms. Here, long before she penned her seminal essay “The Race for Theory,” Christian asserted the importance of black women writers “wresting free from a set of standards that have inhibited and distorted their divisions and attempting to develop measures of their own potential” (Christian xi). As she put it in the final section of Black Women Novelists encouragingly entitled “Pass it On,” new black women novelists’ “language, their characters, [and] their analyses seemed to be directed at their own communities or precisely at that part of themselves that is their community” (Christian 246). And isn’t this, after all, what such a foundational study as this was meant to do?: to inspire and empower black women readers, academicians, students, and even the writers themselves, reminding us that we are ultimately engaged in projects of self definition that are imperative to our very survival and well being?

Through an insistence on the importance of black women’s history to understanding the development of our literary traditions and our active (resis)stances, Black Feminist Criticism, Christian’s second book, argued implicitly that black women’s literatures are not about some wholly fictional categories annexed from ourselves; that is to say “out there” outside of ourselves. It is us. From Frances Ellen Watkin Harper’s nineteenth century “uplift” novels to Paule Marshall’s boundary breaking Diasporic twentieth century visions, to those narratives yet unwritten and those already written but less popular, black women’s literatures re-present us: displaced, dispossessed, and transplanted black women, flung throughout the Diaspora, our blackness not bound by nationality, geography or ethnicity, as Carol Boyce Davies acknowledges, but by political commitments to lives of freedom, to lives of struggle.7 We are anti-imperialist, anti-post/neo-colonialist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobia...anti-oppression...Our lives, sometimes wracked with strangling pain, but also full of joy, hope, and of possibilities for resistance and self re-creation are what we testify and affirm in our literatures and in our theorizing. Resistance and Self-Recreation.

The oft referenced “Race for Theory” put a tongue back in my mouth, gave voice to a feelings and observations I could not always articulate. This essay, however, was but a concentration of critical debates about literature, theory, and criticism Christian had been threading directly or indirectly for quite some time, as evidenced in several of her interrogatorily titled essays: “But Who Do You Belong to Anyway? Black Studies or

Women’s Studies?”; “But What Do You Think You are Doing Anyway?” It helped to empower those of us budding students who felt we were being increasingly silenced by a tightly structured set of rhetorical and epistemological frames and vocabularies that masked exclusionary practices by asserting them esoterically. At a time when there were not many black women in the academy studying or teaching, the burdening and burdened expectation of having to “write back to the center” on its terms, to frame our subjects in the very discourses we attempted to challenge—this situation jaded and chafed our creativity. I am troubled, therefore, by what I call mis-citings of the “Race for Theory” on both sides of the bar: there are those who misrepresent the piece by oversimplifying its arguments into a reductionist, anti-intellectual stance or by dislocating it from its context of production and the larger activist-intellectual matrix in which Christian’s life work must be situated. Vulgar appropriations dub it anti-theory. And there are those who smugly appropriate it as an excuse for silencing productive arenas of debate. But this essay does not endorse the intellectual indolence, violence, and inertia that can result from what Toni Morrison calls a “willful, critical blindness.” Christian, like so many other black women at the time (and women of color today), posed epistemological and ultimately ideological questions about:

1) how we theorize—that is to say which intellectual traditions, trajectories, categories, and epistemes we reify, prioritize, or challenge in and through our intellectual productions;

2) when we theorize (or claim the act)—the literal measure of how critical the possibilities are for our work; and,

3) for whom we theorize—meaning who we envision as the audience(s) that stands in dialogue with us, inspired with us, and ultimately helped by our intellectual labor?

There were and are thousands of black women, both inside and outside of the academy, scholars and non-scholars, as well as many among us here tonight, whose work and lives are in conversation with these essential questions of who theorizes about whom, when they do so, how they do so, and the implication of theories—institutional, social, economic, cultural, and political—for women’s development and survival locally and globally. I am thinking here very specifically about Carol Boyce Davies study Migrations of the Subject: Black Women Writing and Identity, a work in which some of these similar questions are broached, particularly in terms of the validity and efficacy of the “post-colonial” as an emerging “master” category for exploring black women’s realities. And yet resistance is not all that our work is about: we are about the business of resistance, transformation, recreation, and creation. Resistance and Re-creation.

Significantly, beyond the boundaries of Christian’s printed essays, she addressed the difficult questions of audience, commitment, and theorizing in a black feminist Diasporic praxis and pedagogy. Shortly before her death, I worked with Barbara to compile a teaching volume she entitled “African Diaspora Feminisms” for a new course she piloted in the new African Diaspora Studies Ph.D. Program at the University of California Berkeley. The volume evinces her increasing need to bring black American feminism(s) (notice the plurality) into productive dialogues with black women and women of color all over the world. The importance of conceptualizing “black women’s writing as a series of boundary crossings and not as fixed, geographical, ethnically, or nationally bound categories” is a challenge I saw Christian humbly attempting in this volume, which she aspired to publish following dialogues with her students and friends (Davies 4). These
dialogues were cut short by her untimely death, and yet I feel, just by our being here and just by my words, we are continuing those conversations.....

Clearly in conversation with Christian and a host of other Diasporic women intellectuals Carol Boyce Davies deploys Zora Neale Hurston’s famously assertive phrase, “going a piece of the way with them” as a powerful metaphor for representing Diasporic feminists’ strategic journeys, our selective cartographies. Perched on a fence outside her rural Eatonville home, Hurston made a point of spotting white travelers headed in her direction before they “discovered” her home. Alternately, she might “go a piece of the way with them,” parting company as she saw fit. It was not so much that home was never challenged by these journeys, since Hurston managed to find her way back, but that home was a radically altered space open to remaking and/or transformation after each and every journey she undertook. The thoroughfare on which the white folks journeyed was not all their own. Hurston did not necessarily share these travelers itineraries—we might say their imperatives—but she never absented herself from the shared space either. The shared space was thus also a contested space, a site of contestation and interrogation; a place of questioning and reckoning. Hurston went a piece of the way, then journeyed other paths alone or with other company when necessary. We are here because Barbara Christian went a piece of the way. We are here because we are going a piece of the way, but we are not doing so uncritically....

To go a piece of the way is to act, to activate. So, in contrast to the seemingly neutral noun form “theory,” issuing forth from a transcendental authoritative stratosphere (to be consumed by its ostensibly bedazzled subjects), Christian emphasized the predicate form of the term, “theorizing,” as a way of disclosing an interested critical subject and of unmasking the stakes (ideologies) bound up in our acts of theorizing. The stakes for black women in the “new world,” and for that matter black men, have been too high for us to be unclear about articulating what they have cost us, why they have cost so much, and how we might negotiate their burdens without creating further traumatic psychological and material deficits in our respective communities. But our articulations of what issues are at stake—Diasporic women’s sexuality, gender and race constructions, the interrogation of received traditions, colonialism and neo-colonialism—these unwelcome narratives are often eluded by the category “theory.” The subaltern speaks, then, but, where is the space for the subaltern to be heard. How are we heard inside and outside of our respective communities?

My intervention in this discussion is my present work “Stealing Away: African Diaspora Maroonist Poetics” where I outline what I conceptualize as Diasporic grammar of maroonage and a maroonist poetics. When, in Brown Girls Brownstones, Paule Marshall’s character Flores observes, “Talk yuh talk...in this white man’s world you have fe take you mouth mek gun,” she endorses a grammar of maroonage and meta-theory of language as resistance that speaks to how we are heard, the power and potency of our voices, and the importance of literary and cultural practices as socially symbolic and politically transformative acts. Barbara Christian’s life was a socially and politically transforming life, rooted in and propelled by the joy and pain of struggles against sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, intellectual inertia, and a whole lot of other counter-productive “isms.” Whatever the arguments against the limitations of “tradition” as a conceptual category, Christian’s arguments for black women’s literary traditions simultaneously thrust that term and category “tradition” into contestation even as her work helped to present a space for black women’s writing to be taken seriously in the
academy as constitutive of tradition(s). It is on this foundation that I can make the assumption and defend it that when I write about Michelle Cliff, Louise Bennett, Paule Marshall, Lorna Goodison, Zee Edgell, Simone Schwartz Bart, Toni Morrison, Erna Brodber, Nalo Hopkins, Sylvia Wynter, the slave woman Phibba, Olive Senior, Opal Palmer Adisa, Dorothy Smart, Toni Morrison, Amma Atta Aidoo, Alice Walker, Sonia Sanchez, Harriet Jacobs, Nanny, Queen Mary, Queen Agnes, Queen Matilda or any number of women writers and activists—I am correct in saying, “if you have not heard of these women, then get there.” This is not unchecked arrogance but a positive assertion that black women’s writing is not just some negligible gathering of isolated cultural artifacts, but sustained labor full of important questions, aspirations, contradictions and complications. Following Christian I point, then, not to a foundation/tradition that works in the typically exclusionary manner in which many notions of tradition are deployed to disenfranchise and to shore up asymmetrical power relations, but to a positive, self-assertive and self-critical set of intellectual engagements and literatures crucial to our survival. This is the sense in which I believe Christian’s life work and legacy are important for us today. And, it is the sentiment and logic out of which I am crafting a dissertation that theorizes links between the histories of Diasporic Maroon groups and the rhetorical devices and tropes found in African American and Anglophone Caribbean literatures.