Theorizing Black Lesbians within Black Feminism: A Critique of Same-Race Street Harassment

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Street harassment is a form of sexual terrorism that reminds women of their vulnerability to violent assault in public and semipublic spaces. Black women's experiences of street harassment are complicated by their race, and by the race of their harasser(s). Black feminists' political vocabulary of intersectional analysis offers a useful framework for portraying the indivisibility of race and gender in black women's lives, but the extension of intersectional criticism to capture black lesbians' political vulnerability within black politics and civic life has been neither automatic nor consistent in black feminist theory. This article invokes the 2003 street harassment and subsequent murder of a black lesbian teenager by a black male assailant in Newark, NJ, both to demonstrate black heterosexual women's interest convergence with black lesbians in black civic life, and to urge black feminists to be less equivocal in holding black men and women responsible for their participation in black patriarchy. This requires the retrieval and redefinition of the political language of culture and behavior from black conservatives who rightly flag the associational aspects of black politics, but who fail to question the gender and sexuality dynamics within these associations and fail to perceive the interplay between civic behavior and intersecting structural inequalities, such as racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and spatial poverty.

INTRODUCTION

At approximately 3:30 in the morning of Sunday, May 11, 2003, 15-year-old Sakia Gunn was murdered while waiting with four friends for a bus in Newark, New Jersey. The girls were on their way home from a party in Manhattan when, according to one of Gunn's friends, two men got out of a car and sexually propositioned them. When the women rebuffed them, saying they were lesbians, 29-year-old Richard McCullough fatally stabbed Gunn in the chest. McCullough turned himself in to Newark police on May 15, and was arrested and charged with second-degree murder. In a plea bargain, prosecutors reduced the charges to manslaughter, aggravated assault, and bias intimidation, for which McCullough is now serving a 20-year prison sentence.[1] All persons involved were black. In her analysis of this incident, Patricia Hill Collins observes that what ended in fatal violence began as the everyday street harassment of a group of young black women: "Like [all] African American girls and women, *regardless of sexual orientation*, they were seen as approachable. Race was a factor, but not in a framework of interracial race relations" (2004, 115; my emphasis). News coverage of Gunn's murder was scant, even though scores of her classmates gathered at City Hall to grieve and lend their support on the day of McCullough's arrest. Newark's Mayor Sharpe James, also black, called a press conference to denounce the crime, but refused to meet with community activists to discuss bias issues. Gunn's brutal homicide failed to garner significant national attention. Black political leadership did not take a stand. If not for the efforts of community activists, Gunn would have been buried in a potter's grave due to her family's poverty.[2]

These silences and hesitations, within both the dominant American public sphere and what Michael Dawson terms the "black counterpublic," underscore the social devaluing of the identities that Gunn embodied, or was presumed to embody.[3] Poor black lesbian teens are neither familiar subjects nor victims in U.S. political culture. Their lives are "ungrievable" in that "they fit no dominant frame for the human. . . . This level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the

1. Mick Meenan, "Sakia Gunn's Killer Pleads Guilty," *Gay City News*, 10–16 March 2005.
2. Ronald Smothers, "Man Arrested in the Killing of a Teenager in Newark," *New York Times*, 16 May 2004.
3. Dawson's notion of the "black counterpublic" is modeled upon Nancy Fraser's concept of a feminist "counter public," which is a critical response to Jürgen Habermas's ideal of democratic communicative action within a public sphere (Dawson, 2001).

message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture"
(Butler 2004, 24). By contrast, the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard
generated tremendous media attention and public sympathy largely be-
cause, if not for his gayness, he was entirely familiar as a blond, middle-
class white youth.[4] Rodney King and Abner Louima were not familiar as
white "everymen," but their identities as black (presumed) heterosexual
men who had been brutally beaten by police officers made them iconic
victims of racism that black political activists could and did rally around.
And although mainstream feminism has made concerted efforts to
expand its focus to address the political interests of nonwhite, nonhetero-
sexual women, white heterosexual women remain the paradigmatic vic-
tims of sex-based oppression.[5]

    Black women's simultaneous embodiment of blackness and female-
ness, as black feminists have long noted, leaves them between the catego-
ries of race and sex, thus forcing them to divide and prioritize social
identities that are integral to their self-concepts and life experience. Black
women are of course not the only group with multiple identities, but
their legal and political bifurcation is more obvious than that of many
other groups because race (read: blackness) and sex (read: femaleness)
have historically evolved as two discrete and insular definitive paradigms
for the detection and remediation of invidious discrimination.[6] Black fem-
inists use this paradigmatic bifurcation as the foundation for a black fem-
inist epistemology or standpoint, which they in turn use to illustrate and
critique the commingling of racism and sexism as it impacts various as-
pects of black women's lives. Many of these arguments have nonetheless
been equivocal in articulating how sexual diversity *among* black women
might modify the basic intersection between race and sex. Nominal in-
clusion of black lesbians has increased in black feminist arguments, but
mere reference to sexuality does not ensure the substantive inclusion of
black lesbians' experiences. Indeed, inconsistent nominal references to
"sexuality" and avoidance of the term "lesbian" within and among black
feminist arguments renders such inclusion superficial.

    Gunn's violent death at the hands of McCullough poses a direct chal-
lenge to black feminists both to articulate the political harm of street
harassment among African Americans and to highlight the particular ways

    4. See, for example, *The Laramie Project* (HBO Films, 2002).
    5. See, for example, *North Country* (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2005), a movie inspired by the
true story of a white woman who brought the first successful U.S. class-action lawsuit for sexual
harassment in the workplace.
    6. For an historical explication of this judicial doctrine, see Koppelman (1996).

that black lesbian identification complicates that political harm. If black feminism is to be theoretically and practically meaningful to black lesbians, it must consistently and substantively recognize and value the sexual diversity that exists and has always existed among black women. One way to begin this work is for black feminists to retrieve the political vocabulary of "culture" and "behavior" from black conservatives, and redeploy these terms to critique interpersonal black sexist and heterosexist conduct. This is not to deny the simultaneity of plural identities such as class, age, and skin color within black women's lives. Nor do I deny other sexual and gender identities, such as bisexualism, transgenderism, and gender presentations of "fem," "fem-aggressive," and "aggressive," that are unique to the contemporary black lesbian subculture in and around New York City (Moore forthcoming).[7] I focus on black lesbianism as a way of interrupting the routine recitation of perfunctory identity lists. Many arguments invoke "LGBT," denoting "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender," but they only discuss gay men, or gay men and lesbians. Substantive theoretical inquiry requires specificity. How does black lesbian identity affect the intersection of race and sex? To what extent do black lesbians and black heterosexual women share a linked fate in black civic life? These questions matter because these terms are central to the construction and revision of black feminist political vocabulary. As Patchen Markell reminds us, political theorists are especially well suited to the task of evaluating "the lucidity of the background vocabulary in which we represent, to ourselves and to each other, the nature of the political problems we face, the stakes of the decisions we confront, and the range of possibilities we possess" (2003, 8).

   Black feminists direct our attention to the privatized arenas of black life, where much of black women's oppression occurs, but many of these arguments focus solely or mostly on the structural features of such oppression. I use "structural" in the same way that Charles Mills uses "social ontology" to mean "the basic struts and girders of social reality" (Mills 1998, 44), both psychological and material, that cannot be (easily) traced back to specific persons.[8] For Mills, descriptive and ideal social contract theories contain an "inner logic of racial domination" that "structures the politics of the West and elsewhere," an exclusionary logic he terms the "Racial Contract" (1997, 6). Structural racial theories give deep historical accounts of contemporary racial disparities. Black feminists try to lo-

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7. For a portrayal of this subculture, see Daniel Peddles's film *The Aggressives*.
8. See also the definition of "institutional racism" in Carmichael and Hamilton (1967).

cate and improve black women's intersectional position within racial structure. The critical impetus of black feminism is "that African-American women have a shared (though not uniform) location in hierarchical power relations in the United States" (Collins 1998, 224). Here, Patricia Hill Collins theorizes black women's standpoint as a structural location that constricts, but does not predetermine, black women's choices as they navigate their subjective identities.

Theorizing black women's structural location is important, but so too are the daily decisions that individual black men and women make within overarching systems of power relations, for these decisions can help to catalyze the reform of unjust cultural practices, such as street harassment, which can in turn chisel away at structural inequality.[9] In contrast to black feminism's focus on historical structure, contemporary black conservatives invoke the presentist vocabulary of free-market libertarianism. Their political vocabulary of private, extragovernmental personal and cultural reform lacks sufficient attention to how current behaviors are linked to a deep history of structural racial and sexual inequality. The rhetoric of personal responsibility and cultural reform rings hollow without any attention to how black patriarchy structures interpersonal conduct within black civic life. Same-race street harassment is a behavioral pattern, and thus a cultural phenomenon—one that is rooted in black patriarchy. Black men and women nonetheless have choices about whether or not to participate in black patriarchal practices such as street harassment, as they have choices about how best to educate themselves and others about the political harms associated with this seemingly innocuous practice. I urge black feminists to be more explicit in their descriptive and normative attention to interpersonal behavior, while maintaining their incisive structural analysis of the intersection between racism and sexism.

More careful attention to the connections between these two analytical levels can help black feminists articulate the epistemological connections and disconnections between black lesbians and black heterosexual women. Gunn's murder should not be viewed as idiosyncratic, but instead as consistent with behavioral patterns that reinforce rather than challenge a black patriarchal structure predicated upon "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 2005) and its control of black women. I start with a

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9. Extralegal social customs are often more tyrannical than formal law. Peer pressure, as John Stuart Mill ([1859] 1974) argues in *On Liberty*, can thus be a very effective way to change behaviors that constitute customs.

short overview of the political harm involved in the street harassment of women in general, and of black women in particular.[10] I then give a brief critical overview of the political vocabulary that comprises the major strands of contemporary black political thought, in order to demonstrate why black feminism is still necessary. I argue that the language of personal and communal responsibility should be retrieved from its current association with black conservatism and explicitly incorporated into black feminism's structural metaphor of the categorical intersection between race and sex. Finally, I demonstrate how this theoretical revision can theorize both the structural similarities and the differences between black lesbian and black heterosexual female identities. Although black lesbians are positioned somewhat differently from black heterosexual women in black politics, their structural location is also continuous with black patriarchal control of all black women. Black lesbians' political welfare sends a message to straight black women about the state of black patriarchy. It thus behooves black feminists to incorporate this interest convergence into their arguments.

STREET HARASSMENT

Feminist Deirdre Davis describes the street harassment of women as the harm that has no name. The power to name one's experiences is a central theme across the ideological spectrum of second- and third-wave feminism, social and academic movements that have generally endeavored to bring into public light women's privatized experiences of sex-based oppression.[11] Instead of trying to specify the content of street harassment, Davis describes the "mechanics of street harassment" as being characterized by "the locale [public space]; the gender of and the relationship between the harasser and the target [strangers of opposite sex]; the unacceptability of 'thank you' as a response [responding defeats objectification by creating dialogue]; and the reference to body parts [which may be individually hidden, but are publicized via pornography]" (Davis 1994, 138). And just as feminists have named such issues as

10. Boys and men are sometimes targeted for harassment by other males, but such harassment typically follows the patriarchal pattern of singling out boys and men who appear to be weak and/or effeminate, and can therefore be seen as gender policing. Girls and women sometimes try to street-harass other female or males, but it is difficult for them to wield patriarchal power in the way that boys and men can and do.

11. For an overview of the major agreements and disagreements between second- and third-wave feminism, see Walker (1995). Kimberly Springer (2002) rejects the wave metaphor, arguing that it fails to portray the historical continuity of black women's oppressions.

date and marital rape, and sexual harassment in the workplace and schools, as a way of politicizing them, Davis argues that using the language of "sexual terrorism" to describe the verbal and nonverbal intimidation of women by men in public venues is a vital feminist project (ibid.).

Sexual terrorism aptly describes street harassment. As a woman you know it will happen, but you never know for certain when or how it will happen. This makes street harassment hard to define and difficult to combat. Its insidiousness derives in large measure from its venue: the semi-private, semipublic everyday activity of walking, sitting, or standing along city streets, or in other public spaces such as parks and shopping malls. Its regulation raises obvious First Amendment issues of free speech and expression, which make it seem like just another female burden to be endured. Most girls first experience street harassment by boys and men at or even before puberty, and thus learn to see their bodies as sources of sexual danger; their sexual vulnerability to boys and men becomes an inescapable and constant condition of being female, a liability to be managed privately rather than discussed and remedied publicly. Indeed, it is the banality of street harassment that makes it so effective in maintaining a larger system of sexual terrorism. The point is not to prove a causal connection between street harassment and physical assault, but rather to acknowledge that street harassment "reminds women of their vulnerability to violent attack in American urban centers, and to sexual violence in general" (Davis 1994, 141). Unless the harasser's remarks and/or gestures lead to a physical assault, most women "transform the pain into *something else*, such as, for example, punishment, or flattery, or transcendence, or unconscious pleasure" (West 1987, 85).

It is only retrospectively, as in the stabbing to death of Gunn, that street harassment registers on the public radar screen as a likely precursor to violent assault. Davis's point, however, is that street harassment harms women even in the absence of physical attack. As she recounts, "An incident of street harassment often forces me to rechannel my energies away from issues on my mind to the intrusive interaction, makes me lose my train of thought, and interrupts my thought process. As a result, my way of knowing is replaced by men's thoughts of women" (Davis 1994, 143). Extrapolating from Frantz Fanon's depiction of racism's psychological damage, Davis concludes that "[t]he systematic and institutionalized phenomenon of psychological oppression causes a victim 'to be weighed down in [her] mind . . . to have a harsh dominion exercised over [her] self-esteem'" (ibid., 146–47). This psychological "weight" both

denies women equal concern and respect and restricts their mobility in public space.

If we are to understand the political significance of Gunn's murder, we must look within a larger system of U.S. sexual terrorism for the particular social meanings that are attached to black female embodiment. All black women must contend with the stereotype of promiscuous sexual deviance: the prostitute, the Jezebel, the wet nurse. Black feminists widely acknowledge this stereotype, but most fail to notice its profound heterosexism. Black women, like animals, "are promiscuous because they lack intellect, culture, and civilization. Animals do not have erotic lives; they merely 'fuck' and reproduce" (Collins, 2004, 100). Black lesbian identity may include parenting, but it also asserts an erotic life not tied to "breeding." Black communities vilify black lesbians for their sexual rejection of black men, while the larger U.S. society deems them irrelevant and ungrievable. Gunn's murder elucidates these cultural patterns of punishment and neglect. Davis rightly concludes that "[s]treet harassment forces African American women to realize that the ideologies of slavery still exist" (1994, 163), but she fails to consider how heterosexism pervades slave ideology.

That the history of slavery underlies white men's street harassment of black women is intuitive, but what are we to make of black men's street harassment of black women? Davis argues that when black men harass black women, they seek "the position of whiteness" occupied by white men. Quoting bell hooks, she argues that the futility of these efforts means that "men of color are not able to reap the material and social rewards for their participation in patriarchy. In fact they often suffer from blindly and passively acting out a myth of masculinity that is life threatening. Sexist thinking blinds them to this reality. They become victims of the patriarchy" (Davis 1994, 171). I agree that racism prevents black men from fully participating in white patriarchy, but I disagree that black men are mere victims of that patriarchy. For although black men suffer under the weight of racial stereotypes that constrict their lives in myriad ways, they also reap material and psychological rewards for perpetuating black patriarchal practices such as street harassment. I am not suggesting that Davis intends for the term "victim" to exonerate black men who street-harass, but I do think that her use of the term hinders frank discussion about personal and communal responsibility among African Americans, thus evidencing the normative equivocation of black feminism flagged earlier.

We can acknowledge that black men's relationship to patriarchy is complicated by race and still be critical of individual black men who use

street harassment to monitor, intimidate, and control black women. Street harassment is not a uniquely black problem; it is pervasive throughout U.S. society and indeed throughout most of the world.[12] Gunn's murder, however, and the harassment that preceded it, raise pointed issues of intraracial gender and sexuality dynamics within black civic life that can and should be central to black feminism. Collins theorizes that "because women often find themselves in close proximity to men [for a variety of reasons], gender relies more heavily on surveillance and other inclusionary strategies of control targeted toward the proximate other" (1998, 223). Intraracial street harassment exemplifies such inclusionary control. Gunn and her friends were proximate to their assailants largely because of the spatial segregation of black poverty in Newark. With the economic means, they might have opted for a taxicab rather than risking public transportation late at night. Gunn's decision to banter with McCullough was likely imprudent, but it does not qualify McCullough's performance of a deeply problematic black masculinity based on controlling black women's sexualities. In the idiom of colonialism and slavery, black men who street-harass black women play the part of a colonial guard, a native elite, a rearguard, "an overseer for the slave master" (Clarke 1995, 247). Just as rape is not about sex, street harassment is not about flirtation or courtship. Both acts are meant to assert male dominance over women in situations where women appear vulnerable, and both leave psychological wounds on women's lives that are rarely tended to, let alone acknowledged.

BLACK IDEOLOGICAL VOCABULARY

Addressing the problem of street harassment requires a theoretical vocabulary that captures both the structural features of black patriarchy and black men and women's interpersonal decision making. This section briefly explicates the political vocabulary of sex-neutral black ideologies in order to demonstrate the need for a black feminist vocabulary that is both structurally and interpersonally sensitive to black lesbians' intraracial treatment. These ideologies include black liberalism, which Dawson subdivides into radical egalitarianism and disillusioned liberalism (2001); the black radical tradition, which mainly consists of black nation-

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12. Street harassment requires physical proximity, and so tends to be more prevalent in areas with pedestrian traffic: for example, U.S. northeastern cities. In suburbia and rural areas, street harassment often takes the form of boys or men catcalling girls and women from cars or trucks.

alism,[13] and black conservatism, which Martin Kilson subdivides into older "organic" and newer "pseudo" black conservatisms.[14] Black feminists typically launch their critiques from within the black ideologies listed here, faulting them for not explicitly theorizing gender as a vector that intersects race. A consequence of this omission is that black women's particular political interests are often undertheorized or ignored in black politics.

Radical egalitarianism is an optimistic version of American liberalism that melds a scathing critique of American racism with optimism that a strong central state can and should correct for the moral and material inequities wrought by slavery, Jim Crow, and their aftermath. Radical egalitarians, such as Frederick Douglass and the early W. E. B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King, Jr., developed moral arguments based in a literal or "textualist" interpretation of equality references found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible.[15] As the careers of both Du Bois and King progressed, their optimism morphed into disillusioned liberalism, as both men concluded that racism was not an anomalous departure from the course of U.S. liberalism, but was instead deeply ensconced in the economic and psychological structures of American liberalism, as practiced by the white majority.[16] Disillusioned liberalism does not, however, abandon appeals to the state, nor does it forfeit the goal of racial justice. Instead, disillusioned black liberals perceive antiblack racism as a much more formidable obstacle to black progress than the adherents of radical egalitarianism had predicted.

Black feminists subscribe to the racial pragmatism of disillusioned liberalism, but criticize black liberals for not explicitly acknowledging sexism as an intersecting legal and social vector that disadvantages black women in unique ways. Although many of the political concerns of black women coincide with those of black men (e.g., voting rights, fair housing, heath care, and education), black women also experience sexism in interpersonal settings both within and without black communities that

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13. The borders of these categories are nevertheless porous, as Dawson points out that many disillusioned liberals come to embrace aspects of black radicalism (2001).

14. Kilson (1993) argues that older black conservatives such as Booker T. Washington were "organic" in that they had significant support from black communities, unlike the black conservatives who emerged in the 1980s—Glenn Loury, Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, and others—and who cultivate ties to white conservative think tanks.

15. Both invoke natural law to demonstrate the immorality of slavery in Douglass's time (Mills 1998), and Jim Crow in King's (King 1986).

16. For a discussion of Du Bois's invocation of Marx and Freud to theorize U.S. racism, see Holt (1990, 309). By 1967 King had become decidedly disillusioned (Dawson 2001, 17.)

black liberals treat as private and thus beyond their analytical reach, such as intimate-partner violence, teen pregnancy, and street harassment. Black liberal civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League mostly focus on eradicating public forms of racism through governmental intervention in resource redistribution and antidiscrimination law. A long history of black male leadership in these and other black organizations recycles a black patriarchal division of labor that casts black women "as helpmates rather than equals" (Zook 1995, 86). To the charge that black feminist calls for sexual equality within black communities splinter black racial solidarity, Kristol Brent Zook sees a house already divided, pointing out that "black women's voices don't move through public arenas in the same way that black men's do" (ibid.).[17] Privacy is important, but it can also rob black women of a political vocabulary for articulating their experiences of same-race interpersonal intimidation and abuse. Moreover, for black lesbians, "the claim of privacy always also structurally implies a claim to secrecy" (Thomas 1992, 1455). I do not advocate using public policy directly to address intraracial street harassment, but instead push for seeing this problem as worthy of public discussion and remediation within the broad parameters of black civic life.

Social conservatism regarding gender roles and homosexuality pervades all black ideologies,[18] but black nationalists have been the most outspoken and explicit in their promotion of traditional, unequal sex roles for black men and women. For instance, M. Ron Karenga, the founder of US (United Slaves) and the creator of Kwanza, promotes "gender complementarity," in which black men and women have unequal but complementary roles in marriage. E. Frances White notes that Karenga no longer explicitly calls for the subordination of black women, but that "he remains mired in heterosexist assumptions" (White 1995, 514). Homosexuality, especially black male homosexuality, comes under fire as destructive of traditional black nuclear families, and black patriarchy more generally (Harper 1996). Black lesbians' betrayal of racial solidarity consists in the perception that they "have turned their backs on [the] ideal [of black motherhood] by mating with someone with whom they cannot produce offspring by 'natural' or traditional methods" (Gilmore 1994, 234). Black gay men are reviled for "shirking" the dictates of black mas-

17. For critical accounts of black women's organizational roles in the civil rights movement, see Collier-Thomas and Franklin (2001).
18. See Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Fear of Gay Marriage Gives the GOP Another Chance at Minority Voters: Queer Eye for the Black Guy," *Village Voice* 24–30 September 2003.

culinity, while black lesbians are accused of forfeiting their only legitimate claim to sexuality: motherhood. White criticizes the misogynist and heterosexist features of Korenga and Molefi Kete Asante's cultural black nationalisms, but lauds the "strengths of nationalist ideology in its counterattack against racism" (White 1995, 520). This sympathetic critique continues a long black feminist history of "lifting as we climb," of reforming black political ideologies from within, instead of rejecting them out of hand.

THEORIZING INTERPERSONAL CONDUCT

In contrast to black liberalism and black nationalism, black conservatism and black feminism offer a political vocabulary for theorizing the privatized dimensions of black civic life, albeit with very different motivations, definitions, and results. Black conservatives' political vocabulary of personal and communal responsibility *could* supplement black feminists' structural accounts of black women's political travails, but not in its current format. Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, Shelby Steele, Clarence Thomas, Orlando Patterson, and other black conservatives fail to acknowledge intraracial power disparities between black men and women within the various civic associations they promote. Residual racial disadvantage, according to most black conservatives, is limited to economic disparity, which they link to the putative antisocial behavior of the black urban poor (Reed 1994). Behavioral change is needed, black conservatives argue, before blacks can take advantage of the formal equal opportunities that now exist within American capitalism as a result of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Black conservatives direct our attention to black civic life, but their analyses of black civic associations are vague. Loury, for instance, articulates a hazy set of moral directives for black civic reform: "Dealing with behavioral problems; with community values; with the attitudes and beliefs of black youngsters about responsibility, work, family, and schooling are not things government is well suited to do. The teaching of 'oughts' properly belongs in the hands of private voluntary associations: churches, families, neighborhood groups" (1995, 22).[19] Even the "bad" cultural habits of black middle-class youth can be traced to their mimicking of a poor and working-class black culture that promotes "victimology" as it

19. More recently, Loury has urged Americans to take collective responsibility for the putative pathology of black culture (2002, 12).

devalues education and hard work, according to John McWhorter (2001). Loury and McWhorter are not wrong for searching beyond government intervention for the improvement of black life conditions. But their descriptive and prescriptive arguments about black culture lack critical attention to gender and sexuality. Who determines which "oughts" ought to be taught, and how? To ignore the internal power disparities within black civic life is to sanction, by default, status quo black patriarchal norms that tolerate and perpetuate the mistreatment of black women.

This quietude offers rich ground for black feminist criticism. For it is within black civic life that political problems such as street harassment are trivialized and dismissed. Black liberalism and black nationalism, as sketched earlier, do not direct our attention to black civic life. Black conservatives lead us to the associative aspects of black life wherein much of black women's political vulnerability lies, but they fail to connect individual behaviors such as McCullough's street harassment and murder of Gunn to the structure of black patriarchy. To be clear, I am *not* arguing that the aspirations of black conservatives and black feminists are compatible. I argue instead that black conservatives' lack of intraassociational critique gives black feminists a clear opening for retrieving the language of culture and interpersonal conduct, and recasting it as an integral part of their structural critiques of the intersection between racism and sexism.

Black conservatives' advocacy of free-market libertarianism based in the presentism of economic transaction, rather than historical remediation, fails to capture black patriarchy, which is by definition historical.[20] Black conservatives would likely condemn Gunn's murder, but they would not view it as evidence of a historical system of sexual terrorism that compromises black women's personal security and freedom. The only critical lens offered by black conservatism onto Gunn's murder and the street harassment that preceded it is the vague, bourgeois model of a "politics of respectability" rooted in traditional, patriarchal, and mostly Christian values.[21] On this view, McCullough's street harassment of Gunn and her friends can be seen as a breach of black civic decorum (interpersonal and cultural), but not as evidence of black patriarchy (structural and historical).

20. "Presentism tends to slow down the process whereby erroneous or unhelpful formulations are discarded, and it can be pernicious when analyses of past events are distorted by a desire to support a contemporary political strategy" (Banton 2000, 62). For an overview of "patriarchy" ("rule of the father") as it has factored into feminist political theory, see Tong (1998).

21. On the history of a black "politics of respectability," see Gaines (1996).

Street harassment is not a behavior that is limited to the black urban poor. It is a tool of sexual domination available to all men. It is thus a democratic condition of male embodiment. The economic idiom of black conservatives' free-market libertarianism cannot explain this messier, more diffuse sense of culture. Furthermore, "the conservatives who maintain that persistent poverty in the inner city is the result of some cultural deficiency have garnered so much opposition from many liberals and radicals that few scholars are willing even to discuss culture" (Kelley 1997, 17–18). The trope of cultural dysfunction is also deeply gendered, as "the problems associated with the behaviorally focused 'underclass' are predominantly identified with [black] females" (P. Smith 1999, 268). Stereotypes of black women as hypersexual and hyper-fecund that circulate throughout the dominant American public sphere also circulate within black civic life, affecting intraracial gender and sexual politics. As mothers, black women are blamed for perpetuating intergenerational poverty by bearing too many children at too young an age, and for failing to impart the proper moral and cultural values to their children.[22] Compulsory heterosexuality undergirds all of these stereotypes of black cultural dysfunction, as well as black conservative proposals for their remediation.[23] We cannot understand black women's intraracial political injuries, however, unless we detach culture from poverty and begin to talk about behaviors like street harassment as patterned behaviors both within and without black civic life that are both cultural and structural. Culture refers to patterned behavior, and so mediates between the social ontology we find ourselves in and the decisions we make as individuals. Black feminists can and should initiate this process, and our first step should be to retrieve the political language of culture and to infuse it with a critical awareness of black patriarchy.

REVISING BLACK FEMINIST POLITICAL VOCABULARY

As noted previously, all black feminist arguments posit an intersectional analysis of at least race and sex, and are launched within the epistemological framework of fighting antiblack racism. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains that "[b]y continually expressing overt and covert analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take

22. Dorothy Roberts writes, "Black mothers are seen to corrupt the reproduction process at every stage. . . . They impart a deviant lifestyle to their children through their example" (1997, 9).
23. For instance, Patterson argues that blacks' best strategy for achieving racial parity with whites is through heterosexual interracial marriage (1997, 193).

for granted" (1992, 255). Race is a "metalanguage" that functions "to subsume other sets of social relations, namely gender and class," while it simultaneously "blurs and disguises its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops" (ibid.). Higginbotham does not say how race "subsumes" lesbianism within an intersectional framework. Indeed, across a wide range of contemporary black feminist arguments, one finds tension and contradiction between the dualistic metaphor of intersection and the multiplicity of black women's other social identities.

Black feminism should be pragmatically attuned to black women's legal and political bifurcation, but it should also theorize black lesbians' place within the intersection of race and sex. In 1977, the black feminist Combahee River Collective issued its manifesto declaring that black feminism should be "committed to struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (1995, 232), thus setting in motion the now-common practice of black feminists' nominal inclusion of class and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw later used the trope of "intersection" to portray black women's bifurcated status within antidiscrimination law (1991). Some black feminists working within law and the social sciences rely on the trope of "multiplication" to convey the intuitive sense that black women's oppression exceeds the sum of their constitutive identifications (King 1988; Wing 1997). However, these mathematical metaphors obscure rather than clarify black lesbians' theoretical status within black feminism.

The arts and humanities allow more room for theorizing identity proliferation and complication. Poet-activist Audre Lorde urged us to recognize that our identities are more numerous and unruly than most of us let on: "Those of us who stand outside [the *mythic norm* of white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure] often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing" (2000, 539). In stretching human difference to its logical conclusion—pluralistic humanism—Lorde inspires self-examination and interpersonal learning. These are worthy goals, but difficult to translate into the categorical language of law and politics. We get a sense of human complication, but no instruction on how black lesbian identity affects the intersection of racism and sexism.

Collins emphasizes Gunn's "coming out" as a lesbian as precipitant in her murder, but she then brackets Gunn's sexual identity: "Like African American girls and women, *regardless of sexual orientation*, they were

seen as approachable. Race was a factor, but not in a framework of inter-racial race relations" (Collins 2004, 115; my emphasis). In calling atten-tion to Gunn's sexual orientation and then bracketing it, Collins detracts somewhat from her earlier argument regarding black lesbians' particular relationship to a heterosexist slave ideology that gets refracted to contem-porary black civic life. Cathy Cohen uses the term "cross-cutting issues" to depict the secondary marginalization of black lesbian and gay politi-cal interests within black politics (1999). At the level of interpersonal politics, black lesbians like Gunn must make situational decisions about whether to try to pass for straight or to "come out." This sparks an inter-nal sense of transgression that David Richards calls a "psychic ghetto of the mind" that deprives lesbians and gay men of a public "language of sexual experience and sensual bonding" (2000, 175). Black lesbians and gay men are completely absent from Elijah Anderson's (1999) ethno-graphic account of "the code of the street" within poor black Philadel-phia neighborhoods. A plausible conclusion to draw from this lapse is that the code of the street still silences black lesbian and gay voices, even as it may tolerate their visible presence. Gunn broke the code of the street by verbalizing her lesbian identity, which instantly challenged Mc-Cullough's power within the black patriarchal turf of the street.

Black patriarchy did not predetermine McCullough's actions, but it did make readily available to him a social script in which his street ha-rassment and physical assault of a black lesbian would be downplayed or ignored by black civic organizations and the greater U.S. public. As I have argued, black feminists should explicitly and consistently hold black men responsible for their treatment of black women. Likewise, they should hold black women accountable for their decisions to reinforce black patriarchy. Heterosexual black women reinforce black patriarchy when they distance themselves from, and fail to speak up on behalf of, black lesbians. Black lesbians reinforce black patriarchy when they fail to draw links between their political welfare and black feminist activism and scholarship. As Barbara Smith reminds, "Black feminism and black lesbianism are not interchangeable" (1995). We cannot assume that Gunn identified or would have ever identified as a black feminist. Black femi-nist consciousness requires introspection and awareness beyond one's ex-periences and desires. This means dispensing with perfunctory identity lists and engaging in the hard work of compassion, which necessitates familiarity, which in turn demands specificity.

The slogan "the personal is political" not only refers to one's own per-sonal orbit but also issues the challenge of understanding and valuing

sexual choices and identities that differ from one's own. Gunn's murder, if we are to confront its systemic features, can make black lesbian embodiment familiar to heterosexual black women by reminding them that they too are disciplined to stay within the narrow confines of a tenuous ideal of black womanhood that they can never possess but are compelled nonetheless to reach for. Like all gender ideals, black women's individual efforts to master such ideals are asymptotic at best. Epithets such as "ho," "bull-dagger," and "dyke" are disciplinary tools that need not correspond to a woman's self-identification or "true" identity. Confronted with the relentless onslaught of messages that depict them as natural prostitutes and "breeders," many black women adopt the defensive stereotype of the "strongblackwoman" (Morgan 2000) or "bullet-proof diva" (Jones 1997), which prevents them from seeing street harassment as a pressing political issue that harms them. Quoting Veronica Chambers, Kimberly Springer "likens Black women to magicians, 'masters of emotional sleight of hand. The closer you get, the less you can see. It was true of my mother. It is also true of me'" (Springer 2002, 1070).

Interest convergence between black lesbian and heterosexual women does not, however, erase black lesbians' particularity within black politics. So while both black straight and gay women's sexualities are distorted and clouded by what Naomi Zack calls the "American sexualization of race,"[24] black heterosexual women can and often do distance themselves from black lesbians, a self-defeating move that often prevents straight black women from examining their own sexual lives.[25] Evelyn Hammonds argues that "historically, Black women have reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourse on race and sex and this image [black women as empty space] with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility" (Hammonds 1997, 171).

CONCLUSION

My hope is that black feminism will begin to consistently theorize the connections and differences between lesbian and straight black women. This requires reconsideration of the political vocabulary used by black feminists both to describe black female embodiment across sexual identities and to develop behavioral prescriptions for reforming the structural

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24. Zack writes that "there seems to be no historical precedent for the sexualization of race in the United States, that is, no earlier cultural example of the assignment of a debased form of sexuality to an hereditary caste, over generations" (1997, 148).
25. See Kimberly Springer's (2002, 1073) critique of Joan Morgan's memoir.

inequalities they flag. There *are* specific "oughts" that ought to be taught within black families, schools, churches, and community organizations concerning the treatment of black girls and women within black civic life, and black feminists should not equivocate on this. Chief among these "oughts" is for boys and men to understand the psychological and existential harms they inflict when they participate in a long-standing culture of street harassment, and for black girls and women not to dismiss such harm as trivial.

Street harassment indicates a sexual imbalance of power that is connected to broader systems of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia. This is what black conservatives miss in their presentist accounts of an urban black culture of poverty. Black conservatives are not entirely wrong to point up the need for cultural change, but such cultural change must go hand in hand with critical inquiry into the social and economic structuring of U.S. society as it impacts black civic life, as well as with serious investigation of the gender and sexual dynamics within black civic associations. Black feminists have begun this important work, but they must investigate the theoretical specificity of black lesbian identity as it interacts with the structural intersection between racism and sexism. Black lesbian identification is central to this intersection because the macro and micro control of black women's sexualities is central to black patriarchy. In light of this, a central project of black feminism should be the promotion of black women's sexual autonomy, their right to an erotic life with or without black men.

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