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Black Feminism's Minor Empiricism: Hurston, Combahee, and the Experience of Evidence

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the Zora Neale Hurston's early twentieth-century anthropological work and the Combahee River Collective's 1977 Black Feminist Statement can be read as part of a genealogy of Black feminist empiricism: a minor empiricism that rejects positivist empiricism, strategically mobilizing dominant scientific practices while also developing an onto-epistemology specific to Black English and what Combahee terms "black women's style." Their works make tactical use of positivist empirics to critique and counter legal and medico-scientific circumscription of Black women's lives, while simultaneously participating in this counter-practice of Black feminist empiricism. As both Combahee's statement and Hurston's first ethnography, *Mules and Men* (1935), reveal, Black feminist empiricism is grounded not in traditional scientific virtues such as transparency and objectivity, but instead in opacity and subjectivity, which make it unavailable for use for purposes of legal subjection,

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while simultaneously revealing the raced and gendered implications of a legal system dependent on positivist values.

“As a major result of the historical realities which brought us enslaved to this continent, we have been kept separated in every way possible from organized intellectual work. [...] What our multilayered oppression does not explain are the ways in which we have created and maintained our own intellectual traditions as Black women, without either the recognition or support of white-male society.”

-Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, *All of the Women Are White, All of the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*

“We smile and we tell [our questioner] something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. [...] The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.”

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*

When Zora Neale Hurston completed her first ethnography, *Mules and Men*, it did not look much like the work of Franz Boas's other students. Although Boas famously made cultural rather than biological (racial) difference the analytic focus of anthropology, he nevertheless wanted to understand culture scientifically. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, as an idea of “science” as methodical and objective gained cultural cachet, the social sciences increasingly modeled themselves on the procedures and values of the natural sciences.¹ Boas advocated this scientific turn for anthropology, developing an empirical approach to

ethnographic inquiry grounded in the same “dispassionate” standpoint imagined to govern natural science inquiry.² His most famous student, Margaret Mead, evinced the anthropological goal of disinterested empiricism when she described her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, as a “human experiment,” conducted in the “controlled conditions” of “primitive culture,” modeled after and comparable to a laboratory experiment (1928/2001, p. 7). In *Mules and Men*, Hurston made no such claims. Her standpoint was undeniably passionate, her ethnography overtly interested.

While the question of a feminist standpoint, particularly a Black feminist standpoint, would not become central to academic debate until almost half a century later, Hurston’s ethnographic work was inconsonant with dominant white and masculinist scientific and social scientific epistemologies of the mid-twentieth century. As part of her anthropological training at Barnard College in the 1930s, Hurston (1935/1995) returned to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, to collect the Negro folklore that had given her a “love of talk and song” (p. 13). *Mules and Men* documents over seventy examples of stories about Brer Rabbit and John Henry, Gator and God, as well as accounts of numerous HooDoo rituals. In the text, Hurston described herself as looking through “the spy-glass of Anthropology” (p. 9), but she did not observe at a remove. Throughout, Hurston emphasized her shared blackness with the community she studied, marking a difference from other anthropologists in the Boasian tradition, even feminists such as Margaret Mead. Where Mead’s work was full of explanations about comparative adolescent development and meanings of social practices, Hurston’s early work largely avoided causal explanations or political imperatives. Instead of “objectively” imparting cultural “information” and “facts” to her reader, Hurston used vernacular Black English as the language of both the tales and her own writing in order to recount her decidedly sexed experience of folk-telling and listening. There existed few retrospective conclusions in her text; instead, the performance and reproduction of experience were

primary, and knowledge was not the result of accumulated evidence, but embodied in experience itself, constantly (re)produced. Perhaps for these reasons, as well as the general exclusion of Black women from dominant scientific and social scientific practices until late in the century, Hurston's ethnographic work is rarely cited for its contributions to empirical method or scientific epistemologies, and is instead most often taken up for its literary and historical significance.³

Even though she did not directly call for a Black feminist empiricism, Hurston developed an approach that countered dominant, exoticizing, and primitivizing anthropological practices of her moment. Almost fifty years later, concurrent with Hurston's rediscovery by second wave Black feminists, the first book dedicated exclusively to Black Women's Studies was published. It explicitly articulated the urgent need for such an approach in order to refute the racialized and gendered manifestations of dominant social science knowledge in social and legal policy. The essay collection, titled *All of the Women Are White, All of the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), both made a claim for the importance of Hurston's contributions to Black feminist thought and also imagined a reconfigured social science practice that centralized the experiences of Black women.⁴ But despite this simultaneity, the more than forty mentions of Hurston—a number greater than any other single figure in the text—still refer primarily to her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Even among Black feminists of that generation, Hurston's contributions to empiricist methodologies remained tacit.

Both Hurston's rediscovery and the publication of *But Some of Us Are Brave* were the result of Black feminist literary investments. Shortly after Alice Walker helped bring Hurston back to cultural prominence,⁵ the Combahee River Collective, a group of self-identified Black lesbian feminists, made publishing Black women's writing a central focus of their study group, which operated from 1974-1980 (Harris, 2009; Norman, 2007). The Collective's "Black Feminist Statement," first published in

Zillah Eisenstein's (1978) *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, was republished in the collection, and one of the Statement's primary authors, Barbara Smith, served as an editor of the book. For the next thirty years, the Statement stood as a foundational articulation of Black feminism. In it, the Collective detailed their development from an ad hoc political group for Black women dissatisfied with existing organizations into a study group focused on analyzing the specific life conditions of Black lesbians operating at the juncture of "interlocking" systems of race, gender, class, and sexual oppression (Combahee, 1982). The Statement offered the first use of the term "identity politics," and also laid the theoretical ground for both the analytic of "intersectionality" and a specifically Black feminist standpoint, which would become two signal and entangled contributions of Black feminism to feminist epistemology and social science practice, altering the terrain of feminist standpoint theory through an intersectional imperative.⁶ Despite this, Combahee's Statement, like Hurston's work, has been considered almost exclusively outside the purview of scientific epistemology, understood primarily instead as a political document.

This elision is somewhat surprising considering that Combahee's statement helped pave the way for Black feminism's contributions to feminist standpoint theories, which have been crucial for revising and expanding methods in both the sciences and social sciences, demonstrating how those fields remain inextricable from politics. Several scholars have noted Combahee's direct engagement with scientific themes—including their critique of the legacies of biological determinism and their activism against technoscientific innovations that pathologized and circumscribed the lives of women of color.⁷ Yet, Combahee's account of experience as epistemological, as itself a form of empiricist thought, has not been considered in critical relation to the evidentiary demands of contemporary knowledge-production in the sciences and social sciences. In what follows, however, I argue that Combahee and Hurston challenged the epistemological structure of dominant (white, masculinist) science by

deploying not only a distinctive Black feminist standpoint, but also an alternative empiricism grounded in the aesthetic values inhered in the lived experience of blackness and femininity. They developed what I call a “minor empiricism,” which rejects the “positivism” that Elizabeth Grosz (1993) has derisively described as the approach of contemporary social sciences, a positivism characterized by datafication, information production, and technicality.

A number of minor empiricisms emerged over the course of the twentieth century to contest dominant scientific assumptions and practices.⁸ Although minor empiricisms, like empiricism more generally, produce knowledge from the senses, they do not take the organization of the senses, and especially the privileging of vision, as given for converting perception to knowledge. Nor do they assume the value-neutrality of machine mediation and quantification.⁹ Minor empiricisms, instead, reflexively constitute or reorganize the senses as they experience sensation. In using the term “minor” to denote these epistemologies, I follow the lead of contemporary scholars interested in the intersections of race, aesthetics, and epistemology, such as José Muñoz (1999) and Fred Moten (2003), who draw on philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1986) concept of the “minor” as an aesthetic mode with epistemological and aesthetic force. According to Deleuze, minor literature is tasked with using a “bastard language” to produce a “minor people, eternally minor, taken up on the task of becoming-revolutionary” (Deleuze, 1998, p. 5). The “eternal” temporality of the minor—a non-teleological temporality in which the experience of minority is perpetuated rather than resolving into a major form—suggests that minor experience functions rather than explains; it “matters” (in physical and epistemological senses) in excess of isolatable (taxonomic, quantifiable) meaning. Attention to the experience of the literary composition of a minor language—an experience found in both writing and reading—gives one way of making links among a submerged genealogy of minor empiricisms, and in particular, Black feminist empiricism.

Feminist anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran (1994) initiated consideration of the relationships between the literary and the scientific in Hurston's work, arguing that Hurston's blurring of the fictional and the ethnographic, as well as the autobiographical and the novelistic, served as an early feminist intervention in the increasingly scientized field of anthropology, offering "an implicit critique of positivist assumptions" (p. 23).¹⁰ Rather than focusing on the fictive and representational aspects of Hurston's work, however, I argue that by bringing Hurston into conversation with Combahee, we can see the ways in which the particular stylistic and compositional features of Black feminism's minor empiricism offer an alternative empiricist epistemology. Focusing on literary composition, rather than representation, highlights the ways in which these thinkers have been able to reject the temporality of science that stills the object of inquiry through vision and fixes it in time through taxonomy and teleological developmental narratives. By deploying Black English and what Combahee (1978/1982) calls "Black women's style" as the formal grounds for their empiricism, these thinkers brought to science what Moten (2003) has called "the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition." These aesthetics emerge from Black culture to produce "blackness" as an "ongoing performance" characterized by an "improvisational immanence...a disruptive surprise" that is always material and epistemological, requiring a revision of the values through which we live and think (p. 163, 210). Participating in this often unseen tradition, Hurston and Combahee took blackness itself (in multiple valences, physical and cultural) as an epistemological virtue, and mobilized aesthetic values such as opacity, indiscernibility, improvisation, and flux in order to compose an alternative scientific legacy that does not primarily value experience retrospectively as the "evidence" of/for knowledge and expertise, but instead values it as the ongoing condition of thought, as immanent, performative, embodied knowledge.

In what follows, I trace the ways in which Hurston's and Combahee's thought critiqued the value of positivist empirical evidence

and in doing so composed an alternative science. I first outline the role of minor empiricisms in intervening against twentieth-century positivism as well as the specific role of Black feminism's minor empiricism in relation to feminist scientific interventions. I then explore how attention to literary history, narrative temporality, and linguistic epistemology—especially with regards to Hurston's Black vernacular novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—helps to clarify the values underpinning the seemingly illegible history of an alternative empiricism deployed through Black English and what Combahee called “Black women's style.” Building on this performative aesthetic understanding of empiricism, I show how Black feminist empiricism is especially useful for understanding the problematic interface between science and law—often negotiated through social science analyses—that has tended to circumscribe and pathologize the lives of Black women. Finally, I highlight how understanding both the literary and the empiricist as modes of *temporal* composition enables us to see one of Black feminism's most crucial scientific interventions: imagining a scientific temporality immanent to experience. Thus, we can see how Black feminism has developed, through literary performance, new empiricist methods and possibilities for the study and production of social life.

The rise of positivism and feminist interventions

The twentieth-century dominance of positivist scientific values and their application in the social sciences was not the predetermined effect of empiricism's philosophical emergence. Despite early twentieth-century anti-positivist movements, by the mid-twentieth century, positivist empiricism was firmly established as the epistemological underpinning for most institutional science. Positivism's institutional entrenchment can be attributed to the early twentieth-century rise of scientific technicality, expertise culture, and the pedagogical popularization of the idea of a “method” shared by all the sciences (Porter, 2009; Rudolph, 2005). Even

though natural and physical scientists rejected the applicability of the so-called “scientific method” (invented by John Dewey) to their laboratory practices, the professional publications of science began to demand organization that resembled exactly what Harvard scientists, describing mid-century science education in 1946, derisively called the “tabular progression” of the “scientific method,” which was often at odds with more ad hoc research practices (as cited in Porter, 2009, p. 341). As the social sciences aspired to the authority of scientific “expertise,” they based their data collection and analytic practices on the highly quantitative and machine-mediated models employed for natural and physical science research, deploying those methods as evidence of their “objectivity”: code for both technicality and value neutrality (Porter, 2009, p. 305). In short, they evinced a positivist approach to the sciences of social life. This conception also began to pervade the legal sphere, as technically mediated and quantified “empirical evidence” increasingly became the primary form of juridical evidence.¹¹ The imposition of “value neutral” knowledge—which is to say, largely white and masculinist science—on all aspects of social life often had pernicious effects on the lives of women and people of color, especially at the intersection of those identities. Women of color in particular bore the brunt of the legal and policy spheres’ dependence on positivist empiricism. They often constituted the objects of biomedically justified research and punishments (involving, for example, sterilization), and were the primary sources of support for communities targeted by highly technical and often race-based forensic techniques and discriminatory social policies.¹²

This paper reads Hurston’s and Combahee’s work as evidence of a twentieth-century minor empiricism that refused the conversion of experience into “knowledge” understood as “information.” In addition to rethinking the positivist legacy of science, this reading also has important implications for contemporary feminist theory, and in particular its rethinking of science. Standpoint theory, as the primary ground of feminist scientific interventions, has taken disciplinary science and social science,

especially at their intersection with law and policy, as vital political battlegrounds in need of epistemological correctives. As Sandra Harding (2004a) notes, “Standpoint theory challenged the assumption [... that] politics can only obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge” (p. 1). Instead, through the creative “confla[tion] of fields standardly kept distinct,” it demonstrated that “mainstream, purportedly only descriptive and explanatory, theories about science [were] also—perhaps always—normative” (p. 3, 2). In Harding’s account, however, the primary function of standpoint has been dialectical: “remed[ying...] the inadequate philosophies of science, epistemologies, and methodologies justifying and guiding mainstream research” (p. 6) while aspiring to incorporation within them. For example, she argues that one of the contributions of feminist standpoint has been to correct and augment the existing epistemic virtue of “objectivity” by producing a “strong objectivity” that takes into account multiple perspectives from which socially-determined observations are made, thus allowing alternative (feminist) knowledges to contribute to scientific knowledge.¹³ This conception of feminist standpoint has often privileged the value of knowledge (an end retrospectively produced from experience) over the immanent value of the experience of embodiment itself. In the last decade, new material feminisms on the whole left behind standpoint concerns as a legacy of a postmodern discursive turn that spoke *about* bodies without attending to material embodiment (Alaimo & Heckman, 2008, p. 3). Black feminism, which offered some of the most important contributions to standpoint theory, largely dropped out of the purview of contemporary feminist science studies, and identity experience as the grounds for knowledge about both discourse and power took a back seat to material agency and the “matter of matter” itself (Alaimo & Heckman, 2008, p. 5).

The matter of matter itself, however, is precisely the concern of Black feminism’s minor empiricism. By refusing an “informational” model of knowledge, and thereby refuting the possibility (or desirability) of “transferring” experiential knowledge, Combahee and Hurston developed

a form of study invested in the continued embodiment of experiential thought (the materiality of both individual and collective thought) in excess of cognition and signification, a performative empiricism that is especially difficult to incorporate back into traditional scientific epistemologies. Indeed, Hurston and Combahee composed their minor empiricism, often invisibly or illegibly, both within and across the margins of disciplinary sites. Importantly, rather than revising or correcting dominant scientific epistemology, Black feminism's minor empiricism as practiced by Hurston and Combahee has largely resisted the compulsion to make Black women's knowledge transparent or legible. Its opacity and indiscernibility have often been its condition of possibility.

Empiricism, femininity, and Black language: Black women's style

In taking themselves as simultaneously an object and subject of knowledge—reflexively analyzing the construction of their perceptions as they perceived—Hurston and Combahee produced a form of immanent, ongoing study that does not comport itself to traditional demands for separation between observer and observed or the retrospective construction of facts. Their empiricism was therefore comprised of and invested in alternative scientific values such as opacity, indiscernibility, improvisation, and subjectivity. These values were generally anathema to Enlightenment scientific thought but, as both Daphne Brooks (2006) and Britt Rusert (2012) have noted, they characterized the nineteenth-century history of Black women's engagement with both science in particular and knowledge projects more generally. Drawing on Brooks's conceptual apparatus, Rusert argues that, in a context in which US science was virtually inextricable from performance (with both scientific demonstrations and experiments often deployed on stage), "spectacular opacity" (Brooks, 2006) allowed Black women performers to "refuse racial science's attempts to make race fully transparent—and knowable," thereby disrupting dominant (scientific) ideas about race (Rusert, 2012, p. 295). Disruption through spectacular opacity was particularly important for

“Black women, who were subjected to harsher regimes of visibility and exploitation on transatlantic stages” (Rusert, 2012, p. 295). Not only have these values been disruptive of dominant knowledge practices, however; they have also been productive of new compositional possibilities, serving throughout the twentieth century as the aesthetic foundation for Black feminism’s minor empiricism, which thrived on its illegibility to dominant science.

The critique of science as an aesthetic task has a long history, one that is prevalent not only in the performance histories outlined by Brooks and Rusert, but also in Black literary traditions. Throughout the first half of the century, Hurston joined a number of Black writers and thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Nella Larson, who sought to disavow the powerful indictments of blackness implicit in the new sciences.¹⁴ As with the feminist standpoint theorists mentioned above, however, the majority of these Black intellectuals primarily aimed to correct errors in the application of scientific methods (an ongoing project of Black Studies more generally, and especially its current emphasis on social science). But Hurston’s, and later Combahee’s, approach was less straightforwardly confrontational or ameliorative. Far from “correcting” the empirical approaches of medical and social sciences, Hurston capitalized on the imagined transparency and facticity of empiricism to produce an anthropology of “lies,” the value of which lay not in the “truth” coded beneath them, but in the connective surface of their ongoing performance.

Although *Mules and Men* provides an extended account (and performance) of Hurston’s empiricist practice, turning to the more narrative structure of her novel helps to expose the method she otherwise seemed to hide—perhaps strategically—in her science. Hurston’s use of opacity—which, in the opening epigraph to this article, she described as the “feather bed resistance” of the Negro—as well as the general lack of conclusions or “facts” throughout her work make it difficult to understand or even see her empiricism, especially in a contemporary context that values empirical data in the form of what Porter (2009) calls “thin description” (a practice in

which data is imagined to be transparent, allowing it to bypass interpretation and emerge uncritically as “fact”) (p. 308). However, her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, clarifies something of her empiricist practice, enacting standpoint knowledge’s capacity to “conflate fields standardly kept distinct” (Harding, 2004a).

Peppered with the folktales that also pervade her anthropology, Hurston’s novel offers a third-person, Black vernacular account of the life of Janie Crawford. Told from Janie to her friend Phoeby—as though anticipating Combahee’s affirmation of the forms of thought found in “Black women’s style of talking/testifying in Black English”—the novel describes Janie’s negotiation of the post-slavery era, passing from adolescence through two oppressive and socially-prescriptive marriages, and finally embarking on an unorthodox relationship with the much younger drifter, Teacake, with whom she leaves the Black town of Eatonville to work side-by-side in the “muck” of the Everglades. Invoking the genre of the bildungsroman, early in the novel Janie enters into both sexuality and what she calls her “conscious life,” a moment which highlights the distinctive aspects of feminine embodiment as Janie inquires about her experience of sensation in order to make sense of her own experience. Hurston (1937/2006) writes:

It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds [...] to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. [...] What? How? Why? This singing she heard [...] connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness. [She gazed] up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (p. 11)

Although the scene appears as a moment of transition characteristic of the literary genre of the bildungsroman, it also links Hurston to a history of empiricism. Here, the strange sensuality of sexual awakening—the mystery of *feeling*—induces synaesthesia: a disorganization and

reorientation of the sensorium. As Janie is “stirred,” her senses are stirred and mixed. Singing resounds somewhere other than her ears; smell and touch, breath and caress are simultaneously activated. She is connected to “vaguely felt matters,” the sensation of impressions of which she has yet to make sense, which “struck her outside observation,” not brought to vision, instead “buried [...] in her flesh.” She irrupts with half-formed questions—What? How? Why?— questions in search of their objects. And the occasion of world-making for which she waits becomes an occasion for making the world, organizing her perceptions anew—in her first moments of “consciousness.”

This description of Janie’s emergence into reflexive self-inquiry enacts an ongoing struggle that is central to a submerged strain of empiricism, returning to it an anoriginal and philosophical indetermination of the senses, found not only in the work of empiricism’s nominal founder, Hume, but also in the irruptions of minor empiricisms that both precede him and follow in his wake—thus disrupting a linear narrative of empiricism’s development. That is to say, the experimenter’s reflexive inquiry into his/her own mind—questions about how he/she makes sense of sensation—have characterized multiple strains of minor empiricism that contest dominant, positivist empiricism. As Hurston’s novel shows, however, these empiricisms do not necessarily bring us closer to a totalizing scientific vision (or a unified, complete science); instead, they are iterative emergences of reflexive self-study specific to the subjectivities they constitute while simultaneously being constituted.

As part of this genealogy of minor empiricism, Hurston and Combahee—affected as they were by the positivist empiricism that characterized twentieth-century science—offer an immanent (and often invisible) critique, from the grounds of empiricism itself. This minor empiricism does not end with surety about what constitutes data or about the utility, let alone possibility, of quantification. Instead, empiricism appears as the immanent study of the experience of sensation; it is an attempt in the midst of sensing to understand how the mind makes sense

of sensation. . . and, as Deleuze (1953/1991) observed of Hume's empiricism, how the senses constitute subjectivity. Crucially, Hurston's description affirms the value of belief in the world and its capacity to be composed. Minor empiricism, then, far from discovering a given world, is first and foremost creative.

Through Hurston, Black feminism's minor empiricism highlights the *experience of sensation* as an occasion already engaged in sense-making, producing immanent knowledge in the phenomenological composition of sensational experience that is neither passive nor given, but instead always produced—performed—in concert with the world that touches back as it is touched. Black feminism's minor empiricism, then, offers a particularly feminine emphasis on sensational embodiment as a performative form of thought and consciousness that augments Du Bois's understanding of Black "double consciousness" as a psychic phenomenon. Black feminism's minor empiricism is shaped not only by the specificity of the female body (as both Harding and Grosz have attributed to feminist science more generally),¹⁵ but it is also formed by the embodied deployment of an epistemology that inheres in "Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black English" (Combahee, 1978/1982, p. 17).

According to poet June Jordan (1988), a contemporary of Combahee's, the epistemology of Black English derives from "a distinctive Black value system" (p. 191), perpetuated in the very syntax of language, and necessitated by conditions of Black life in the US. Black English emerged to counter the material reality of the "constant[...] threat of annihilation" inflicted on Black life. It therefore "abhors abstraction" because it is "a system constructed by people constantly needing to insist that we exist" (Jordan, 1988, p. 191). In her essay, "Nobody Mean More to Me than You, and the Future life of Willie Jordan," Jordan (1988) goes on to detail the ontological assumptions that guide the construction of Black English, which she and students in her English class, most of whom were Black, discovered through the collective study of Hurston's work. They came to understand that Black English was characterized by "the

presence of life, voice, and clarity,” and therefore assumed “the living and active participation of at least two human beings, the speaker and the listener” (Jordan, 1988, p. 191). As she explained it, this means “there *is no passive voice construction possible in Black English*. [...] For example, you cannot say ‘Black English is being eliminated.’ You must say, instead, ‘White people eliminating Black English’” (Jordan, 1988, p. 191). Against Standard English, the onto-epistemology of Black English operates in ways conducive to the reality and perpetuation of Black life in the US.

Illegible experience: Resistance to evidence

When Jordan and her students wrote letters to local newspapers *in Black English* to protest ongoing police violence against Black men in their community, the newspapers declined to print them—thus evincing the epistemological difference between Black English and Standard English. In advance, Jordan and her students recognized that Black English would make their letters illegible and illegitimate for a publication intended to distill and transmit information. The brutal incompatibility between the epistemologically-specific empiricist community Jordan and her students formed in their self-study of Black English and the larger structures of information dissemination found in the newspapers threatened to devalue Black knowledge precisely at its interface with dominant knowledge. But, as Jordan affirmed, the value of her students’ endeavor was immanent to their shared act of study as a mode of community formation, a valuation that resonates with the value systems described and performed by both Hurston and Combahee. Understanding scientific virtues as aesthetic values, magnified through attention to the literary, allows us to trace the counter-history of Black feminist empiricism that operates by way of an insistent opacity, and for which the condition of possibility is precisely its ongoing illegibility *as science*, its eternal minority.¹⁶

Hortense Spillers’s essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” raised this incompatibility as a central problem

that has threatened Black women's thought and existence, from the first moments of African colonization to the present, precisely at this interface. As she described it, the scientific invention of ethnicity that stilled and codified blackness as race, as well as the trans-Atlantic slave trade it helped justify, led to the historical loss of language and of gender differentiation for Black people in the U.S. As a result, Black women have been plagued by an ongoing, overdetermined, externally imposed nominalism (a litany of often pejorative names and types), codified at the intersections of science, law, and economy, and at odds with their ontological existence (Spillers, 1987). However, the interstices between racial classification grids and fluid life, between Black women's typology and their existence, continually evinced a disconnect between representation and ontology, thus calling for an alternative onto-epistemology, such as the one produced through Black feminism's minor empiricism.

Combahee's Statement operated at the problematic interface historicized by Spillers and encountered by Jordan and her students: between autonomous, uncoded knowledge and the brutal reality of violence engendered by dominant knowledges and the latter's social institutions that necessitated such illegible knowledge in the first place. Combahee was acutely aware of the imbrications of science and law, and in particular the ways they impinged on the lives of women of color. Although the group included several practicing social scientists (for example, Beverly Smith was a professor of women's health), their relationship to social scientific evidence and medical interventions in the legal system varied on a case-by-case basis. Combahee (1978/1982) clearly reject "biological determinism" in their statement (p. 17), list "sterilization and abortion rights campaigns" as among the activities in which they participated, and protested with regards to at least three high-profile court cases that mobilized medical, scientific, or technoscientific interventions (p. 20-21). Far from uncritical supporters of social science, they saw it as a tool—never value-neutral—that could be wielded in

multiple ways and for multiple agendas.¹⁷ They therefore protested against the use of an “insanity” defense in the case of Inez Garcia, which pathologized female victimhood as insanity, while supporting the use of “scientific jury selection” to gain favorable trial conditions for Joan Little, who had killed her rapist, and backing the release of Kenneth Edelin, a Black doctor imprisoned for conducting legal abortions (p. 20). In each instance, Combahee did not express faith in the legal system to bring women of color to justice; instead, they found it necessary to fight on behalf of women whose experiences had been put on trial. They could not and did not defer to the accuracy of scientific knowledge as given in positivist representation; instead they made use of the interstices between ontology and dominant epistemologies and institutions, mobilizing seemingly representational practices (such as science writing and their own writing) to create performative spaces of study and community formation.

This has been an ongoing challenge for Black feminist knowledges, as they move from what bell hooks (1984/2000) has described as their autonomous origins on the social “margin” to the “center,” in order to intercede against policies, legal decisions, and institutional practices that were often backed by the kinds of positivist social science described above, and appearing in forms such as the Moynihan Report. In this light, it has been necessary for Black women to harness the cultural power of dominant social science practices while offering correctives to its methodological and taxonomic assumptions—a problematic urgently detailed by Patricia Bell Scott in *But Some of Us Are Brave*.¹⁸ Building on these second wave Black feminist articulations, the most prominent Black feminist response in the later part of the twentieth century was the development of intersectionality theory by legal theorists such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000), which was subsequently taken up by the social sciences.

From the moment that intersectionality theory proposed a turn to the empirical study of Black women’s experience, the question of

experience and its evidentiary value emerged as a vexed question for feminist researchers across disciplines.¹⁹ Combahee's Statement, however, seemed to also offer a different path, one already trod by Hurston in her re-linking of subjective experience and empiricism. As Hazel Carby (1991) notes, Hurston's work does not operate within given representational frameworks; it instead "rewrite[s] the geographical boundaries of representation" (p. 126). This places her work squarely within an alternative genealogy of Black feminist geography, one in which black women's bodies traverse what Katherine McKittrick (2006) has called "demonic"—shifting or undetermined—ground. In Hurston's novel, this shifting ground makes Black women's submission to law, with law's imagined external and objective viewpoint assumed to engender justice through empiricism, an often dangerous endeavor. Indeed, the concern with legal evidence—which in the twentieth century began to depend on similar values evinced by the dominant idea of science—was of central concern to Hurston.

As Hurston's Janie reminds us, for Black women, being compelled to make evidence of one's experience, compelled to comport one's self to the legal apparatus, has often meant being exposed to the violence of a judgment that never brings justice. While living in the everglades, Janie and Teacake are caught in the apocalyptic terror of a hurricane. When a rabid dog bites Teacake, negligent governmental intervention, which focuses on white survivors, leaves him unable to get the serum that will treat him. Here, Janie and Teacake embody a blackness already abandoned, dispossessed by the promise of the civic medical establishment. As Teacake goes mad, Janie is forced to kill her greatest love in self-defense. Her experience is then put on trial.

In the context of a novel in which Janie repeatedly rejects models for appropriate Black female adulthood, and moreover, rejects the compulsive desirability of civil society by leaving Eatonville for the muck, Janie's legal subjection takes on a spectacularly and excruciatingly violent force. She is denied what she calls "de poor man's trial" of community

mourning and is instead subjected to a sham white judicial system that papers over its own racist culpability through its pronouncements of judgment (Hurston, 1937/2006, p. 314). In some ways it might seem that Janie is better off being judged by the “disinterested” judge and jury—especially as the Black community is none too kind to her in the moment. But where the community operates through altered and continually mutating social relations (often motivated by economic disparity), the judicial system instead proposes to make medico-scientific disparity the individual fault of Janie. It is precisely the law’s “disinterest” in her personal life that makes it capable of pronouncing judgment while invisibilizing the structures of abandonment that forced her into personal crisis.

In this scene, where Janie’s experience is submitted for evaluation to an all white male jury, for whom she will always be more and less than legible, Hurston makes visible the unfulfillable promise of law. Put another way, the trial can never be a site of justice for Janie because the jury’s hermeneutic practice is inevitably disconnected from the vernacular text of her experience, which, composed in an incommensurable language, cannot be made into a text *for them*. But, as Rizvana Bradley (2013) emphasizes, before and beyond law’s “violation” of Janie and Teacake’s “vernacular space” there is also “the fashioning of a common project, or simply a commons, possibilized under the rubric of care, concern, devotion, and interest.” Linking the “commonness” of their country speech to common or shared life makes sensible the value not of objectivity but of interest that both precedes and exceeds the invocation of judgment. For Janie and Teacake, inhabiting the marginal or minor is preferable to interpolation in majority social structures, which would write over their vernacular values and common life.

Identity politics and the time of empiricism

Literary modes and improvisational composition enable not only further perpetuation of the ontologically shifting and epistemologically strategic

geographical terrain of Black womanhood. They also make possible the alternative temporality mobilized for Black feminist empiricism. Through formal strategies of composition and recomposition, Hurston and Combahee demonstrate the inextricability of the aesthetic from the empirical, thus reconfiguring the *time* of science through the autonomous production of new value systems, and wresting empiricism from the violent grip of twentieth-century positivism and deploying it in the revolutionary construction of collective life. They revalue sensorial and embodied experience—how we come to know the world through our senses, aesthesis—as an ongoing process of reflexive study. In doing so, Black feminist empiricism appears as a performative—experimental—site of collective study in which blackness, femininity, and queerness are not intersecting coordinates of oppression to be mapped and analyzed, but additive aesthetic strategies of composition and creation.

For Combahee, literary-compositional modes enabled them to improvise on science writing by mobilizing multiple, seemingly non-scientific forms in order to resist the particular evidentiary demands of positivist science and social science. The Statement was modeled after social science reportage while drastically altering its content. Their sections therefore resembled the function of traditional social science organization (offering a literature review, for example, or outlining the problems addressed by research), while emphasizing the importance of “belief” and their own position as both the subject and object of study. They therefore referenced the social science model while rejecting the conventions of science writing that retrospectively constructs the time of research as teleological by composing reports that erase the messiness of research in order to present positive results.²⁰ Where conventional science writing assumes an always-already given existence of ontological reality that can appear as “fact,” in contrast, Combahee refused the conventions of twentieth-century scientific practices that demand the separation of subject and object or developmental progress.

Focusing on Combahee’s temporal intervention helps us to

understand the concept of “identity” at issue between the body and the flesh, between subjugating taxonomy and productive possibility. Combahee’s Statement included the first use of the term “identity politics,” which, contrary to popular understandings of the term, entailed not a solidification of competing identities, but a *disidentification* from any singular or authentic identity position (Murphy, 2012). This allowed them to produce the multiple coalitions necessary as part of what they called their “whole life situation” (Combahee 1978/1982, p. 14). In this sense, while “politics” named the play of competing interests that result from divisions enforced by multiple systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, and capitalism, it also named an entire field of existing and possible social relations. Identity politics offered a way of expanding the field of the social through meaningful and shared struggle, which “sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable” (p. 13), even against a legacy of their scientific objectification and legal erasure. Belief, rather than “knowledge,” not only gave force to their political commitments, but also served as the grounds for their study. Combahee write, “We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. [...We] are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us” (p. 13-14). Study, internal accountability, and projects focused on eliminating their own oppression—“as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression”—were central to their political project. Through self-study of their own forms of organization—study of how they make sense of experience—they emerge in both their speech and their writing as a “we.”²¹ Combahee’s Statement, then, became a performative site, enacting the production of not merely individual value and subjectivity, but also collective subjectivity. In this way, they imagined a non-teleological relationship to collective time, which is both actualized in the duration of activist tasks and also endured as an ongoing, never-ending revolutionary practice.

In order to understand the value of an autonomously produced and

personally-grounded science, rather than one that seeks its force through “education” and epistemological unification, it is helpful to pay attention to Combahee’s description of their self-formation. Over several years time, the group shifted, becoming increasingly interested in class analysis and simultaneously struggling over internal differences with regards to sexuality and class. Finally, in 1976, they write, “Those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. [. . .] We decided at that time [. . .] *to become a study group*” (p. 12, emphasis mine). The establishment of a collective organized around study—around the value of being a student rather than an expert—is a break not only from leftists groups whose goals were to eliminate false consciousness through education in proper ideology, but also from the value systems that organized time in ways that valorize the events of life as a means to an ending, to the production of history and knowledge.

Decidedly, the ongoing *event* of continuous struggle was the durational occasion for Combahee’s self-production. They suggested that their position at “the bottom” of the social hierarchy disenabled access to the procedures of civic reform—especially those to be found in science and law—because those procedures would require them to accept a progressive narrative of modernity that positioned them against the world, requiring them to therefore “fight the world.” For them, “fighting the world” was undesirable, although they acknowledged that it is perhaps “realistic” rather than “pessimistic” (Combahee, 1978/1982, p. 12). More hopefully, and more importantly, they claimed that their position at the bottom enabled the thought of an alternative not limited to reform; it allowed them “to make a clear leap into revolutionary action.” But revolutionary action here did not indicate *a* (singular, temporally contained) revolution to be won; rather, Combahee saw their “revolutionary task” as engaging in a “lifetime of work.” Revolution is a lifetime practice that includes not only their own lifetimes, but also the “countless” (both infinite and uncountable)

“generations” of women that preceded and followed them, including a legacy of Black women thinker-activists with which they see themselves participating, such as Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and their contemporary, Angela Davis (Combahee, 1978/1982, p. 14). Rather than fighting the world, Combahee materialized a genealogy of Black women as an eternal and resistant flux of flesh, an ongoing flow with which they connect.

Combahee’s insistence on the value of *belief*, the value of belief in their own value, inaugurated their radical epistemological revision, and connects them to an eternal history of Black female resistance: “There have *always* been Black women activists,” they write (Combahee, 1978/1982, p. 14). And because revolution is an *enduring* event, they invent revolutionary time as immanent to the materiality of the revolution, one that continues on in the ongoing constitution of a “we” who studies—including those who study Combahee’s writing. In this way, the performative act of collective reading becomes an empirical practice that can produce a people, a collective. But that *performative* is also always made possible in *performance*, and performance indicates a style. The actual manifestation of the collective act of study, for Combahee, materializes in “Black women’s style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced” (p. 13). The aesthetics of epistemology take form as style, in the ways in which Black women “talk/testify” to each other, constructing their “own intellectual traditions as Black women” (Hull and Smith, 1982). Crucially, Combahee insist on the importance of this style and of Black language, while keeping both opaque, largely hidden from view of the reader. The document, written in Standard English, insists on the value of Black English without making it transparent, while improvising on the formal strategies of science and mobilizing the honest trickery—the visible truth of the surface of folkloric “lies”— found in Hurston’s work.

Subjectivity and opacity: The minor and the literary

That Hurston's anthropological work is most often read as part of literary rather than scientific history points to the opacity of Black women's style, but also hints at its possibilities engendered through such opacity. Putting Hurston in conversation with Combahee's much later interventions, we might, through Hurston's work, take stock of the value of Black women's style of talking/testifying in English, a value that highlights the interplay between scientific and literary temporality. Indeed, it is precisely through attention to the literary reconfiguration of time in both Combahee's and Hurston's work that "minor" becomes a useful alternative to "identity." This is especially true when thinking of Hurston's invocation of the *bildungsroman*—a genre concerned with ending minority and entering into majority—in order to historicize the use of "minority" in terms of *age*, which has served as a means for pathologizing multiple iterations of identity.

In Franco Moretti's (1987) by now traditional account, the *Bildungsroman* takes youth as its central theme, and coming-of-age through education is its central mode for producing a dialectical resolution of life experiences, culminating in autonomous individuality or proper socialization. *Bildung* is the story of the protagonist's leaving behind minority and entering into majority, into proper citizen-subjectivity. It imagines both the inevitability and desirability of coming into majority, which the early twentieth-century science of the New Psychology would suggest to be a "natural" fact of development and thus enable scientific pathologization of extended minority. Holly Brewer (2007) traced the longer history of the denigration of minority, showing that in the rigid paternalism of Anglo-American culture in the seventeenth century, the minor child was considered irrational and therefore not capable of participating in democracy or political decision-making. The same rhetoric was repeatedly applied to other "minor" groups—based on race or sex—as a justification for patriarchal and colonial control. The collective irrationality of minority was then frequently and conveniently "proven" through sciences, including anthropology, anthropometry, and craniology.

From our twentieth-first century vantage, it becomes easy to see the “interest” or invested values that governed the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century iterations of those sciences, allowing us to dismiss them as “pseudoscience.” But it would be a mistake to imagine that a truly “objective” or “value-neutral” science is possible. . . and, more importantly, as Combahee and Hurston show us, it would be a mistake to imagine that such an “objective” science would be *desirable*.

In this light, we might think of Hurston’s novel—and Janie’s rejection of given models for adulthood—as something like an anti-bildungsroman that also rejects the related scientific values of development, objectivity (externality/value neutrality), and majority; Hurston rejects the drudgery of a compulsive adulthood that would compel her and her characters to submit to citizen-subjecthood while never being allowed full access. Her critiques of science along with Combahee’s are grounded in revealing the consistent interests of science that are not *their* interests. Indeed, they show that the invention of the concept of “value-neutral science” is not an inevitable outgrowth of the progress of empiricist methodology, but is instead a concept mobilized precisely in the interested denigration of minority and the enforcement of social division. And it is from these grounds, then, that we can understand the intervention that Hurston’s anthropology makes. *Mules and Men* is valuable in Hurston’s valuation of her own *interest*—as a participant observer studying the very town in which she grew up—and in her refusal to capitulate that experience to the demands of evidence. Hurston wrote *Mules and Men* in a fledgling moment of American anthropology, and so was able to invent a science that neither depended on the stilling of evidence into fact, nor the value of an external observer to judge and evaluate meaning. Her science therefore put her vernacular sensibility in the service of an affirmation of the autonomous and immanent value of experience.

In her ethnography, Hurston places her own experience of, *and pleasure in*, collecting that evidence on center stage. *Mules and Men* is a playful recounting of “Negro Folklore,” which she points out is composed

through a tactic of excess and evasion, a “feather bed resistance” against the white gaze (Hurston, 1935/1995, p. 10). Often seeming to be mere nonsense or whimsy to a white listener, Negro Folklore communicates and makes community with other Black folks through meaning that rides on the excess of these tales and the shared experience of the pleasure of telling. Although Hurston reveals that Negro Folklore is tactical, her main goal in writing is not to unmask the hidden meaning of the tales, stilling them through a hermeneutic enterprise. Instead, she asserts their value as is: “They are a lot more valuable than you think,” she writes. “We want to set them down before it’s too late” (p. 14). *Mules and Men* becomes an occasion for repeating the experience of vernacular telling and listening as radical acts of community formation, which Hurston would also deploy in public performances of folktales, folk songs, and several plays.²²

Hurston’s refusal to make meaning in the collection resonates with her novel’s refusal of the values of Bildung. The main section of *Mules and Men*—the recounting of folklore—ends somewhat arbitrarily with a brief account of a fight she herself is involved in, leading her to skip town, rather than with any closing meditation on what she had learned. It then reopens with a completely different topic, HooDoo, which she is hurrying to New Orleans to study due to lack of funds. The arbitrary first ending gives way, then, to another double ending of the HooDoo section: first she kills a cat in a hoodoo ceremony, and then she awakens as a cat. Through this doubling or tripling of endings, which never resolve into fact, *Mules and Men* celebrates the impropriety of the minor—it ends with the scientist as a cat!—as a means of rejecting both the value of the coming into majority in the bildungsroman or of making meaning and garnering of bourgeois respectability in the sciences. Impropriety and performance and a performative act are Hurston’s empirical interventions.

The final ending of *Mules and Men* acts as something of an allegory about the joy of deception and the strategic post-facto construction of respectability following indulgence. Hurston writes:

Sis Cat was mighty hungry, but she hate for de rat to think she ain’t

got no manners, so she went to de water and washed her face and hands and when she got back de rat was gone. [When the next rat she caught] askes “Where’s yo’ manners at, Sis Cat?” [She] tol’ ‘im, “Oh, Ah got plenty manners, but Ah eats mah dinner and washes mah face and uses mah manners afterwards. I’m sittin’ here like Sis Cat, washing my face and usin’ my manners. (p. 112)

In the end, Hurston reveals that her ethnography of lies is itself a lie, but it is not deceptive because it gives false information, so much as it simply does not lend itself to the usual scientific results of information or meaning-making at all.

Coda

Taken in light of June Jordan’s essay, in which her students chose the obstinate and opaque value of Black English as a form of shared thought and solidarity against dominant and politically expedient modes, we might see that Hurston’s refusal to make too concrete a “meaning” or conclusion out of the endless retelling of Black folklore—told between slices of gingercake and the labor-performance of toe parties—speaks back to what was happening with Janie in the courtroom. The tales are iterations of each other, actualized for particular moments. Although one can take them more generally as evidence of the persistence of Black life made available through a kind of coded telling, that code does not break down in a one-to-one correspondence with informational meaning or discrete sensory data. Where Standard English comports itself to positivist empiricism’s evidentiary demands, in Hurston’s minor empiricism, composed in Black English in Black women’s style, neither quantification nor datafication accounts for experience. The tales do not “end” in order to be interpreted for a closed meaning, nor do they comport themselves to the burden of hermeneutic “evidence.” Instead they proliferate in their own composition, decomposition, and recomposition, making use of the material they can loosen up enough to construct in new ways. We see

then that Janie's life experience cannot be read as evidence of a particular juridical meaning by the white male judge and jury, not only because it is composed of a language they do not read, but more specifically, because the epistemology that found that language is always-already resistant to the abstraction of "meaning" that could be imagined to matter more than matter itself. And Combahee's Statement, too, speaks to the value of the immanent study of experience as a particularly Black feminist practice. Hurston's work, Janie's life, and Combahee's collective study compose new perceptions and impressions from the disorganized, non-quantifiable experience of sensation and sense-making, over and against any evidentiary function that would close them off in the service of "fact."

Notes

¹ See Grosz (1993) on the social science's positivism as a result of its aspiration to "a natural science model of knowledge" (p. 192), as well as Porter (2009) on the rise of "expertise" culture, in which twentieth-century US social scientists took up the mantle of "science" to make claims to "objectivity," "detached from the rhetorical fray of ideology and politics" (p. 306).

² See A. Kroeber (1949), in which Kroeber, one of Boas's students, outlined the principles of Boasian empirical anthropology.

³ One notable exception is Visweswaran (1994).

⁴ See Section Three: Dispelling the myths: Black women and the social sciences.

⁵ See Walker (1983), which describes Walker's attempts to recover Hurston's legacy, as well as Hurston (1979), a collection of Hurston's writing edited by Walker and published shortly before *But Some of Us Are Brave*.

⁶ See P. H. Collins (1990/2000; 2004) for a discussion of the role of intersectionality in Black feminist standpoint.

⁷ See, for example, Murphy (2012) on Combahee's role in reproductive justice struggles.

⁸ Most notably, William James's "radical empiricism." See James (1909/1995).

⁹ Perhaps most famously, at the turn of the twentieth-century, as part of his "Radical Empiricism," William James (1890) suggested that we might understand the "unclassified residuum"—or experiences that were sensed while seeming to be extra-sensorial—as important sites for revising and producing human knowledge.

¹⁰ Carby (1991) also suggests that Hurston's work contributes to the imperialist project of early twentieth-century US anthropology. To my mind, this is perhaps more true of Hurston's later anthropological tracts, which tend to come to more numerous (and more moralizing) anthropological conclusions.

¹¹ See Keenan and Weizman (2012) and "Part II: Irreductions" in Latour (1993) on the use of technoscience forensics in legal decision-making.

¹² See Washington (2006).

¹³ In their account of the historical emergence of the scientific concept of "objectivity," Daston and Galison (2007) describe epistemic virtues as the values that guide scientific thought; "objectivity" is the exemplar virtue.

¹⁴ For example, see Ahad (2010) for Black modernist critiques of psychiatry. See Ellison (1964/1995) and Ellison (1952/1994) for an example of Blacks' mid-century critiques of sociology, in particular as it emerged out of Burgess and Park (1921).

¹⁵ See pages 202-205 in Grosz (1993).

¹⁶ In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984/2000) and “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (2004), bell hooks (2004) articulates the desirability of continuing to occupy a marginal subject position as a space from which to develop standpoint knowledge; Hurston’s and Combahee’s thought suggests that such marginality is desirable not only for the subjects of knowledge, but also for epistemology itself.

¹⁷ Kenneth Edelin, a Black obstetrician, had been arrested and convicted in 1973 after performing a legal abortion. His case was later overturned (Edelin, 2007). Joan Little, who was Black, was put on trial in 1974 for killing a white prison guard who had raped her. Following the invention of “scientific jury selection” just two years earlier, her defense team employed it in her trial to have her case moved from the rural county of Beaufort, where polled residents had exhibited racist attitudes, to the state capitol of Raleigh (Abramson, 2000). Inez Garcia was a Latina woman who also killed her rapist. After an unsuccessful insanity/diminished capacity defense, she was later exonerated by way of a self-defense (Salter, 1976).

¹⁸ See P. B. Scott (1982) on the importance of revising social science practice for Black women.

¹⁹ See K. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and J. W. Scott (1988) on the evidentiary function of experience.

²⁰ See Latour and Woolgar (1986) on the ways in which scientific fact production elides its own construction through inscription and publication practices. On the controversy surrounding the publication of almost exclusively positive results, see Ioannidis (2006) and Collins (2014) among others.

²¹ See Norman (2007) on Combahee’s use of “we” as an ongoing performative act.

²² See Brooks (2010).

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Bio

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