
# Women's Studies in Transition

## The Pursuit of Interdisciplinarity

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# Subject to Speculation: Assessing the Lives of African-American Women in the Nineteenth Century

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THIS brief essay is intended as a retrospective meditation on some of the methodological problems I encountered—specifically, my inability to answer questions that I had posed for myself—while writing my book *"Doers of the Word": African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880)*, published in 1995. It constitutes, so to speak, a speculation on speculation. The book is a study of ten nineteenth-century northern African-American women—among them the religious evangelists, Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee; the travel writer, Nancy Prince; the journalist, Mary Ann Shadd Cary; the antislavery lecturer, Sarah Parker Remond; the poet, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper; and the slave narrator, Harriet Jacobs—who turned to social work, public oratory, and writing in order actively to participate in the most important reform movements of their time. It argues that these women were routinely excluded from official positions of power within the national institutions of the black male elite—namely freemasonry, the church, the press, and the convention movement in which African Americans met on an annual basis to debate issues of vital concern to their communities. Although they were sometimes able to find (temporary) authority in unofficial relations with male leaders, I contend that they also sought sites of power in the liminal spaces of religious evangelicism, travel, public speaking and, finally, fiction-making. Their experiences on the margins as well as their literary representation of these experiences are highly complex, suggesting both power and pain, radical subversion, and a desire for legitimation.

When I started this project many years ago, my initial plan had been to examine the specifically "literary" production of these black women. I soon discovered, however, that my interests went well beyond purely literary considerations to an investigation of how the

act of writing was in fact part of a much broader social activism engaged in by these women, how this social activism itself is constitutive of a long tradition of black civil rights and liberation movements that still continues today; and finally, how such a recovery of the past can enhance our appreciation of African-American cultural traditions, enable the formation of identity, and thereby encourage us to claim agency as historical subjects. I thus sought to broaden my field of investigation to include forms of cultural work other than the purely literary—public speaking, community activism, religious proselytizing, newspaper editorship, and so forth. I also found that I needed to abandon the more traditional methods of my discipline—literary criticism—that are still marked by exclusionary and hierarchical practices in order to adopt more interdisciplinary approaches.

In recent years, critical work in the humanities has offered us cultural studies as a model of interdisciplinary scholarship. Indeed, as certain theorists have maintained:

> Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture. It . . . argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures. Cultural studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices.

These theorists have further argued that cultural studies cannot be viewed simply as a "chronicle of cultural change but [rather] as an intervention in it," as politically engaged activity. As a consequence, they have begun to worry that in its current setting in the United States "the institutional norms of the American academy [might] dissolve its crucial political challenges."[1]

In her keynote address "Through and Beyond Identity Politics" at the University of Delaware's Women's Studies Conference "Interdisciplinarity and Identity," bell hooks recalled how both feminist studies and black studies are in fact interdisciplinary fields that antedate the contemporary cultural studies movement.[2] Both fields came of age in the 1960s under intense pressure for radical political and social change. Both fields have insisted on the need to analyze the lives, thought patterns, modes of behavior, and cultural production of women and African Americans by relying on methodologies from disciplines as diverse as history, sociology, political science, economics, and literary criticism. And both are explicitly political fields of

study as they conceive of scholarship as a tool for understanding the past and present in order to plan for a better future.

My book embraces such a commitment to interdisciplinarity as it insists on (1) a historical specificity that places the women studied within American, and especially African-American, "social and historical structures" of the period; (2) anthropological perspectives that interpret the work of these women in relation to their "beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices"; and (3) a literary criticism that not only analyzes the themes and narrative/rhetorical strategies found in these women's writings, but also examines how these were shaped by a politics of publication (access to mainstream publishing houses, self-publication, and white abolitionist patronage) and a politics of reception (multiple audiences, consequent audience constraints, and the need to negotiate this divided readership). And, as noted earlier, my project is explicitly political in its commitment to recovering aspects of our African-American past in order to rethink ourselves as historical subjects and claim agency. As a consequence, such an interdisciplinary approach comes to significantly transform "literary criticism" itself.

As I proceeded to carry out such interdisciplinary work, however, I found myself repeatedly asking questions about the activities of these nineteenth-century African-American women cultural workers to which the historical record was unable to provide answers. Searching unsuccessfully for written accounts that would detail the lives of these women, I soon found myself repeatedly engaging in acts of speculation, obliged to theorize about these women without having garnered sufficient evidence that would have enabled me to present conclusions with unquestioned authority. Such speculative activity ultimately led me to reflect on my own subjective position and agency as a black intellectual working in the white academy at the end of the twentieth century.

Although I could offer any number of examples of my need to speculate, those that I would like to concentrate on here concern the relationships that these nineteenth-century black women might have had with other black leaders of the period—male or female—and also with each other; they point to an apparent model of working in relative independence from other leaders once outside the local community, and raise questions about gender relations, audience reception, and interiority. Yet, how to interpret this model remained unclear to me. Should it be seen as a position of disempowerment or as a radical challenge to existing social structures?

For example, as I started to investigate the life of Sojourner Truth, I was struck by the degree to which she appeared in her adult life

to have had an ambiguous relationship with the larger northern black community of social activists, affiliating instead primarily with whites. Indeed, following her emancipation from slavery Truth joined two white experimental communities—first the religious kingdom Matthias and; after its demise, the socialist Northampton Association. After the failure of this latter organization, Truth affiliated with the Garrisonian antislavery movement. From the mid-1840s to the Civil War, she often lectured on its behalf as well as on that of the nascent women's rights movement led by Stanton and Anthony. Was it Truth's nonconformism, the black elite's disdain for this "uncultured negro" as Frederick Douglass once referred to her, or a combination of both, that separated her from the community of black reformers?[3] And how did she feel about her marginalized status within white organizations? Finally, what was I to make of the reactions of white auditors to Truth's public speeches that almost unanimously labeled her oratorical style as eccentric, peculiar, and idiosyncratic? Must we simply concur that Truth's English was faulty or may we read into these assessments the troubling presence of a double discourse, in which the language of the dominant culture is shot through with Africanisms, thus allowing Truth to reach beyond her immediate white audience to speak to those of her race and, following Benedict Anderson's formulation, "imagine community"?[4]

I was equally struck by other apparent forms of unconnectedness in the lives of still other women. For example, Frances Watkins Harper became active in black reform movements in the early 1850s shortly after her uncle, William Watkins, had left these movements but at a time when his son, William J. Watkins, had emerged as a leading spokesman. Yet I could uncover no evidence that might have indicated the kind of collaborative work that might have occurred between Watkins Harper and her male relatives. Given the fact that both men explicitly condemned the black community's apathy toward reform work, it would be reasonable to suppose that they welcomed and encouraged Watkins Harper's social activism. Yet it is also possible that given the negative attitudes of many men of the black elite toward women's activities in the public sphere, they might have felt quite uncomfortable with her presence. Indeed, femininity does not appear to be congruent with William J. Watkins's concept of the social reformer: "The bold and dashing Reformer, who walks to and fro, with the besom of destruction in his right hand . . . comes with flaming sword, and must penetrate, if he would be successful in the end, the incrustations of ignorance, in which he finds imbedded, man's mental and moral organism."[5]

Yet, perhaps the most perplexing aspect of these women's relationships was what appears to have been their relative institutional independence from one another as they carried forth their social activist goals outside their local communities. Why did concerted black female activism remain on the local level until the Civil War? To what extent were black women able to forge a group authority as they participated in national reform organizations that were either racially mixed or led by white women? Given their exclusion from positions of power in black national institutions, why didn't black women, or why could they not, band together to form national organizations of their own?

Burdened by such speculative pressures, my narration of the social activism and cultural production of these women-reformers may be seen to break down at certain textual junctures. At such moments, my narrative is disrupted by unanswered questions that mark the loss of a professional authority traditionally granted literary critics or historians and of the single interpretive reading that they produce. Confronting such an authorial breakdown, I was forced to wonder whether I was faced here with an instance of the "postmodern turn," through which postmodernism critiques modernist notions of authorial power claiming "that the very criteria demarcating the true and the false, as well as such related distinctions as science and myth or fact and superstition, are internal to the traditions of modernity and cannot be legitimized outside of those traditions."[6] Yet I also worried that the postmodern questioning of the coherent social subject, of the commensurability of language, and of the meaning of value may finally be of little help to the researcher who remains committed to empiricist methods and points of view to bring about political and social change.

More pertinently, does such speculative activity take place under the sign of woman—woman as both the object and the subject of speculation? Indeed, as I proceeded in my research I became aware that the necessity of resorting to speculation resided in large part in the fact that the historical figures I had chosen to study were women. Had I decided to focus on their male counterparts—Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delany, and Alexander Crummell, for example—a wealth of written historical documentation would have been available to me to help shape my narrative. But I had chosen to study women, specifically black women, and discovered that history—both historical events and historical writing—had shrouded them in silence and invisibility in several important ways. First, because they were women they had been excluded from assuming official positions of power, and often even from partici-

pating, in the most important national institutions of the period whose history was even then being recorded, obliged instead to seek sites of empowerment in liminal spaces that lie outside the economy of writing. Second, because they were women, researchers have not until recently deemed the cultural work that they engaged in to be important, but have allowed whatever existing written record of their activities to remain buried in silence.

Finally, as black women living in the nineteenth century these women seemed to have blocked any easy access to the interiority of their lives even through our reading of their personal letters and diaries. The prevailing cult of sentimentality popular among antebellum middle-class white women had situated women within a domestic sphere characterized by values of privacy, interiority, and feeling, which are made public through the act of literary composition. In contrast, slave culture and the slave narrative are marked by a kind of textual opacity, a refusal to speak or to interpret the secret facts of African-American folkways. The women-reformers I studied appear to have adopted this latter rhetorical strategy such that their absence both from national institutions and from historical records is compounded by their decision to maintain their interior lives secret. Given this lack of documentation, speculation then becomes the only alternative to silence, secrecy, and invisibility.

If speculation in my book was initiated because woman was its object, it was also prompted by the fact that woman—myself as researcher—was its subject as well, suggesting that I needed to speculate about the possibilities of speculation as a feminist activity. Indeed, speculation may be viewed as one aspect of that broader feminist epistemology that questions masculinist modes of inquiry and knowledge stemming from the Enlightenment—modes that assert the existence of a transcendent, generalized perspective convinced of its power to reveal "general, all-encompassing principles which lay bare [and explain] the basic features of natural and social reality," and its consequent ability to construct narratives whose adequacy would be independent "from the historical context of their genesis."[7]

The standpoint of speculative activity lies in the "I." On the one hand, the use of the "I"—the statement of personal opinion, the description of personal experience—has been interpreted negatively as trivial, banal, nontheoretical, and thus has been associated with female discourse. On the other hand, critics such as Barbara Sichtermann have suggested that "personal view" carries with it its own authority and generates privileged meanings that guarantee the writer an audience, "favored status," and "self-importance"; this au-

thority is of course typically gendered as male. Sichtermann further argues that the articulation of personal view is a form of speculative activity that most often takes place outside of institutions and is thus bereft of institutional legitimation; if its enactment is a challenge to men, it is all the more problematic for women for whom the permission to speak and the ability to be heard has always been difficult.[8]

I would like to suggest, however, that for the woman willing to take the risk, speculation may in fact be liberatory. Speculative activity may place the feminist researcher in liminal spaces on the margins of established institutions where she may come to test and challenge institutional conventions and constraints. Refusing to allow thought to be disciplined, speculation may encourage the researcher to cast aside disciplinary rules and to create her own methodologies, and perhaps even to claim the personal "I" as its own authority. In my own particular case, simply claiming speculation as a possible methodology allowed me to reflect on my own position not only as a feminist researcher but as a black intellectual—as a black feminist critic. Paraphrasing Cornel West, the dilemma of black intellectuals today is that we are no longer "organically linked" to the African-American community; we have lost those "strong institutional channels" that foster "serious intellectual exchange" and "sustain tradition," and we engage in activities that remain marginal to, and *de*legitimated by, the white academies in which we work. West suggests that we need to question current "regimes of truth" and to "dislodge prevailing discourses and powers" in order to "enable alternative perceptions and practices" that might then lead to "meaningful societal transformations."[9]

In my case, to the extent that I was able to free myself from the institutionalized rules of my discipline and to engage in speculative activity, I found that I was able to make common cause with the black women cultural workers that I had been studying. For, as I noted earlier, these women had themselves been excluded from official positions of authority in the national institutions of the black male leadership and had thus been obliged to seek sites of empowerment outside of institutions in liminal sites such as the "clearing" of the Second Great Awakening or the platform of the public lecture hall where they encountered that difficulty of being heard described by Sichtermann. Yet, despite this they had made themselves heard.

How, then, did I proceed in the writing of my book? From the outset, I acknowledged the constructed nature of my narration of the lives, social activism, and cultural production of these black women. I acknowledged the political agenda embedded in my recovery of these aspects of our cultural past. I acknowledged the limita-

tions to what I could factually know on the basis of reading books and doing archival research. I refused to invent an interior life for these women, leaving this task to fiction writers such as Toni Morrison who has stated that she wrote *Beloved* because nowhere in their narratives could she find a record of the inner life of slaves. At the same time I rejected the temptation to offer conclusive interpretations, but left open the possibility that Sojourner Truth might, of might not, have constructed her oratorical style in order to reach beyond her present audience of whites to a broader audience of blacks and thereby "imagine community"; that Frances Watkins Harper might, or might not, have gained the approbation of her male relatives and worked collaboratively with them to achieve racial uplift; that these women might have deliberately chosen, or might have been forced by economic and political circumstances, to work without the benefit of strong organizational networks outside of their local communities.

Throughout this process, I was well aware of the fact that the selection of one or the other of these alternatives might have led to the construction of a specific kind of narrative, each one of which would have been fraught with its own political ideology—the one emphasizing what might loosely be called "agency," the other "oppression." This is not to say that my work is then ideologically pure, eschewing political positionalities. Far from it. But by maintaining an approach that encourages speculation and resists closure, my narrative points to the ways in which nineteenth-century African-American women "doers of the word" were neither totally accommodationist nor totally subversive, but repeatedly negotiated agency and oppression, institutions and liminiality, and subversion and legitimation. As a black feminist working largely within the white academy but engaged in speculative activity, I like to think of myself as an heir to these doers of the word chosen to carry their legacy forward.

## Notes

1. Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3, 4, 5.

2. bell hooks, "Through and Beyond Identity Politics," Interdisciplinarity and Identity, Women's Studies Program Conference, University of Delaware, 15 April 1994.

3. Quoted in Esther Terry, "Sojourner Truth: The Person Behind the Libyan Sibyl," *Massachusetts Review* 26 (summer-autumn 1985): 442.

4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 6–7.

5. William J. Watkins, "The Reformer," in *The Black Abolitionist Papers,* eds. C. Peter Ripley et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988–92), 4:212.

6. Linda J. Nicholson, Introduction to *Feminism/Postmodernism,* ed. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 4, 7.

7. Ibid., p. 2.

8. Barbara Sichtermann, "Woman Taking Speculation into Her Own Hands," in *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives,* eds. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 90–91.

9. Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *Cultural Critique* 1 (fall 1985): 112–23.