

“It’s Not as Easy as It Looks on the Page”: Security, Precarity, and Working with Black Feminist Classics

Brittney Proctor and James Bliss

This article presents reflections on the contemporary academic workplace from two junior scholars working with Black feminism in interdisciplinary contexts. We reflect on our own interactions with two Black feminist “classics” Conditions V: The Black Women’s Issue (1979), co-edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, and Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology (1983), edited by Barbara Smith, and consider the challenges of teaching Black feminism in the classroom. We discuss both our experiences as education professionals working within and against hostile institutions, and our experiences in the classroom. We explore the dynamics of teaching Black feminist theorizing in an increasingly financialized and securitized environment, where our students’ desires for economic security index a worsening precarity they share with us. In the face of these desires for security, we explore what of the Black feminist tradition resists any reduction to the brutalizing logics of racial capitalism.

Keywords: Black Feminism / Higher Education / Labor / Pedagogy / Security / Smith, Barbara

The End of the Day . . .

We didn’t realize all the feelings we had about teaching until we started writing about it. We didn’t realize how many feelings we’d have about those feelings until we started rereading what we wrote. Will we sound ungrateful? Will we sound unprofessional? Will sounding unprofessional affect our professional lives? Will the way we sound reflect badly on our colleagues or our institutions? How

will our colleagues or our institutions feel about how we're feeling? Will their feelings have some material impact on our lives?

These are (some of) the concerns we carry as nontenured, non-tenure track "junior scholars." By the time this piece is in print, we might not be so contingent. We might get off the job market treadmill and onto the junior faculty treadmill. But we're also just a little bad luck away from being "independent scholars," wishing we were still "junior scholars." Because we see the mixture of condescension and guilt our professional associations reserve for the tragically nonaffiliated. Because we're fumbling around an industry organized almost entirely around the distribution of prestige—we all need just enough that we don't come off as desperate for it. In this moment, it feels like each of us is only ever a few cycles from unhirable. Apocalyptic thinking is one of the affective responses to our structural vulnerability. This piece reflects on both our common structural vulnerabilities and the differences that make a difference within those structures of vulnerability.

We chose a pair of feminist classics that cut to the heart of the hydraulics of security and precarity that shape contemporary academic labor, and, further, that gave us a sense of the histories that we live in the present: *Conditions V: The Black Women's Issue* (1979), edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), edited by Barbara Smith. The *Conditions* issue was part of a wave (forgive the metaphor) of feminist publications that included academic publications like *Signs* and *Feminist Studies*; literary-political publications like *Sinister Wisdom*, *Heresies*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*; and newsletters, broadsheets, and newspapers like *off our backs* and *Sojourner*.¹ It meant to contribute a range of Black feminist and lesbian feminist voices to the burgeoning world of feminist independent publishing, and entered a circuit that moved between early women's studies classrooms, feminist literary practice ("I think every young feminist wrote poetry," Barbara Smith joked in a 2003 interview), and feminist activism. Feminist independent publishing was a venue for disseminating the work, literary and political, produced by feminist activists, or women simply energized and animated by feminist activism. Those feminist publications became the materials of the women's studies classroom. The women's studies classroom energized and animated women, young or old, who passed through them and began their own activism and writing.

Conditions V was less an attempt to be included in a white-qua-universal feminist discourse than an invitation to a new kind of feminist discourse. *Home Girls* was one attempt to extend the life and the project of *Conditions V*. Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2010) has noted that *Home Girls* was an attempt to keep the *Conditions* volume in print, understanding that the anthology as a form had a longer lifespan than the journal issue. Almost twenty years later, after the collapse of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, *Home Girls* was published anew by Rutgers University Press, a way of saying that the university press has

a longer lifespan than the independent feminist press. One wonders what sort of lifespan the university press has at this moment. *Home Girls*, Gumbs notes, was one of two projects Barbara and her sister, Beverly, were working on in those days. The other never came to fruition. We think of all the projects we try to speak into existence, the projects we fear we'll doom if we speak about them "too soon," and the projects we hope everyone forgets we said we were working on. "Here we are again," Gumbs tells us, "with intention and absence, a desire that we somehow realize is queer because it was impossible at the end of the day" (2010, 465).

We teach under impossible conditions. Not, or not only, because teaching is one of Freud's "impossible professions," though we're confronted often with that particular truth. Though our experience in the classroom, and our encounters with our students, make up the bulk of the experiences we call "teaching," our conditions are determined by university administrations increasingly disinterested in maintaining the pretense that universities have any function other than extending social inequality. But knowing we're doing impossible work under the best circumstances doesn't assuage the shame or anger of feeling like we're "failing" students we care about, or even failing the students who demonstrate how little they care about us as individuals or as teachers offering them some point of connection to the Black radical tradition.

"The thing is that people need to know that it's not as easy as it looks on the page" (Smith 2004, 103). Reflecting on a career that had, by 2003, led her in and out of the academy and in and out of independent publishing, Smith had the perspective to "feel good about the work [she'd] done" and "feel anxious about the work [she] still [has] to do" (102). We have much more work ahead of us than behind us, but Smith's model inspires us. It's never as easy as it looks on the page. There are layers of anxiety we wanted to keep in our writing because we know that everyone who teaches these materials in these classrooms has similar experiences, similar feelings, similar feelings about their experiences. We wanted to write this piece for other untenured and underpaid education professionals trying to share the best of the feminist tradition with students who vaguely hate them, or who sleep in the heat of a crowded lecture hall. We also wanted to write this piece to affirm the work of educational professionals who are brutalized by the forces of antiblackness, cissexism, and heteropatriarchy. As the faces of "diversity" on college and university campuses (whether you are committed to said work or not), you and your classrooms are left vulnerable to various forms of terror and violence. *What* you teach matters less than *to whom* you are teaching it. Returning to Gumbs, "the queer thing about survival is: the end of the day isn't the end of the day. When all is said and done, all has not been said or done, because we are still in a process of learning from the implications of what did and did not happen" (2010, 465). We hold the impossibility of our conditions with the impossibility represented by *Conditions V* and *Home Girls*, by every classic of the Black feminist tradition.

We broke up our reflections into three categories: reflections on our experiences as teachers, how we interact with these Black feminist classics and bring them into our classrooms, and how we make sense of all of the above in the present moment. We organized our reflections in this way to concretize the specific challenges of teaching Black feminism in the classroom, such as the mounting pressure for both junior scholars working in interdisciplinary Black feminist contexts and the students they teach to produce economic security. What follows is a reflection on the stakes of teaching Black feminism in the classroom and the lessons on resisting “security” that Black feminist classics like *Conditions V* and *Home Girls* teach us.

“Her Own ‘Personal Politics’”

James Bliss: I’ve found I take my teaching conditions for granted, and there’s a shorthand I can use with other advanced graduate students in the University of California system, but when I meet graduate students and faculty from other sorts of institutions, they can’t wrap their heads around the work we do. Briefly, the bulk of our (nonloan) funding comes from teaching assistantships. In a standard funding package, we may have between two and zero years of fellowship funding. In the humanities, our teaching can consist of teaching lower-level writing courses or working as TAs for larger lecture courses (which has been my experience). We may TA in our chosen discipline, or we may not. We usually have two sections a week, most sections will be between 25 and 35 students, and some can be well north of 50. So we might teach 50 students each term, or we might teach 150 students each term. But TA work is only “teaching” in the sense that the institution tells us we’re “receiving valuable teaching experience.” The courses I teach, the courses I design and implement, came during summer sessions, though now I’ve also taught large introductory lecture courses during the regular academic year. As a doctoral candidate, I’ve taught classes of 200 students, and been in a position of (extremely) nominal authority over three TAs. All with my pay capped at 20 hours a week. If I’m one thing, it’s cost-effective.

I generally teach courses in the African American Studies introductory series, courses meant to give overviews of African American history and culture and of the concept of race. It’s probably an unspoken assumption that each course will have a sustained engagement with Black feminist thought and with Black women as agents within the history of Black life and Black freedom struggle in the Western Hemisphere. Which is great. It’s great to have that commitment at the department level. I count myself lucky to be an alumnus of, and an occasional teacher in, Irvine’s Department of African American Studies. But the Department is not the School (of Humanities), and the School of Humanities is not the (Grad) Division, and Grad Division is not the upper administration or the Office of the Chancellor or the Board of Regents or

the state legislature. When I'm thinking at the department level, it's hard to remember why I grind my teeth away all night.

Brittney Proctor: After I successfully defended my dissertation in the summer of 2018, I began the position I currently occupy. I am a one-year visiting assistant professor in a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at a liberal arts college, which has a total undergraduate student enrollment of approximately two thousand. The college is located in a small city in the Middle West.

The college I teach at emphasizes undergraduate mentorship and research; faculty primarily teach and advise undergraduates. Most faculty at the college, contingent or otherwise, have considerable teaching and advising loads. As visiting faculty for the year, my teaching load is two to three courses on the semester system, and I also co-advise four senior research projects.

During the fall of 2018, I taught two sections of Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. The enrollment for each section was some twenty-plus students. It was my first time teaching Introduction to WGSS, so I felt a bit insecure designing and teaching the course. Some of my insecurity stemmed from the anti-Black logic that Black Studies (which is what I got my PhD in) is, at best, irrelevant to the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies, and at worst, opposes the field and the project of feminism. We see this anti-Black logic manifest itself in the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies in a variety of ways. From the framing of Black Studies, by the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies, as somehow inherently or "more" patriarchal/homophobic/transantagonistic, to the institutional exclusion of Black Studies faculty and coursework in the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies, alongside the embrace of Ethnic Studies (framed as non-Black or nonrelational to Black Studies) to the almost exclusion of Black Studies, and so on. Black Studies is made to be out-of-place within Gender and Sexuality Studies.

But my insecurity was also spurred by an internalization of all of the antagonisms and resistance faced by both myself and other Black feminist scholars when teaching Black feminist texts in the classroom. My iteration of the course was designed around Black feminist approaches to the field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. This meant that I taught texts that revolved around Black feminist ethics and concerns such as: violence against Black (trans) women and women of color, violence against Black trans people and trans people of color, the prison industrial complex and the criminalization of sex work, self-defense, and "citizenship" status, the militarization of borders and territories by the West, critiques of bourgeois and carceral feminism(s), and so on. Between my insecurities, the institutionalization of WGSS, and the institution I taught at, I felt pressure to also teach white "canonical" feminist texts for the intro course. I often asked myself, what does it mean to teach Black feminist texts in courses that are traditionally taught with Black feminism as an outlier, in this case, Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies?² Where is

the teaching of Black feminist texts like *Conditions V* and *Home Girls* made legible? Retrospectively, I wonder what it would mean to exclusively teach Black feminist classics like *Conditions V* or *Home Girls* for Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies?

JB: I always struggle with the day/week problem when I'm designing courses, whether it's a course on theory or a historical survey. That is, how do I incorporate Black feminism, either its theoretical contributions or its historical outline, within the "larger" concerns of the field I'm tasked with "introducing"? Is there a day on Black feminism? A week? A unit? Do I mark some distinction between lesbian feminisms and more "mainstream" feminisms? What about nationalist Black feminisms? And with the great and increasing variety of Black feminist historical work, how do these questions impact how I teach or what I assign about the histories of slavery and colonialism, or Jim Crow, or the Great Migration, or the Harlem Renaissance, or the long career of the Civil Rights Movement and Black freedom struggle? It's times like that I have to step back and breathe and remember there are two other classes in the sequence that I'm not teaching.

Still, I talk about teaching with people. I compare myself to what other people say about their teaching, and I always come up wanting. Other people sound like they're connecting with their students, like their students come out of the sessions feeling like agents of change. When other people talk about teaching it sounds like their students leave the room or leave the semester imagining they've learned something. I don't feel nearly so efficacious. At worst I feel like they're surviving my lectures. At best, I feel like I'm offering them something that, maybe, they'll find some utility in.

And that something I imagine I'm offering is a relation or a way of relating to a textual tradition. A practice of reading and a way of being authorized by a set of texts. Or finding ways to be open to being authorized by those texts. And those texts are, themselves, a heterodox collection of artifacts, textual expressions of histories (plural) of Black liberation struggle as nothing more and nothing less than histories (plural) of Black feminism. It's an attempt to treat the texts as expressions of an ongoing practice. It's an attempt to learn to interact with texts in a way that doesn't freeze them in time and space. A way to honor that practice by being willing to find something new inside them.

BP: My initial hesitancy and insecurity might be best understood as reactionary—an existential crisis enacted by whiteness, or the "twoness" of my consciousness (as described by W. E. B. Du Bois). I imagined my students' response to the design of the course well before our first class meeting and anticipated the "consequences" of teaching Introduction to WGSS from a Black feminist framework.

I also think my initial hesitancy marks my students' refusal of (my) Blackness and any indication of its relationship to the field of Gender and Sexuality

Studies. It was challenging to teach the course from a Black feminist framework because of the way the category of “woman” is framed in the title of the course. For me, I have issues with the category of “woman,” as it relates to the institutionalization of Gender and Sexuality Studies because it is often used to (or implicitly) supplants what Barbara Smith terms in *Home Girls* “the simultaneity of oppression”: “The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought” (2000, xxxiv). The use of “women” in this way makes white womanhood the epistemic center of “feminism” and the ideas and concepts related to the field of Gender and Sexuality Studies. This additive approach (i.e., using “Black” as a modifier) allows white women students to believe that “feminism” is their inheritance without ever asking the following: (1) What is the project of feminism? (2) What are the implications of the unitary model of feminism? (3) What is their relationship to feminism?

Consequently, in the course of teaching the two sections of Introduction to WGSS, I felt my students’ expectations of what the course content and my pedagogy should be: the active and passive universalization of gender, sexuality, and feminism; and my orientation toward the field and feminism, which is rooted in Black Studies and Black feminism, were at odds with one another. The undercurrent of the classroom environment, what I might call an affective cloud consisting of students’ expectations of their Black woman instructor, was confirmed by the following feedback from a student: “the teacher tended to bring in her own ‘personal politics.’ The course was less informational because I felt as if the teacher would veer off and begin to complain about the world.”³ My subjectivity as a Black woman academic (“the personal”) and the Black feminist ideas and ethics the course primarily revolved around (“the political”) were framed as an antagonism to my overwhelmingly white classroom.

My specific experiences in the classroom varied: my, albeit infrequent, mammy-fication by students in the course was apparent, as I was asked to do labor that I am simply not qualified or credentialed for, which proved quite difficult given that the majority of my students were white. But alternatively, there were some students in both sections of my course that held space for my failures as an instructor and also the impossibility of classroom collaboration and discussion given the course materials.

JB: I’ve been thinking of paying my friends to read my student evaluations for me. Then organize the good ones for my teaching packet. I’m told there are people who find valuable things in their evaluations. Sometimes I dream I’ll wake up a different person, a person who finds usable truths in student evaluations. I’ll become one with the algorithmic university. I’ll find the best combination of quantifiable metrics to demonstrate my utility and efficacy.⁴ Or I’ll wake up and know all the tricks and techniques of “active learning.” “Active learning”

presents a new set of difficulties in my classrooms because I see how my social identity, the way I occupy the position of a cis-white-man at the front of a classroom, authorizes some of my non-Black students to say the worst nonsenses when I open lectures up to their input. Of course, there are students who will articulate pure racism no matter who is teaching the course. There are students who save their worst invective for Black women instructors. And there are students in my courses who offer their racism and sexism *solicitously*, who are looking for a moment of anti-Black solidarity to re-ground them in the world they know. Worse still, I could perform some righteous disavowal of my openly racist student only to comfort their peers, the regular liberal racist students—the students who don't understand that anti-Black solidarity is structural rather than voluntary, that we don't simply “opt out” through proper thoughts and good works.

In the Academy, Or Anywhere Else

BP: *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* inherits *Conditions V*'s investment in describing the centrality of Black lesbianism to the project of Black feminism, especially the importance of Black lesbian writing. In the “Introduction” to *Conditions V*, Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith make it a point to discuss the “the racial/sexual politics of publishing,” which ultimately shapes the content of submitted/published works: “If we had to choose between giving space to a lesbian/feminist expression of the Black female experience and a less overtly radical treatment of this experience that would have a good chance of publication elsewhere, we should place a premium on providing a voice for the less publishable work” (1979, 12). Bethel and Smith are cognizant of the impossibility of publishing Black lesbian/Black feminist writing with publishers, without having to dilute or mitigate the contents of said work. Their commitment to a politics of publishing that centers the work of (unpublished) Black lesbian/Black feminist writers reminds us of the overwhelming anti-black, heteropatriarchal orientations towards publishing, both in academia and elsewhere. What their work also shows us is that the “racial/sexual politics” that shape the reception of Black lesbian/Black feminist writing by publishers, are the same politics that shape the reception of said work in academic settings like the classroom.

Given that I have the latitude to teach and design my courses as I wish because I am housed in a WGSS program in which I am the only faculty member housed solely in the program (I do not have other departmental/program appointments or affiliations), I am able to assign and teach Black feminist classics like *Home Girls* and *Conditions V*. Alternatively, given the ever increasing financialization of liberal arts education in the United States, specifically, and the financialization of the US economy, more generally, my students are mostly disinterested in Black feminist thought and theory. The ethics imperative to *Conditions V* and *Home Girls* are at odds with how many students see the role of their education (i.e., to attain financial stability).

JB: Our own access to financial stability is linked less to the content of our courses, or to our “performance” as instructors, and more to our capacity to embody, for our institutions, some combination of “diversity,” “inclusion,” or “excellence.” But there we are, in classrooms and office hours, face to many faces with students who feel put upon because they *are* put upon. Meanwhile, a rotating cast of professional administrators saddle us all, students and instructors, with converting the textual artifacts of the desires called Black feminism into chores, tasks, debts, grades . . .

There are moments I’m shocked by my own inability to think institutionally, when I resent students for not reading (or, for participating in a massive, unorganized work slowdown), or for expressing more concern for their grades than the materials (or, for doing what any of us does when we sacrifice the health of our souls for short-term security). The conflict, between the institution itself and the workers and students passing through it, is displaced onto a set of conflicts between “academic” workers and students. The antagonism, between antiblackness *as institutionality* and Black feminism, Black study, Black students, Black workers, suffuses the entire enterprise of higher education as its condition of possibility. Or it certainly seems to. It would go some way to explain the long and spectacular failure of the professorial class to think (and act) seriously about our labor conditions.

So in the classroom, as the site of a displaced class conflict, as the site of an unspeakable (but never unspoken) antagonism, I can (try to) follow the example of those feminist classics, to instruct the noninstrumental. Spend half a session talking about poems, journal entries, song lyrics—and they’re not on the midterm or the final. Try to demonstrate that “noncritical” forms still think critically. Endeavor to be “a bit much.” Even friendly reviews of *Conditions V* and *Home Girls* took issue with the variety of forms they included, their lack of focus (McDowell 1982; Spillers 1984). When I teach from *Conditions V* or *Home Girls*, I like to also assign some reviews, to convey the capaciousness of Black feminist theorizing, and to de-instrumentalize the work we’re doing.

Ultimately, our students believe something that we also believe: that there is some form of training that becomes security. We know that we can’t vocationalize a liberal education into something that guarantees them secure employment. Our faculty advisors (on good days) know that they can’t vocationalize our graduate training in a way that guarantees us secure employment. There isn’t any training that changes the letterhead on our cover letters to the handful of elite schools from which doctoral students reliably become tenure track faculty. Outwardly, I’m patient with my students who, consciously or not, would like an instrumentalized education. Inwardly, I’m as impatient with them as I am with my faculty mentors (for not magically instrumentalizing my training into tenure) and as I am with myself (for believing something I know isn’t true).

BP: To the point of training equating to security, I believe students, especially those who are Black, nonwhite, or working-class, face exceptional pressures to materialize their education into employment (again, training equals security), but I often find that these are the students who are often more curious about (or interested in) what the works of Black feminism (i.e., *Home Girls* and *Conditions V*) have to say about labor, political economy, and overall, our current social order.

I have also, ever increasingly, found myself discussing the labor of Black feminists in academia (and in general, job precarity in academia) with my students. Returning to *Home Girls* and reading *Conditions V* has reminded me of how important it is to account for and name Black women's labors, including my own. For example, Barbara Smith spends much of the introduction to *Home Girls* detailing the labor of Black women and "in particular Black feminists" and its "obvious and unrecognized impact on the development of other political groupings and upon the lives and hopes of countless women" (2000, xxxiii). While Black feminists like Smith have struggled and labored to maintain the project of Black feminism, those disinterested in said labor, (white) researchers of the "lives of black women" and non-Black feminist scholars, have benefited from said labor. Black feminist labors have been made "gainful" for others, but have left Black feminists assed out, destitute, overworked/underpaid, and so on. The "life" of Black feminists, of Black feminist thought and theory is often brief and fleeting. For example, in response to the waning institutional support for Black feminist theory, Ann duCille (2010, 33) writes, "but the question of ownership and textual terrain [in Black feminist theory], like so many other issues with which the discourse was preoccupied during its short happy life, was never so much resolved as disappeared. Like old soldiers, it didn't die; it just faded away, folded into the cultural imperatives and interpretative strategies of a new millennium in which black women and their literature are no longer in vogue in the academy or anywhere else."

... Isn't the End of the Day

BP: And it is not entirely my students' fault for not knowing about the historical and contemporary state of Black feminist labors. There is a structural "unawareness" built by institutions of higher education. In general, students do not know much about the labor conditions of colleges/universities, seminaries, and the like because institutions do not want them to know. Students are *made* to know little about their labor conditions and more importantly, those of staff and faculty.

So, by explicitly discussing said labor with students, which names the conditions under which contingent faculty and lecturers have to work at the college and also implicates the labor conditions of students, it is my strange way of empathizing with (most) students who desire, as you said, "an instrumentalized

education.” It is also my way of dealing with my own job precarity and an attempt not to internalize my failures on the job market.

JB: I had a long winter of bad news on the job market (this was in early 2019). The wonderful thing about our industry is that all the thousands of people who also had long winters of bad news on the job market are nonetheless isolated in our failures. But one way I remember “the end of the day isn’t the end of the day” is to look to history, look to the archive. The archive of the *PMLA* is a treasure trove of old convention programs and organizational miscellany. For instance, in 1974 Barbara Smith was appointed to the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession. In those years she taught courses in Black literature at Emerson College. On a Friday morning that December, she gave a paper on Black Children’s Literature at the Convention in New York. In San Francisco the next year, she gave a paper on Zora Neale Hurston on a panel with Robert Hemenway and Trudier Harris (the paper would later appear in *The Radical Teacher* [Smith 1978]). She also chaired a panel organized by the Commission, “Black Women Writers: Strategies for Criticism,” with Hortense Spillers, Mary Helen Washington, and Hortense E. Thornton giving papers. The names are more or less familiar, depending on one’s engagement with the history of Black literary criticism, but junior scholars understand the trajectory. It’s the trajectory we’re told to aim for. Increasing visibility with increasingly visible scholars. We only hope to arrive at it organically. By 1976, Smith’s institutional affiliation changed from Emerson College to the MLA Commission on the Status of Women. She gave a paper on Richard Wright and appeared on a panel on Minority Pedagogies, with a paper titled “Invisible Woman Teaches Invisible Literature: How It Feels to Teach Black Women Writers.” During these years, Smith also published essays in the new Women’s Studies journals on doing research on Black women writers and teaching about Black women writers (Smith 1974, 1976). The next year, the year “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” was published in *Conditions II*, she appeared on the panel “Black Women Writers: Included, Excluded, and Ignored.” At the convention in 1979, Smith no longer had an institutional affiliation. Three years later she reappeared at the conference, listed as a writer living in New York, New York, on a panel with Lillian Robinson and Sylvia Wynter and chaired by Gayatri Spivak on Marxist-Feminist Literary Criticism.

Across this historical debris, one can read a history of the institutional lives of Black feminist criticism. The cycles of inclusion and exclusion, of fetishization and disinterest, of acquisitions editors falling over themselves and university presses that suddenly can’t find any room on their lists. Of course, one can’t confuse the contours of Smith’s trips to the MLA with her biography, certainly not in the service of crafting a tragedy. The years Smith regularly attended the MLA were also the years of the Combahee River Collective’s Black feminist retreats, the years of *Conditions V* and, eventually, *Kitchen Table: Women of*

Color Press and *Home Girls*. The panels, the panelists, the names that became Names and the ones who left or were drummed out. The despair of unrealized potential and unappreciated genius. “The end of the day isn’t the end of the day.” Our failures are impression points in much longer histories.

BP: Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith imagined *Conditions V* to “function as a resource for exposing individual women to Black feminist thought; we also suggest that it be considered and used as a text in a range of women’s studies courses” (1979, 14). But, it is very telling that a work like *Conditions V*, which, in its conception, is keenly aware of its intended audience, is rarely taught in undergraduate courses. Surely, there is no definitive answer as to why works like *Conditions V* (and *Home Girls*) are not taught in “general” courses in the field of gender and Sexuality Studies, but we might consider how these works’ investment in Black lesbianism relates to the current preoccupations of the field.

For example, the universalized “queer” subject of feminist theory and queer theory is positioned as having eclipsed a figure like the Black lesbian, making it difficult to teach students the importance of the location/subject position of the Black lesbian.⁵ Akin to the centrality of the queer subject in feminist and queer theory, is the common parlance of conflating “women of color” writing with “Black women’s” writing, making it hard for students reading the work of Black women writers to understand the significance and importance of the work on its own terms.

Moreover, the ongoing investment in lauding work that critiques “identity politics” and “essentialism,” particularly, their imagined mobilization the work of Black feminists, has made feminist “classics” like *Conditions V: The Black Women’s Issue* and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* the pariahs to the future of feminist thought and theory. It positions this work as an impasse to the promise of the feminist “postmodern subject” or the resolution to the “identity crisis” of feminist theory and thought.

* * *

We say all this in a moment when colleges and universities are ramping up their efforts to financialize higher education and proletarianize the professional classes, the presumed destination of the class mobility higher education claims to offer. Our teaching and service labor is marginalized within an administrative calculus organized around exchanging increasingly onerous debt burdens for decreasingly meaningful credentials. Our students become vaguely credentialed debt products. More and more academics are, ourselves, debt products. And we struggle to imagine a politics from the position of the supernumerary, the superfluous worker, the unemployable PhD, the living debt. The plurality of our positions and voices can feel debilitating. Returning to Black feminist classics like *Conditions* and *Home Girls* reminds us of the very real and present

danger of desiring political hegemony and compliance over struggle and resistance. To paraphrase Jennifer Nash (2014), Black feminism is always somewhere behind us or somewhere ahead of us. It's either something we've moved beyond for being identitarian, or something we're moving toward when we're moving toward multiracial democracy. Reading and teaching these "feminist classics" now means learning to inhabit the contradictory and impossible temporalities of a radicalism rooted in Black feminism. It also means reckoning with a great diversity of Black feminist voices. There are voices in the texts that are liberal in ways that don't mesh with our contemporary political vocabularies and sensibilities. There are also voices that challenge us to forge political imaginaries beyond the reduction of Black radicalism to multiracial democracy. There are voices in these texts that find possibility in contradiction, that make friends with antagonism. Like the lines in Donna Kate Rushin's poem, "The Black Goddess," (2000, 315–17) with its refrain "I am not a Black Goddess / I am a Black Woman":

There is Healing in my hands
If you can hold these contra ditions in your head
/in your heart

Brittnay L. Proctor received her PhD in African American Studies from Northwestern University and is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of California–Irvine. Her research interests include Black Studies, Black popular music, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Black feminist theory, sound studies, visual culture, and performance. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *American Literature*, *Sounding Out!* and is forthcoming in *Hyped on Melancholy*.

James Bliss is a doctoral candidate in the Program in Culture and Theory at the University of California, Irvine. His dissertation, "Nothing To Lose, The World to Gain: Insurgent Self-Writing and the Politics of Violence," links anarchist and Black radical traditions through their theorizations of terror and narrative, desire and defeat, and state violence and sexual difference. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Palimpsest*, *Signs*, *Mosaic*, *Feminist Formations*, and *Feminist Studies*.

Notes

1. We note Julie Enszer's (2015) remarkable article on the history of *Conditions*, as well as her work maintaining the *Lesbian Poetry Archive* website, as an invaluable source for the history of that particular journal and the contexts out of which it emerged.
2. For an elaboration on the following question, readers might consult Lee 2000.
3. For more on black women's affective labor see Proctor 2017.
4. I'm thinking here with Stefano Harney's (2017) work on logistical capitalism, and Safiya Noble's (2018) work on the racial politics of our new algorithmic institutions.

5. In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings (2011) shows how the narratives feminist scholarship construct about itself tends to position Black feminism as a stage between the narrow whiteness of feminism before 1980 and the post-identitarian scholarship of the 1990s.

References

- Bethel, Lorraine, and Barbara Smith, eds. 1979. *Conditions V: The Black Feminist Issue* 2, no. 2 (September).
- duCille, Ann. 2010. "The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory." *differences* 21, no. 1 (May): 32–47.
- Enszer, Julie R. 2015. "Fighting to Create and Maintain Our Own Black Women's Culture: *Conditions Magazine, 1977–1990*." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 25, no. 2: 160–76.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2010. "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black feminism 1968–1996." PhD diss., Duke University.
- Harney, Stefano. 2017. "The New Rules of Algorithmic Institutions." In *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, edited by Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, 447–57. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lee, Rachel. 2000. "Notes from the (Non) Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color." *Meridians* 1, no.1 (Autumn): 85–109.
- McDowell, Deborah. 1982. "Review." *Black American Literature Forum* 16, no. 2 (Summer): 77–79.
- Nash, Jennifer. 2014. "Institutionalizing the Margins." *Social Text* 32, no.1 (March): 45–65.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Proctor, Brittnay. 2017. "'Shout It Out': Patrice Rushen as Polyphonist and the Sounding of Black Women's Affectability and Genius." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 4 (December): e12243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12243>.
- Smith, Barbara. 1974. "Teaching about Black Women Writers." *Women's Studies Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (April): 2.
- . 1976. "Doing Research on Black American Women." *Women's Studies Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (April): 4–5, 7.
- . 1978. "Sexual Politics and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston." *Radical Teacher* 8 (May): 26–30.
- , ed. 1983. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table Press.
- , ed. 2000. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- . 2004. Interview. *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project*, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
- Spillers, Hortense. 1984. "'Turning the Century': Notes on Women and Difference." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, nos. 1–2 (April): 178–85.