

ARTICLE

A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms: The Necessity of Love in Black Feminist Discourses and Discoveries

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Abstract

Black feminisms offer lenses through which Black women can resist and re-exist under new emancipatory conditions. Part of that work is uncovering roots and routes through which Black women's lives can come to the fore as articulated centers. Such a mandate, I argue, must center love. This article's work, therefore, is to articulate the function of love, as an ethic and a discourse of love as a dialectic space, in the creation of emancipatory spaces for Black women. In particular, this article aims to articulate how a *love ethic, as a principle*, can be used to support a citational politics for Black women toward a Black feminist reclamatory past, liberatory present, and emancipated future.

Feminism as it is often conceptualized within the Euro-centering academy is predated by Black women's investments in self, female selves, and larger societies. A Eurocentric worldview would have us believe that feminism is something new. This is not so. Eurocentric ideologies separate the practice and history of Black women's contributions to society and women's advancement from F/feminism and indeed removes Blackness from conceptions of *womanhood*. It situates the history of feminism and of women's advancement within a White, heteronormative, Eurocentric temporality. A Black feminist—Black-validating—ontology, however, recognizes that the work of feminism—polyvocal feminisms—has always been a part of Black women's lives and is intrinsically Black women's work (Lorde 1984; Massaquoi and Wane 2007; Mowatt and French 2013). I do not view Black feminism(s) as simply a response to White feminism or to Eurocentricity, because to do so is to participate in the logic of that temporality. Black women have been concerned with the centrality of their experiences and the articulation of that centrality long before there was “an academy” or an “ivory tower.” Black women have been asserting, in multiple domains and in multiple ways, feminist theory and praxis for centuries.

As bell hooks writes, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 2000a, vii). Black feminisms, then—even where the word *feminism* is replaced in the naming (for example, with *womanism*)—are critical, reflective spaces and positionings that seek the emancipation and self-determination of Black women at their various intersectional locations. Black feminisms seek to inscribe,

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center, define, create, and ensure Black women's identities, work, ontologies, and futures within and outside the many discourses of womanhood, recognizing our contributions in every area of life as well as the interconnectedness of oppressions. As such, Black feminisms must also pay attention to multiple intersecting ideas such as multiculturalism, modernity, Indigeneity, sexuality, enslavement, orientalism, and colonialism. These are necessary considerations as Black feminisms aim to decenter and eradicate Whiteness and White supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and other "isms" by asserting Black, female centers through the location and articulation of Black women's stances as salient and as generative. This is a grand task. The work of Black feminism is multiple and necessary. This "work" is defined by what concerns Black women and is thus articulated differently. But, whatever the work, we must center love.

This article, therefore, works to articulate the function of love as an ethic and a discourse of love as a dialogical space, in the creation of emancipatory spaces for Black women. In particular, I aim to articulate how a love ethic can be used to support a citational politics for Black women toward a Black feminist, reclamatory past, liberatory present, and emancipated future. Although many Black feminists have engaged the idea of love, hooks is most notably associated with the idea of a *love ethic*. Whereas hooks is fundamentally concerned with how love has been defined and taken up in social relations toward a progressive social world, this article is concerned with how a love ethic and a loving discourse can be used for Black women's work as a citational politics for resistance and re-existence.

Engaging the work of Black women such as bell hooks, Njoki Wane, Kameelah L. Martin, Audre Lorde, and Brittney C. Cooper, I contend that an ethic of love and a loving discourse are necessary components for Black feminist futures. I argue that both are fundamental in the formation and fruition of Black women's identities, imaginaries, and discoveries. A love ethic and a loving discourse are about relating in difference and from agency. They are about holding up Black women and insisting on our citational power and permanence. A discourse centered on love for Black womanhood, as a diverse subject location, recognizes and creates salient Black womanhoods as plural centers. Furthermore, a loving discourse allows for tensions and for critiques by and about Black women and the theories that speak to our experiences, without the need for power manifested in domination or the need for perfection. It uncovers, emboldens, and promotes located articulations of Black feminisms that do not by virtue of their particularity divorce them from the goal of an overarching Black feminism, where Black feminism is imagined as being necessarily plural and polyvocal. Finally, a discourse of love, and of being loved, speaks of claiming and defining identities that—even in their complexities and histories—are valued. A love ethic allows for difference at ease with difference and therefore presents new dialectic spaces, new imaginaries: new ways of imagining relations between the world and *we*.

This, to me, is not simply an academic exercise but a movement toward the fulfillment of hopes. Black women deserve to imagine and have their hopes fulfilled. Thus, in coming to these questions about love, I ground my view of Black feminism(s) and the work that emanates from that view in what I hope for myself and for other Black women like, and unlike, me. What I hope for us is peace.

Peace to me is an embodied, spiritual contentedness and wholeness arrived at when the self and the other are relationally harmonious. It is not about the absence of contention, but rather about an absence of exploitative dominance logics and an ability to relate in difference. So, if peace is the goal, we must also turn to those approaches and spaces that make that goal achievable. A love ethic and a loving discourse insist on the

validity of Black women and do not apologize for our ways of being. As such, these approaches work toward making peace realizable for Black women.

When we speak of a loving discourse, we invoke imaginaries and presume Black futures by insisting that these things exist already and that new configurations are also possible. We insist on the presence and the continuance of Black lives, in new, free, and radical ways. A Black imaginary, a Black feminist imaginary, therefore asserts the validity of Black spirits—Black total beings—and of women’s agency without taking for granted, or essentializing, Blackness and the diversity of Black women’s experiences and subject locations (that is, womanhoods). A Black imaginary that arrives out of a love ethic is a space in which the present contends, productively, with visions of the possible toward the development of wholesome Black futures. It negotiates and challenges what is by asserting what can, and *should*, be. Fundamentally then, a love ethic for Black feminism(s):

- Is not Eurocentric;
- Insists that Blackness is valid, positive, and generative;
- Insists that women are able—in a full and unconditioned sense;
- Insists that Black women are indomitable agents in the articulation of their lives, as they are lived and as they should be lived;
- Involves an abuse-free positioning and an engagement of love as care, kindness, honesty, open communication and listening, commitment, diligence, trust, pleasure, humility, and awareness to intention;
- Trusts in, and seeks out, the theorizing of Black women in its many forms and believes that a multitude of forms exists and is valid;
- Works with the concept of space-time: the appropriateness of something at the time and circumstance of its articulation;
- Does not reproduce hierarchies based in logics of domination; and
- Insists that liberatory and liberated Black futures are possible.

In exploring the idea and importance of love as an ethic and as a discursive orientation, I will explore definitions of love and also look to how love has been connected and distanced from the notion of Black womanhood. In doing so, this work will engage the Conjure Woman¹ as an archetypal representation of Black female ontological and epistemological lineages as well as explore historical presentations of Black womanhood more broadly. Finally, I will argue that in loving ourselves, centering love, and demanding that we be spoken of lovingly, Black women heal and create healing spaces that are necessary for Black imaginaries and discoveries—that is to say, for peace and Black futures.

What is Love?

What, then, is Love?

Love as a term is employed both as a noun and as a verb, yet rarely do we consciously define it or recognize that its definition can change under new conditions or in new locations. This absencing of definitions also absents responsibilities. If we do not state what love is, or at least how we use *love*, we run the risk of misapplying it and falling short of it. Most often, it seems, love is discussed in relation to heterosexual, romantic relationships or familial relationships and is thought of as a feeling that one intuitively recognizes. One problem with this is that many of us have been socialized to accept abuse as love: “this hurts me more than it hurts you,” “I’m doing this because

I love you,” and so on. We have also been socialized to believe that we are born knowing how to love, thus making it a thing that is taken for granted and commonsensical; however, as bell hooks writes, “[i]f our society had a commonly held understanding of the meaning of love, the act of loving would not be so mystifying” (hooks 2001, 3).

In her book, *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks attempts to bring us back to love in order for “ours to become a culture where love’s sacred presence can be felt everywhere” (hooks 2001, xxix). hooks argues, and I would agree, that “[d]efinitions are vital starting points for the imagination. What we cannot imagine cannot come into being. A good definition marks our starting point and lets us know where we want to end up” (14). I would suggest that this is particularly important when addressing questions of love and a loving discourse as they are applied to Black women and Black women’s work, principally in an environment that negates Black women’s lives. Reflecting on the importance of a loving environment, hooks writes:

We have all heard the maxim “if you do not love yourself, you will be unable to love anyone else.” It sounds good. Yet more often than not we feel some degree of confusion when we hear this statement. The confusion arises because most people who think they are not lovable have this perception because at some point in their lives they were socialized to see themselves as unlovable by forces outside their control. We are not born knowing how to love anyone, either ourselves or somebody else. However, we are born able to respond to care. As we grow we can give and receive attention, affection, and joy. Whether we learn to love ourselves and others will depend on the presence of a loving environment. (53)

The fruition of Black futures depends on defining and creating environments that will support the loving of Black selves.

If defining love must also be about imagining futures or calling into being “where we want to end up,” then it is also necessary to imagine and define love, and thus Black presents and futures, as being free from abuse. We cannot understand abuse as a consequence or mechanism of love. Thus, Black feminist theorizing must also invoke an abuse-free positioning. Toward this, I suggest employing the erotic—as defined by Audre Lorde—in our conception of love and loving discourses. As Lorde writes:

The erotic is a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced it, we know of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. . . . Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness. . . . Within the celebration of the erotic in all of our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered. (Lorde 1984, 54–55)

Lorde as a Black feminist lesbian developed the idea of the erotic from within this subject location: her ontological center. It is important to note that she defined this notion as a woman who loved women, both as an intellectual practice and as a romantic orientation. Love as it operates in this article, and as I suggest it should operate in Black women’s theorizing, needs to recognize and imagine Lorde’s state of “fullness”

and seek out those practices and activities that call up and sustain that “internal sense of satisfaction.” If the goal of Black feminism is indeed an end to “sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” then it must also seek to extend and ensure the power of the erotic—that internal sense of satisfaction and of fullness—in and to the other (hooks 2000b, 1). As with Lorde, this sense of the erotic must be developed and engaged from each of our particular locations, such that it is based in our honest intentions and motivations. We must find those spaces and methods that enable us to articulate our fullest selves and to theorize—in our many ways—Black female lives.

Love, here, is understood as an act that one engages in conscientiously, recognizing that it implicates the giver and the receiver. Love, to borrow from hooks is “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (hooks 2001, 4–5). Love in this context understands the self as primary, but also assumes that the self and the other are connected. As Cornel West posits, “Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses, it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul. This turn is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others” (hooks 2001, 94). A love ethic then, is a conscientious affirmation of Black lives and ontologies. We must choose to love. It is not passive. It is not intrinsic. To love, we must care, we must listen, we must speak honestly, there must be trust, and we must seek out intention and recognize that intention sometimes fails to manifest in right action (94). That is not to say that we must accept wrong, but that we must recognize humanity as being subject to error. Moreover, we must recognize our rights—as an act of self-love—but also our responsibilities to one another and our implication in oppressions. As Lorde writes,

If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister’s oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction. It wastes energy I need to join with her. And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman’s voice delineate an agony I do not share, or even one in which I myself may have participated. (Lorde 1984, 128)

Thus we must take care not to be the root from which, or the route through which, oppression continues for sister or self. Lorde continues: “The angers between women will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision, if we listen to the content of what is said with at least as much intensity as we defend ourselves from the manner of saying” (131). Again, we must recognize the potential for sites of domination and the reality that power is manifested through relations. We must have the humility to recognize how we enact privilege even as oppressed persons, so as not to reinscribe power as domination. This means that even in moments of difference and dissent, we must take care in how we deal with and respond to other Black women.

Fundamentally, if we are seeking peace for Black women, if we are seeking freedom for Black women, we must love Black women—self and other—and we must create, through loving action and loving discourse, the environments that will facilitate this. How can you defend a self that you do not love or enjoy? Further, how can you love another who reflects that reviled self? As the Combahee River Collective Statement reminds us, our work must “evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective 1977/2015, 212).

What of Loving Black Women?

In taking up this mantle, we must understand the histories and the conditions that make love as a response—as a liberatory positioning and mechanism—necessary.

Under White Supremacy, the idea of love and of lovingness has been systematically divorced from conceptions of Blackness, but in particular is juxtaposed against any presentation of Black womanhood. As Black people, and as Black women in particular, we are subjected to hateful environments that scrutinize our every move, while at the same time rendering us invisible. Black women are confronted with coded images that have been stretched across our skins, so as to blanket and hide away our humanity, our diversity, and the validity and complexity of our experiences (Mowatt and French 2013, 650–52).

In her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the many bounded presentations of Black womanhood as created and disseminated vis-à-vis the White-Supremacist project. Quoting Trudier Harris, Patricia Hill Collins writes:

Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself. (Collins 1990, 70)

There is no aspect of Black women's lives that goes uncriticized. Under White Supremacy, Black women's identities are constructed and given value insofar as they serve some dominant purpose. We are erased from landscapes and made visible only so as to suggest absence, lacking, or underdevelopment. The white-supremacist project manufactures and brings to our doorsteps, as Black women—where the term *woman* is not reliant on being “female”-sexed—a number of identitarian contentions: Black womanhood in the Black women's imagination; Black womanhood in the white (man's and woman's) imagination; and Black womanhood in the Black man's imagination. The neuroses of these varying, conflicting, and often damaging images bring epistemic and psychological violence. What is common in each of these presentations of Black womanhood is the hegemonic call to reject the idea that the Black woman, both as woman and as Black, is lovable and worthy of life. We have been read and projected as the unlovable and have been conditioned to see Blackness in others as undesirable. This hate for self and likeness has been internalized within each of us to some degree. Even as we resist it, it nags at us, “judging, first ourselves and then others” (hooks 2001, 56). This rejection of Blackness ties itself to a distancing from the spirit work of conjure and the archetypal Conjure Woman, as well as to other rejections of Black traditional knowledges and ways of life (Anderson 2008; Martin 2012).

The Conjure Woman as one such example of Black female-centered praxis is a manifestation of living Black women's theorization. She is an epistemological root and route through which Black diasporic ontologies are ensured, reclaimed, lived, understood, validated, challenged, and evolved. As Kameelah L. Martin defines:

A conjurer includes, but is certainly not limited to root workers, fortune tellers, midwives, herbalists, hoodoo doctors, voodoo queens, spiritual mediums, persons born with a caul, or “second sight” and others who are gifted with verbal or visual communication with the spirit world. The term “conjure woman,” then, works as

an umbrella term for the various forms of healing and spiritual practices with expressly African derivations that appear in African American literature. (Martin 2006, 3)

The *spirit work* of the Conjure Woman is an embodiment of African (and primarily African diasporic) traditions (Martin 2012). She holds a lineage of Black female remembering, across space and time, carried in the language of her work and the foundational tenets of her practice. Reverence for the ancestors, “catching” babies as opposed to *delivering* them, natural medicines: each of her traditions and her engagements points to the how and the why—the theory and intellectualism—of African (diasporic) knowledges, histories, and ways of being (Mitchem 2002; Stewart 2017). In particular she is a vessel, among many, for Black women’s epistemological and ontological revolution through an engagement with the logics and beliefs of her practice. She insists upon Black histories, ways of being, and knowledges as valid and generative. She lives these practices without apology. The Conjure Woman is rejected on the basis of her race and gender, yes, but also on the basis of having the audacity to challenge and reimagine, in her voice and that of ancestors, what the white center had defined as natural, acceptable, and good. She contests the presumed ahistory of Blackness by being a spiritual and physical manifestation and insistence of multitemporal, multispatial Black being. Like this archetypal woman, we must rise with new and old magics, not only to withstand these assaults but also to live beyond survival, unapologetically insisting upon ourselves and our conjurings: our knowledges, our ways of being, our Black girl magics.

Lindsey Stewart writes about the connections between blues, conjure, love rituals, and freedom: “sexual love, as conceived in hoodoo and the blues, became a terrain upon which newly emancipated blacks worked out what their newfound freedom meant” (Stewart 2017, 103). Although I am not principally focused on love as in sexual or amorous relationships, an attention to love, in particular to love as it connects to Blackness, engenders the kind of emancipatory starting points with which we need to concern ourselves. It is about intellectually—in mind, body, and spirit—conceiving of Blackness, womanhood, and affection within the same dialectical space. More important, it is about conceiving of them as inherently mutual. This kind of mental work enables us to return to previously discarded, shunned, or shamed epistemological, cosmological, and ontological roots and routes with which we can shape new-old histories as well as new Black imaginaries and futures in which multicentric liberation is realizable. This discussion does not eschew romantic love from its bounds, nor does it subscribe to rhetoric that labels love as unserious. It is a discourse that recognizes just how serious and intellectually poignant love is.

As Lorde writes, “We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred” (Lorde 1984, 8). Our ability to engage with and receive love must contend with and confront histories of enslavement, narratives of inbred inferiority, accusations of violent, hypersexual inclinations, forced sterilization, the exploitative use of our bodies (for example, Henrietta Lacks), and so on. We must be able to look squarely at our scars without making them the sum total of ourselves. Eurocentric systems and modalities do not recognize the particularity of Black womxn’s experiences and therefore ignore those traumas that divorce the idea of a lovable self from female-Blackness (Jones and Guy-Sheftall 2015). Therefore, a conscious engagement with love as an ethic and as a discursive positioning is a necessary reinforcement, resistance, and act of healing.

The endurance of Black women is a challenge to white supremacy and a disruption to hegemony. We are not meant to thrive or to imagine ourselves into the future, yet here we are. A love ethic and a loving discourse offer us the permanence of citation, through the ongoing insistence of our contributions: past, present, and future. Discussing love and the self as lovable—the Black female self as lovable—is a radical act and it disrupts the viability of white-supremacist narratives of Blackness and Black femaleness. Primarily, it recognizes the Black woman as a subject—as seen and seeable. As hooks notes in “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” “Black slaves, and later manumitted servants could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving as only a subject can observe or see. To be fully an object, then, was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality” (hooks 1997, 168).

Black womanhood, which recognizes itself as lovable, discusses itself as lovable, and presents itself as loved, opposes Whiteness and the narrative of Whiteness, which is taken for granted and normalized. Collins and others have commented on the fact that as outsiders-within, Black women have a particular ability to see not only their position, but also the realities of the dominant, both male and white. The *Black love look* contradicts Whiteness and exposes Whiteness as unclean, as imperfect, and as false. Further, it situates Whiteness as the oppressive, terrorizing tool, which constructs the fictitious narrative of the unlovable Black woman (hooks 1997).

The Conjure Woman as described by Kameelah Martin and Kintra Brooks is an “interstitial” figure occupying an intersectional role in which she plays the “midwife, herbalist, fortune-teller, relationship counselor, and spiritual advisor” all while being both a social outcast and an indispensable social resource (Brooks and Martin 2019, 204). Like the Conjure Woman, Black women also sit in this interstitial space, required to play multiple roles, being both needed and discarded; described as useless and yet held onto as necessary. Thus, the Black woman through the act of deciding to love and be loved in an unloving environment engages power and agency not simply as resistance but as re-existence, forging new worlds for herself. Reflecting on the linkages between the Conjure Woman and blues women, Brooks and Martin write:

Within such an ideology where black women openly flaunted their agency and executed self-determination in the face of so-called respectability, a different narrative of black femaleness emerges. The blues are a subversive form for black women as they contradict “mainstream ideological assumptions regarding [black] women and being in love.” (Brooks and Martin 2019, 205)

Not only do blues women and conjure women contradict “mainstream ideological assumptions regarding [Black] women and being in love,” they also challenge the fundamental separation of Black women and love as mutually linked and generative.

The fictional but consequential narrative that presumes the inferiority and unlovableness of Black women does not spare our work. This means that the intellectual production of Black women is also called to defend its merits and indeed its reason for being. As Brittney C. Cooper writes, “academic Black feminisms still confront a ‘culture of justification,’ in which one is always asked to prove that the study of Black women’s lives, histories, literature, cultural production and theory is sufficiently academic, and sufficiently ‘rigorous’ to merit academic resources” (Cooper 2016, 7). Our lives and our work are painted as being unintellectual. There is no love for the productions of

Black women. Curiously, though, the metaphysical dilemma of existing as a Black woman in a space that is predicated on your erasure and the uncovering of the erased requires an “intellectual” positioning that is necessarily predicated on a devotion to Black women, as derived from a love of Black women. Kristie Dotson summarizes this position well:

I find that radical love for the lives and cultural artifacts of black women takes a steadfast commitment to centering black women, an unwavering trust that such centering will reap theoretical fruit, and a willingness to stake these claims in the face of many who would find my orientation, quite frankly, ludicrous. It is radical love and, at times, only radical love that brings me to black philosophy and it is from radical love that I produce it. (Dotson 2013, 38)

We need to, as Crystal T. Laura writes, “challenge what counts as data” not through apology, but by lovingly presenting ourselves, our stories, and our work without qualification (Laura 2013, 289).

The Conjure Woman’s involvement in love is often limited in discussion to potions and manipulations: period blood to trap a lover; root work to bind one to another (Mitchem 2002). Yet, if we look at her through the lens of a love ethic and interrogate her work within a loving discourse, we can attend to her practice as itself a practice of love. The care with which she administers her trade, her insistence upon the wisdom of the ancestors as continuous before and after her, and her connection to nature all point to what an ethic of love can revive and expand when looking at the work of Black women. We can also point to the wickedness that her craft sometimes involved, and it can serve as a plane for necessary critiques about how and for what purposes we engage our Indigenous knowledges. Indigeneity and tradition should not escape a critical gaze. They are not pure realms for false nostalgic return. A loving discourse allows for these contentions and revolutions without the kind of Eurocentric reductionism that casts these knowledges as “primitive,” evil, illogical, unfounded, or backward.

A love ethic engages the notion of generative Black world visioning and presumes that Black women and Black lives are intrinsically intellectual. After all, there is no being who does not theorize about their existence: who does not attempt to come to terms with, and voice, the how and why of their sentience. As Lorde writes, “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde 1984, 38). The feeling being acknowledges their presence not simply through consciousness, here read as thought, but also through an awareness of, and struggle with, the meaning of that consciousness as manifested in feeling and as realized through love. The conscious, feeling self desires—if we return to the erotic—a feeling or sense of “fullness” wherein the self can flourish. In the introduction to *Sister Outsider*, Cheryl Clarke remarks on the fact that “The white patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think—between poetry and theory. We are easier to control when one part of ourselves is split from another, fragmented, off balance” (Lorde 1984, 9).

Binary thinking is a Eurocentric modality, and it shapes our understanding of differences and positions them as oppositional rather than constitutive. As Clarke reminds us, it is a mechanism of control. Feeling and thought are juxtaposed and set in opposition where, as Collins notes, “feeling retards thought and values obscure facts” (Collins 1990, 70). Further, a binary modality obfuscates the social relations enacted to position

one side of the binary as negative and the other as positive and conceals the actions that maintain that binary as *true* even in the face of contradiction. In such a framework the intense feelings and emotions that arise from the circumstances of Black (women's) subjugation, and that premise and carry Black women's theorizing, are seen as "unthinking," because—according to them—how can something that is feeling be thinking? The Black woman is bounded as being unreasoning, and her work, when unlovingly read from a Euro-center, is branded as unintellectual.

An African-centered positioning, however, recognizes that intellect, or knowing, arises from an experiential as well as emotive grounding. Reason does not stand apart from feeling or the feeling being, and experiences inform reasoning. A loving discourse grounds itself in this understanding of intellectualism and seeks out impetus: what is the struggle that theory, as living discourse both inside the academy and beyond it, is seeking to respond to? A loving discourse assumes that Black women have something to say and that that something is meaningful. As Dotson writes in "Radical Love," we must "trust that our ancestors have indeed thrown their theoretical production into this century, as we, by engaging in black theoretical production and beyond, throw ourselves into the future. . . . One must trust that black people have lived deliberately. . . [and] that black people's practice ought to be read to hold principles" (Dotson 2013, 40–41). While a love ethic is the practice or orientation, a loving discourse is one that creates the space for that ethic to bear fruit.

The erasure of Black women's knowledge-production, and indeed Black women's presence on landscapes, is no accident and is yet another act of violence. Reflecting on the absence of Black women in historical narratives of enslavement, Gaiutra Bahadur writes, "Enslaved black women appear in the archive at the very moment they disappear from it, as a line in a book of the dead, a debit in a column of property losses and gains. They appear as commodities and as corpses" (Bahadur 2018, 246). Similarly, in "Nothing's Shocking: Black Canada," Katherine McKittrick negotiates notions of surprise and wonder as they apply to the disappearing of Black bodies and histories through deliberate erasures across social and geographical landscapes. In the Canadian context, the absenting, erasure, and nondocumenting of Black lives creates, and normalizes, a Blackless Canada, where to be Black in Canada is to always be of elsewhere and of nowhere. McKittrick's loving discourse is a response but is also a movement forward in time. It is a re-existence. She challenges the notion that Blackness in Canada is shocking, new, or atypical. She also shows how history can be recreated through erasures and absenting. In moving the conversation forward by showing what work can be done to claim, rather than create, necessarily new Black geographical spaces, McKittrick disrupts the hegemonic, but also loves Black people enough to trust that the absent-present needs only to be "wondered" for Black histories and futures to come to the surface (McKittrick 2006). Like McKittrick, Dotson emphasizes the need to uncover the work of Black women as part of a loving practice and writes, "to do black philosophy that centers the lives and work of black women requires that one is committed to valuing the theoretical production of black people, in general, and black women, in particular" (Dotson 2013, 39).

Hoodoo, a conjure practice, relies on the absent-present in that the function of the dead is to give life and backing to continued existence (Stewart 2017). The absent is present and real and only needs to be engaged for new possibilities. Hoodoo, like McKittrick, trusts in what is seemingly gone, dead, or nonexistent. This spirit work ontologically connects with what McKittrick talks about when she says that spaces must be "wondered." It also makes a fool of the nonbeliever, refusing shame rather

than succumbing to the reflexive apologia that Black women's work and world-visioning is often called to take on.

Black feminist work that engages a love ethic and that uses a loving discourse is conjure of its own kind. It is an insistent practice of magics, where magic is conceptualized as the seemingly miraculous persistence of Black women through the ordinary and extraordinary success and articulations of Black womanhood. As Aria Halliday and Nadia Brown write:

Whether recognizing academic achievement or business acumen, winning Olympic medals or excelling as single mothers, Black women have created a community that affirms the diversity of Black womanhood as "Black Girl Magic." Although "#blackgirlmagic" has not been articulated as principally political, it follows historical parameters for Black women's community building and organizing. For example, like themes and terms expressed in cultural phenomena such as "I'm Black and I'm Proud," "young, gifted, and black," or films like *Cleopatra Jones* and *Foxy Brown*, "#blackgirlmagic" challenges hegemonic notions that demean and belittle Black women's labor, beauty, and talent. Additionally, Black feminist themes and Black women's political labor have been identified in civil rights-era music and rap music. "Black Girl Magic" calls Black women and others to acknowledge the "universal awesomeness of black women." (Halliday and Brown 2018, 226)

We must believe enough in the magic and permanence of Black women's work to go in search of it as well as to create and articulate it. We must love Black women enough to trust that they have spoken the necessary words, and we must find those words and use them—even when we challenge and are challenged by them. Unlike the Eurocentric mode, which incorrectly assumes that its judgments of Black women's theorizing are objective, a loving discourse recognizes the power relationships at play. It is attentive to "the ways in which asymmetrical power, racist-sexist discursive frame[s], and willful ignorance affect the interpretation of Black women's lives and ideas" and actively challenges such presumptions (May 2017, 40). The erasure of Black womanhood from the intellectual as well as cultural landscape is, as Dotson writes, "process-based invisibility": the manufactured forms of invisibility that situate the work of Black women as nonexistent (Dotson 2013, 39). In insisting upon our presence, we challenge this invisibility.

Love as an Ethic for Radical Black Futures

Recognizing that power is involved, love as an ethic must challenge the notion that power must be manifested in domination, or as power *over*. The related term, power *to*, speaks of agency and of an ability to act without subordinating the other. Our futures depend on our ability to disturb relations of power as carried out in a Eurocentric framework. We must, as Lorde writes, "relate within equality . . . root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves . . . [and] devise ways to use each other's difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles" (Lorde 1984, 122). In rooting out these internalized patterns of oppression, we must name them. We cannot afford to be silent in this regard, as to do so is to act unlovingly toward the self and the other, and to maintain an environment that perpetuates the discord. However, in doing so, we must take care that we are not replacing one dominance-bonded hierarchy with another. For instance, it is important to reject the idea that the Black woman can be

categorized into any finite number of identities such as “the angry,” “the mammy,” and “the jezebel,” particularly where those identities are captured by stereotypes and classed as pejorative, subservient, unfeeling, unthinking, and so on. At the same time, it is also necessary to embrace those women who may in fact be angry, sexually liberal, outside of the formal education system, mothering apart from a partner, or “ratchet” These women—these single-story beings—are also valid and deserving of love.

We cannot go around saying, “we are Black, but not that kind of Black” where “that kind of Black” lays our sister outside the circle of validity or respect. We cannot, as Lorde writes, be so “enamored of [our] own oppression, [our] own oppressed status, that [we] cannot see [our] heelprint upon another woman’s face” (Lorde 2007, 132). That is not to say that we cannot trouble notions of Blackness that seemingly have been “claimed” by Black bodies, but that have been crafted under, or by, white supremacy. The absence of conflict is not the solution; in fact, conflict is necessary for growth. In conversation with George Brosi, bell hooks said, “the issue is not to be without conflict, but to be able to resolve conflict, and the commitment to community is what gives us the inspiration to come up with ways to resolve conflict” (Brosi and hooks 2012, 76). For example, we can critique the embodiment of Black female servitude and make clear the capitalist goals that craft it and make it necessary without scorning our sister who may indeed identify with certain traits or functions of this embodiment. We must look to analytical frameworks that do not say, “I disagree with you, so I must destroy you.” Such “jugular vein [psychologies]” are not only based on the empty notion that one’s assertion of self prevents the self-definition of another, but also “leaves us as Black people with basically uncreative victories, defeated in any common struggle” (Lorde 2007, 51).

A loving approach recognizes this because it does not seek a hierarchy and does not subscribe to any type of respectability politics, which attempts to soothe Whiteness by encoding Blackness in ways digestible to the White palette. The conjure woman rejected/rejects respectability politics, honoring the fullness of traditions that she inherits and passes on, and commonsenses a distinct way of being, disrupting a white hegemony that insists that its way is the only way. A love ethic calls us to love our full selves and live in our full truths. Further, it calls on each of us to create relations where others can also live without disjointedness. As Alicia Garza asks, “What does it mean for movement building, for building power, when we are afraid of one another? How does this hiding, this shaming, this being afraid to be our full selves with one another, this transforming for the sake of safety, impact our liberatory practice together?” (Garza 2015, 22).

In extending the practice of love through self to other there is a sense and enactment of community-building. Ultimately, the self and other are inherently linked, and this is something that Black womxn have unfailingly demonstrated a keen awareness of. Black womxn consistently include others in the catchment of “us.” We lead projects that seek our liberation, but that keep in sight the needs of others. To turn to a modern example, the founding members of Black Lives Matter were three Black women, and it is part of their mandate to seek out liberation for all marginalized people. This is a story that is consistent with so many liberation movements, spearheaded by Black womxn, throughout time. Reflecting on the contributions and mandate of Black Lives Matter, founding member Alicia Garza writes:

The #BlackLivesMatter network has placed a great emphasis on the principle of all Black lives—that none of us are free until all of us are free. And so, we must devote ourselves to complexifying Black life in this country. To do so means that we claim

our transgender and gender nonconforming family as Black lives worthy of dignity, respect and Black love. To do so means that we do not participate in the valuing of one tactic over another, instead, we value a diversity of tactics and refuse to throw anyone under the bus for the sake of a seat at the table. To refuse to be divided, to reject crumbs in favor of an entirely new pie where there is enough for everyone—that is the ultimate form of Black love, Black resistance, and the key to winning and sustaining Black liberation. (Garza 2015, 25)

A call to love as part of Black feminist theorizing and as a call to reclaim, resituate, and assure Black women's voices must also trouble the defensive posture that we are often forced to assume when tending to the work of Black women within the White discursive arena. In "Love No Limit," Brittney Cooper writes:

Black feminists must stop defending our intellectual territory. We must stop letting others make us think ours is territory to be defended, and we must make them defend why it is reasonable to encroach upon, dismantle, or otherwise do violence to the space we occupy. . . . We keep losing arguments that we should be winning because we have allowed others to set the agenda. We have allowed others to artificially proscribe the limits of Black feminist inquiry, telling us where we have been and where we are, while suggesting that there is nowhere else for us to go. This must change. Let us love none of these limits. (Cooper 2016, 18–19)

A loving practice recognizes the empowerment and the pain in this defensive position and resolves to seek out and adopt discursive frameworks that challenge the normalcy and centeredness of Whiteness. In particular, a loving practice challenges the idea that Black women must always write in response as if we and our notions are new or un(der)developed.

If we then take love as an action and the erotic as a framework, a loving discourse, or as Vivian May writes, "a loving interpretive practice," we "would cultivate interpretive inclinations, modes of being, and political commitments . . . that disrupt, trouble, and fundamentally depart from mainstream logics, ontological habits, and perceptual practices. This means developing the capacity to exercise ruptures with hegemony and to embark on (coalitional) journeys toward each other's worlds/histories/meanings/imaginaries (May 2017, 40). A loving discourse, then, recognizes futurity. It recognizes intentions, needs, and potentials. It speaks not simply of what is lacking, but of what can be imagined. A loving discourse situates articulations of feminism, intersectionality, affect, and so on within the emotional locus of their design. It looks to the motivation and seeks to lend to the execution toward multicentric futures. A loving discourse questions intersectionality, for example, by not assuming that it means to answer all questions. Rather it approaches it by seeking out the impetus: what is it that intersectionality seeks to address—where does the need come from—how does it attempt to do this; what are its successes; what questions does it create; how can a critical discourse lend itself to resolving or meeting the original intention of the discourse of intersectionality? It does not locate the work of Black women as needing to meet unfair criteria, such that where the work of white men is called *foundational*, the work of Black women is called *incomplete*. A loving discourse also responds without a defensive posture. Rather, it states, *I said what I said, and when I said it I meant it, and now here's what else I have to say*. Finally, a loving discourse situates Black feminist theorizing as temporally continuous, rather than as a time-bound response or project that sought to supplement

any previous “wave” of feminism in its hour of need. If we look at the Conjure Woman, she is exactly that. She is a time-traveler who insists on the inheritance and indomitability of the spirit. She is a Black woman before, now, and ever-more. Where we speak of the indomitability of the spirit we also speak of the decolonized self. African feminism centers itself in decolonization through reclamatory workings with the spiritual and the spirit self (Wane 2011). As Njoki Wane often writes, decolonization of the spirit calls us return to our African Indigenous ways of knowing, without romanticization, as a way of grounding ourselves in ancestral and communal knowledges. As Wane reminds us, colonialism “has been from the very beginning a contest over the mind and the intellect” (Wane 2008, 189). It has been about defining what counts as knowledge, who counts as the knower, and thus who and what is valuable. As a rejection of this violating practice of colonialism, the Conjure Woman challenges notions of “reason” as defined within supremacist dialectics and “stands in opposition to the ‘man of reason.’” As alicia deon notes, “the conjure woman is animated genetic memory. She is an amalgamation of Africa and the Americas where critical theory and decolonized imagination converge to deploy African-based spirituality as a praxis of healing, resistance, and self-preservation in her queer world space” (deon 2019, 144).

Black feminist discourses and discoveries should embody a love ethic and engage in loving discourse if a new, free future is to be imagined and realized; if a new “world space” is to be possible. Fundamentally our feminisms are about healing and building—they are trauma-informed, but also healing-centered. Again, we can look at the nexus among decolonization, healing, and the reclamation of Indigeneity. As both Wane and deon note, the journey through and to an Indigenous, female center is a healing journey (Wane 2008; 2011; deon 2019). A love ethic and a loving discourse are starting points for that journey as they require that we love ourselves and our sisters into the light.

You cannot defend what you do not love: what does not evoke the erotic. You cannot love if the tools and parameters you engage with are unloving. Lorde claimed that “what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other” (quoted in Nash 2013, 9). We must love ourselves enough to take it back. We must be Walker’s womanist who “loves herself regardless,” recognizing that love as a feeling may be transient, but that love as an act and as a practice can be always (10).

Who Loves Her Anyway?

I do. We all must. Our love must be a conscientious practice. Cite Black women, deliberately. Know as Black women that your lives, our lives, are rich and generative. Do not spend all of your time, and joy, and space arguing that you deserve those very things; instead, articulate what those things mean and how they can be engaged collectively. Show up in the fullness and richness of yourself at every table, in every room. Build your community, seek it out, and know that you do not walk alone. Speak to, and of, other Black women with care, even in moments of contention. Know that you cannot seek liberation for Black women if your practice of liberation does not make space for all Black women. A love ethic is a practice of citation: of insisting on and representing the generative capacity of Black women across place, space, and time. It is the insistence, diligence, and timelessness of conjuring. It is a practice of care. It is a praxis of love.

Thus, as we do this work, as we struggle with the task of, “bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored,” as Ntozake Shange’s Lady in Yellow says in *For Colored Girls* (Shange

2010), we must move with love for ourselves, speak of ourselves lovingly, and thus continue to imagine and assert ourselves into a beautifully Black future, where Black lives are richly colored with love, with possibilities, and with joy.

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Note

1 Here the Conjure Woman is referenced as an archetype, not to be confused with Charles W. Chesnutt's novel *The Conjure Woman*.

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