



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Literary Fragments

Ayesha Hardison, University of Kansas

Hardison, Ayesha. "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Literary Fragments." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7, no. 2 (2018): 56-63.

Short url <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3UA> (provided by WordPress)

To acknowledge *Jane Crow*, the term Pauli Murray contrived to unmask black women's intersecting race and gender oppression, is not the same as understanding how black women's subjection works—or why it persists. In “Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability,” Kristie Dotson defines Jane Crow as a system of practices subjugating black women materially and epistemologically. That is, Jane Crow restricts black women's inalienable rights to citizenship and limits their equitable access to resources.

Moreover, Jane Crow forecloses comprehension of the disenfranchisement it engenders. Dotson explains, “The complex bind of Jane Crow subordination is constituted by occupying simultaneous hyper-visibility, i.e. membership in social categories policed and suppressed for the maintenance of some form of supremacy, and invisibility, i.e. the limited nature of using those social categories to understand the specific nature of the subordination in question.”¹ Jane Crow, Dotson argues, singles out black women and girls for repression and control and summarily casts them as ciphers, nonentities “hidden in plain sight” despite statistics documenting their plight.² As a result of their concurrent hypervisibility and invisibility, black women are perceived as “unknowable” to the social, political, and cultural brokers upholding white supremacy and patriarchy. They are systematically targeted, branded as pathological, pared down to stereotype, regarded as disreputable, and ultimately deemed untenable.

I agree with Dotson: Jane Crow is a material and epistemological problematic manifest in black women's longstanding repudiation in US hegemonic culture, a phenomenon theorized in black feminist thought since its beginnings. Black women have been relegated historically to the margins of black freedom struggles and women's movements, and they continue to struggle for legibility in our post-civil rights moment particularly, as Dotson highlights, in the context of familiar narratives about the “endangered black male.”³

Yet, constitutive to black women's epistemological quandary under Jane Crow, i.e. the way racism and sexism impacts their ability to produce knowledge, is the conceit that black women's narratives about their multivalent oppression register similarly in hegemonic and counterhegemonic spaces. For example, a 2017 *New York Times* article uses the term Jane Crow to describe the practices of Children's Services to punish poverty-stricken black and Hispanic women's parenting by removing their children from their homes. The piece quotes a lawyer at length to indict the epistemic nature of the system's biases:

There's this judgment that these mothers don't have the ability to make decisions about their kids, and in that, society both infantilizes them and holds them to superhuman standards. In another community, your kid's found outside looking for

¹ Kristie Dotson, “Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability,” *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 31:5 (2017): 417.

² *Ibid.*, 420, 425.

³ *Ibid.* The degree of black women's visibility in the current #metoo campaign is also debatable, given the limited discussion of their experiences in Hollywood despite the hashtag's origin in black female activist Tarana Burke's grassroots organizing around sexual abuse.

you because you're in the bathtub, it's 'Oh, my God'—a story to tell later. ... In a poor community, it's called endangering the welfare of your child.⁴

The state's criminalizing narrative, based on discriminatory racial, gender, and economic geographies, exemplifies the distorted perspectives on black women's structural disadvantages. Black women continue to be "unknowable" in dominant culture due to its investment in white supremacy and patriarchy. However, black women are not unknowable to themselves, especially if we consider their writing as epistemological endeavors instructive for their readers as well as their conceptualization of self.

An analysis of African American women writers' engagement with Jane Crow is outside the scope of Dotson's epistemological story in "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability," but their texts illuminate the philosophical conundrum she identifies. From its conception, the African American women's literary tradition has explored the realities of black women's social condition under Jane Crow as well as considered, in its various fiction and nonfiction forms, the ways Jane Crow has shaped black women's production of knowledge.

Pauli Murray's own memoir *Song in a Weary Throat* (1987), which narrates the legal scholar's civil rights activism throughout the twentieth century, makes concrete the material and epistemological injustices black women endure. Whereas Dotson theorizes Jane Crow by outlining the social factors facilitating black women's "unknowability," in literary studies, we might say black women's "unknowability" is actually a matter of audience and, more importantly, a problem of reception. Structural realities (and inequities) demand black women's invisibility, but black women's philosophical and literary efforts make them visible—first and foremost—to themselves and each other.

"Theorizing Unknowability"

Dotson describes the conditions fostering black women's invisibility as "a trifold structure of disappearing" that relies on "disregard, disbelief, and disavowal."⁵ First, black women occupy *negative socio-epistemic space* in hegemonic culture, which fixes them as unknowable. Public opinion largely classifies black women as irrelevant, and their social vulnerability permits rigid stereotypes that further their invisibility rather than inspire challenges to it. Dotson explains, "a catalyst for invisibility can be seen as, in part, epistemic failings with respect to what we use to make sense of our worlds that serves to obscure certain populations."⁶

⁴ Maisha Joefield, the mother penalized under these circumstances, shares in the article that the temporary removal of her child still makes her nervous: "You're afraid to parent the way you would normally parent." The ritualized castigation of poor black mothers with scarce options for childcare speak to the circuitous material and epistemological aspects of their Jane Crow oppression. Stephanie Clifford and Jessica Silver-Greenberg, "Foster Care as Punishment: The New Reality of 'Jane Crow,'" *New York Times* July 21, 2017, Accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/21/nyregion/foster-care-nyc-jane-crow.html>.

⁵ Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability," 426.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

Second, black women experience *reduced epistemic confidence*, which means they are not afforded plausibility, seen as credible, or viewed as worthy subjects to be “believed in.”⁷ In conjunction with the epistemic failings that encourage a disregard of black women, a common-held disbelief in black women delimits their capacity to contribute to the social production of knowledge.

Finally, black women are susceptible to *heightened epistemic backgrounding*, by which they are demoted to bit players in their own stories or employed as material for juxtaposition instead of subjects of inquiry. Such disavowal, Dotson expounds, displaces black women “as the backdrop of some other subject(s) of contemplation.”⁸ Together these three negating environs underwrite black women’s invisibility, which effectively mystifies their Jane Crow oppression by the state and delegitimizes their discernment of their social status.

Dotson’s methodology invites a literary approach to her philosophical interrogation of Jane Crow’s epistemological assault. For example, she cites Toni Blackman’s poetry to exemplify black women’s negotiation of their presence so often mistaken for absence. However, when engaging Pauli Murray’s conceptualization of Jane Crow, Dotson focuses on Murray’s academic and public scholarship. She is careful to note that her work is not an intellectual history of Murray but a “theoretical archeology” of Jane Crow. “It is a story sketched between conceptual fragments in Black women’s social theory,” she writes.⁹

To compose an epistemological story, Dotson stitches together theoretical fragments from Murray’s 1947 article “Why Negro Girls Stay Single” and 1965 essay “Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII.” She also mines a quote from Murray’s 1970 essay “The Liberation of Black Women,” in which Murray clarifies, “Jane Crow refers to the entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements that have robbed women of a positive self-concept and prevented them from participating fully in society as equals with men.”¹⁰

Dotson highlights this fragment’s epistemological relevance by concentrating on the causes of Jane Crow oppression. She contends black women’s “unfavorable placement with respect to prevailing” assumptions, stereotypes, and customs sanctions the material effects and epistemic circumscriptions of Jane Crow.¹¹ In effect, her grappling with and suture of Murray’s philosophical fragments challenges the hierarchal epistemologies that have characterized black women as unknowable and unknowing.

I appreciate Dotson’s attentive epistemological reading, and I am struck also by the fragment’s reference to Jane Crow’s influence on black women’s “positive self-concept.” This, too, is epistemologically relevant, and I would go further to suggest that it is within

⁷ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁰ Pauli Murray, “The Liberation of Black Women,” 1970, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 186.

¹¹ Dotson, “Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability,” 421.

fragments of Murray's creative and nonfiction writing that an inchoate discourse about black women's positive self-concept, which is often overlooked and undervalued, emerges.

“Creatively Theorizing The Black Female Autobiographical Self”

Murray was an accomplished writer as well as a distinguished legal scholar. In addition to academic articles and law compendiums, she produced a collection of poetry, a biography of her grandparents, and her posthumously-published memoir *Song in a Weary Throat*. The latter takes its title from Murray's published poem “Dark Testament” (1943), which sketches African American history from African society, captivity, and slavery to impending freedom over the poem's twelve sections. Its speaker relays, “Hope is a song in a weary throat.”¹² Noticeably, “hope” is not included in the title of Murray's autobiography, but its affect resonates in her extraordinary life story as a black activist, feminist, lawyer, priest, and poet.¹³

The speaker of “Dark Testament” goes on to entreat, “*Give me a song of hope and love/ And a brown girl's heart to bear it*” (italics original). This fragment, just a few lines later, suggests that a song of hope does not achieve its full transformative power without a brown girl's heart and ear—or to put it another way, without an empathetic black female audience. In the introduction to Murray's poetry collection, Morris Milgram reveals the activist/poet thought of “Dark Testament,” a prodigious narrative, as “only a fragment and forerunner of the epic of black America yet to be written.”¹⁴

Nonetheless, the fragment frames Murray's memoir as a song of hope. It also signals the importance of a black female reader to whom and for whom her production of knowledge would be regarded, believed, and avowed despite the presumptions of “unknowability” black women's Jane Crow oppression provokes.¹⁵

In her essay “Being the Subject and the Object,” Barbara Christian recalls her experience reading African American women's fiction, namely Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), for the first time. She writes that the “woman-voice” of the black female protagonist's mother “constantly interrupted my mind-voice. Her anguish-rage warned me of trials I might have to face.”¹⁶ Marshall's coming of age tale resonated with Christian, as the latter internalized the lessons she gleaned from the protagonist's racial and gender struggles.

¹² Pauli Murray, “Dark Testament,” *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1970), 22.

¹³ Murray's public identities are the subtitle to the eponymously titled 1989 edition of her autobiography.

¹⁴ Morris Milgram, “Introduction,” *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1970), n pag.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Bobo differentiates the interpretive community black women create from audiences that passively consume representations perpetuating black women's ideological domination. Within an interpretive community, “women utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways” to challenge their cultural subordination. Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia, 1995), 22.

¹⁶ Barbara Christian, “Being the Subject and the Object: Reading African-American Women's Novels,” *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*, edited by Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 121.

The novel allowed Christian to confront the epistemic offense intrinsic to black women's Jane Crow subjection. "In it," she writes, "I as subject encountered myself as object."¹⁷ By reading black women's writing, Christian distinguishes herself as a reader, a subject, from that which is read, an object. Her confrontation with herself as an object codified her abiding invisibility in American literature and culture even as it marked her obvious presence. Christian surmises *Brown Girl, Brownstones* "was crucial to a deeper understanding of my own life," and she later learns from a conversation with Marshall that it was written "to unravel [the black female writer's] own knots." Central to the acts of reading and writing, then, is black women's knowing.¹⁸

Christian's reflection minds African American women's fiction, but its premise is helpful for thinking about black women's epistemic endeavors in nonfiction.¹⁹ A cursory review of black women's literary criticism in autobiographical studies reveals fragments theorizing their unknowability as well as their efforts to counteract it. In *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, Joanne Braxton expresses, "We have been knowers, but we have not been known."²⁰ She elucidates that autobiography is a way for African American women to "meet," or know, their mothers "on the conscious plane," as exemplified by her study of the works of Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, Nina Simone, and Maya Angelou among others. "Defying every attempt to enslave or diminish them or their self-expression in any way," Braxton writes, "black women autobiographers liberate themselves from stereotyped views of black womanhood, and define their own experiences."²¹

Similarly, Margo Perkins contends that the autobiographies of Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown construct "an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing."²² Finally in *Words of Witness*, Angela Ards asserts that personal narrative and political discourse intersect within an autobiography to create a "deliberative space where

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸ African American women's fiction also theorizes black women's Jane Crow oppression. For example, Ann Petry's novel *The Street*, published in 1946 one year before Murray's essay "Why Negro Girls Stay Single," examines Lutie Johnson's interlocking racial, gender, class, and sexual oppressions as a single mother and domestic worker in Harlem during WWII. Lutie is aware of her invisibility among her white employers, who assume she is promiscuous, and she questions the purpose of being taught how to write, as her voice is undermined throughout the novel. Of course, the existence of Petry's novel attests to the importance of black women writing and sharing their stories.

¹⁹ The social aims of black women's fiction and life writing are not mutually exclusive. Maryemma Graham points out "the autobiographical impulse in the African American novel. The continuous need to explain and 'inscribe the self' in a world which has historically denied the existence of that self gives both focus and intensity to the act of writing a story about black life." Maryemma Graham, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

²⁰ Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 1.

²¹ Joanne M. Braxton, "Autobiography and African American Women's Literature," *African American Women's Literature*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 128.

²² Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), xii.

readers” can “imagine the new vocabularies and strategies that the moment demands.”²³ These fragments of knowing identify black women’s autobiography as a vehicle for positive self-concept and social epistemology.

In *Song in a Weary Throat*, Murray relays the moment she decided to write her memoir late in the narrative. While contemplating a faculty appointment at Brandeis in 1968, she explains, “Suddenly I realized that what I really wanted to do was to write an autobiographical book on Jim Crow and Jane Crow—racism and sexism as they had impinged upon my life.”²⁴ Murray elected to do both, to teach and write during the summer. Her purpose for penning the book, to write about sexism during the height of twentieth-century black freedom struggles, echoes her resolve to confront systemic oppression depicted throughout her memoir.

Earlier in the text Murray discloses her decision to attend Howard Law School “with the single-minded intention of destroying Jim Crow.”²⁵ However, it is during her time there that she began to theorize Jane Crow, “the twin evil of discriminatory sex bias,” as she was the only female student in her class at the all-black institution which had no women faculty and only one female staff member.²⁶ “[T]he racial factor was removed in the intimate environment of a Negro law school dominated by men,” she writes, “and the factor of gender was fully exposed.”

Murray describes experiencing the material affects of Jane Crow as well as its epistemological repercussions in this period of her life. She is excluded from the legal fraternity and its extended networks due to her gender. Although she characterizes her male classmates as “friendly,” she qualifies that they “seemed to take it for granted that I had nothing to contribute. For much of that first year I was condemned to silence unless the male students exhausted their arguments or were completely stumped by a professor’s question.”²⁷ Murray is barred customarily from adding to the class’s production of knowledge. Consequently, she writes that her realization “women were often the objects of ridicule disguised as a joke” by her classmates and professors “aroused an incipient feminism in me long before I knew the meaning of the term ‘feminism.’”²⁸

Song in a Weary Throat details Murray’s experiences with racial and gender subordination, but it also outlines the processes of knowledge production that motivated her to identify and signify her Jane Crow oppression.²⁹ She theorizes the practice in law school, and she applies

²³ Angela A. Ards, *Words of Witness: Black Women’s Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 16.

²⁴ Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1987), 388.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 183, 184.

²⁹ Murray’s autobiography foregrounds her battles with racism and sexism in her public life to the exclusion of her efforts to understand her queer and nonnormative sexual and gender identities in her private life. Britney Cooper’s intellectual history of Murray highlights the ways Jane Crow and the politics of respectability inform black women’s praxis as “knowledge producers” (102). She reveals, “at exactly the same moment that [Murray] named Jane Crow as a form of sexist discrimination that she experienced as a woman, she was frequently being hospitalized for depression related to her struggle with her gender identity” (100). In my own work on Murray,

the term in her 1947 essay “Why Negro Girls Stay Single.” Yet, it is in the fragments of her autobiography that Murray demythologizes black female epistemologies. *Song in a Weary Throat* is an enlightening testament to black women’s production of knowledge.

Coda

In the conclusion of her essay, Dotson asks, “How does one disrupt epistemic resources that hide their inadequacy behind the shape of its own sense making features? ... Would one aim an intervention at the nature of imagination as a means of disrupting knowledge economies?”³⁰ In response to these questions, she states many black feminists, such as Pauli Murray and Kimberlé Crenshaw, and many black women writers, such as June Jordan, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde, “have tried.” Yet such a feat could only be accomplished with the demise of Jane Crow—a complete end to its material and epistemological abuses.

Although I engage Pauli Murray as a writer here to offer a complementary approach to Dotson’s theorizing of Jane Crow, I do not claim that black women’s writing irons out Jane Crow’s material paradoxes. I do want to suggest black women’s self-articulation provides them a way to mitigate the intellectual confines of Jane Crow. Black women writers do not “resolve our dilemmas,” to return to Christian’s insights about the literary tradition, but they do “name them.”³¹ In a destructive culture of invisibility, for black women to call out Jane Crow and counter with their self-representation has substantive weight.

Contact details: hardison@ku.edu

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I argue *Song in a Weary Throat* “resounds with silence” about her struggle with her gender identity due to Jane Crow’s “literary inscriptions” for black women’s self-representation (17, 15). Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Ayesha K. Hardison, *Writing through Jane Crow: Race and Gender Politics in African American Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

³⁰ Dotson, “Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability,” 426.

³¹ Christian, “Being the Subject and the Object,” 122.

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