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Abolishing Jane Crow

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It took me 8 years to publish “Theorizing Jane Crow.” I wrote it at the same time as I wrote my 2011 paper, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing.” The many reviews that advocated for rejecting “Theorizing Jane Crow” over the years made me refine it...and alter it....and refine it some more. This is not necessarily a gripe. But it will seem that way. Because there are two consistent critiques of this paper that have stuck with me for how utterly problematic they were and are. In this reply to Ayesha Hardison’s commentary, “Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Literary Fragments,” I display and analyze those critiques because they link up in interesting ways to Ayesha Hardison’s commentary.

The two most common critiques of this paper include: 1) the judgement that my paper is not good intellectual history or not good literary criticism and 2) the conclusion that Black women’s literary production is so advanced that there is no way to make a claim of unknowability with respect to US Black women today (or yesterday). In what follows, I will articulate and explore these critiques. The first critique brings attention to just how wonderful Hardison’s commentary actually is for how it sets up the rules of engagement between us. The second critique can be used to tease out convergences and a potential divergence between Hardison’s position and my own.

### **The First Critique: Does E’rybody Have to be Historians or Literary Studies Scholars?**

Since I neither claim to be a literary scholar nor a historian, I found no reason to deny the first (and by far most consistent) critique of this paper. This paper is not good intellectual history. And, plainly speaking, it is terrible literary criticism. Let me say this, for the record, I am neither an intellectual historian, nor a literary critic. And, with all due respect to those people who do these things well, I have no desire to be.

Hardison detected that she and I are coming to the same sets of problems with different trainings, different habits of attention, and, quite frankly, different projects. Because, no, I am not a literary critic. Hardison acknowledges our different orientations when she writes:

Whereas Dotson theorizes Jane Crow by outlining social features 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. (2018, 57)

Another place where differences in our respective approaches is foreshadowed is in the very first line of Hardison’s reply when she writes, “To acknowledge *Jane Crow*...is not the same as understanding how black women’s subjugation works – or why it persists,” (2018, 56). From the very first line, I was put at ease with Hardison’s commentary. Because however much we might disagree or agree, at least, she recognized *my actual project*. I treat Murray like a philosopher. In accordance with philosopher stone rules, e.g. like an element from which composite understandings can be derived. It was clear to me that even among Black feminist

academics, potential audiences for this paper were simply unused to the kinds of flights of fancy that taking Black women as philosophers requires.<sup>1</sup>

Hardison didn't have this problem at all. In other words, Hardison was, for me, a "brown girl's heart" to receive what I was trying to articulate. For that I am so very grateful to her. I believe that Hardison understood what I was trying to do. I was treating Pauli Murray the way I would be allowed to treat any theoretical white dude. Like her work should be able to inspire more work with family resemblances. I treated Murray like there could and should be Murray-ians. And it was this move that I utterly refused to compromise on. It was also the move that inspired, in my estimation, the most resistance from anonymous reviewers. But Hardison got it. But, then, of course, she would get it. She does the same thing in her book, *Writing Through Jane Crow* (Hardison 2014). We treat Murray like a philosopher.

The performance of Hardison's commentary accords very much with the existence of (and necessity of) "an empathetic black female audience" (Hardison 2018, 59). And what is uncovered between us is a great deal of agreement between her positions and my own and a potential disagreement. At this point, Hardison and I can talk to each other. But I want to draw attention to the fact it is Hardison's commentary that sets the stage for this exchange in a way where our convergences and divergences can be fruitfully explored. And that is no easy feat. Hats off to Hardison. I am deeply grateful for her work here.

### **The Second Critique: Black Women's Literary Production vs. Jane Crow Dynamics**

The second most common critique of "Theorizing Jane Crow" concerned skepticism about whether US Black women could be understood as unknowable in the face of US Black women's literary production. It was only in reading Hardison's commentary that I realized, I may have misunderstood part of the critiques being leveled at me from (again) anonymous reviewers that were most likely Black feminist academics themselves. One might have misread my essay to say that Black women never afford each other the kind of empathetic audiences that are needed to render them, broadly speaking, knowable in hegemonic and counterhegemonic spaces. That the Black community at large *never* extends such empathy.

Or, in Hardison's words, some may have taken me as advocating for "the conceit that black women's narratives about their multivalent oppression registers similarly in hegemonic and counterhegemonic spaces" (2018, 56). Now, I am not sure if Hardison is accusing me of this.

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<sup>1</sup> Nothing I am saying here is meant to indicate that literary critics are not (and can never be) philosophers. That is not a position I hold (Dotson 2016). Rather, the claim I am making is that *treating people like philosophers* can come with certain orientations. It takes extreme amounts of trust and belief that the person(s) whose thought one is exploring can act like a transformative element for the construction of composite understandings (Dotson 2013). It takes trust and belief to utilize someone else's ideas to extend one's own imagination, especially where those extensions are not written word for word. One way to treat a person's work as philosophical work is to assume a form of authorship that allows one to use that work as a "home base" from which to explore and reconstruct the world that is implied in their abstractions. I call this activity, "theoretical archeology" (Dotson 2017, 418). And all I really meant to describe with that term was *one way* to take a writer as a philosopher. I had to become very detailed about my approach in this paper because of the propensity of anonymous reviewers to attempt to discipline me into literary studies or intellectual history.

There is reason to believe that she isn't but is rather choosing this point as a way of empathetically extending my remarks. For example, Hardison writes:

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. (2018, 57)

This suggests, to me, that Hardison detects the problem of Jane Crow unknowability in Black women writer's work, even as they work to navigate and counter such unknowability with some degree of success.

Now, to be clear, unknowability, on the terms I outline, can be relative. One might argue that the difficulty of receiving a fair peer-review for this paper in a *particular domain* rife with either Black feminists with literary, historical, and/or sociological training means that hegemonic and counterhegemonic communities alike pose epistemological problems, even if they are not exactly the conditions of Jane Crow (and they aren't). But those epistemological problems may have the same structure of the epistemological engine I afford to Jane Crow dynamics, e.g. disregard, disbelief, and disavowal. This is primarily because, epistemologies in colonial landscapes are very difficult to render liberatory (see, for example, Dotson 2015).<sup>2</sup>

### Limits of Unknowability, Limits of a Single Paper

Still, for me, the most egregious misreading of "Theorizing Jane Crow" is to interpret me as saying that Black women are equally as unknowable to other Black women as they are in "hegemonic spaces" (56) and according "hierarchical epistemologies" (58). Yeah, that's absurd. Hardison's commentary extends my article in exactly the ways it needs to be extended to cordon off this kind of ludicrous uptake, i.e. that Black womenkind are equally unknowable to ourselves as we might be in the face of hegemonic epistemological orientations.<sup>3</sup>

But, as Hardison notes, an extensive development of the point that Black womenkind offer empathetic audiences to Black womenkind that render them knowable, at least "to themselves and each other" (Hardison 2018, 57), both for the sake of their own lives and for the sake of the lives of other Black womenkind, is *outside the scope of my paper*. Rather, I am concerned with, as Hardison rightly notes, "understanding how black women's [Jane Crow] subjugation works – or why it persists" (2018, 56). And though I don't think my essay

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<sup>2</sup> This is what I attempt to draw attention to in my work. The epistemological problems in Jane Crow, for example, are epistemological problems that *might be* able to exist without their corresponding material problems. The material problems in Jane Crow are material problems that *might be* able to exist without the epistemological problems. But in Jane Crow they are so linked up with each other that they reinforce and reproduce one another. So, one can address the epistemological problems and leave the material ones (that eventually reintroduce those epistemological problems again). One can address the material problems and still leave the epistemological ones (that will eventually reintroduce those material problems again). Epistemic relations impact material relation and material relations impact epistemic relations, on my account. But they are not the same and they are not subject to domino-effect solutions. Fixing one does not mean one has fixed the other. And it is unclear one can make a claim to have fixed one without having fix both.

<sup>3</sup> If the reader needs more evidence that I have "figured this out," see (Dotson 2012, 2016).

indicates that Black womenkind are equally “unknowable” to each other in all instances, if that is a possible reading of my essay, thank goodness for Ayesha Hardison’s generous extension of this project to make clear that the performance of this text belies that reading.

Perhaps Hardison says it best, my “grappling with and suture of Murray’s philosophical fragments challenges the hierarchical epistemologies that have characterized black women as unknowable and unknowing,” (2018, 58). This is why I love Black feminist literary studies folks. Because, yes! The performance of this piece *belies* the message that there is *no way* for us to be known, especially by ourselves. And, what’s more, *such an inexhaustible unknowing has to be false for the successful performance of this text*. But then I am aware of that. So what else might I be attempting to articulate in this paper?

It strikes me that a charitable reading of the second main criticism leveled at this paper might proceed as follows:

From where does the charge of unknowability come in the face of the existence and quantity of US Black women’s literary and cultural production? This is an especially important question when you need Black women’s production *to write* about their ‘unknowability,’ how can you claim that Black women are unknowable when the condition for the possibility of this account is that you take yourself to know something about them from their own production? This seems to be a contradiction.

Yes. It does *seem* like a contradiction or, if folks need a white male theorist to say something to make it real, it is a kind of *differend-* (Lyotard 1988).<sup>4</sup> Radically disappeared peoples, circumstances, and populations are often subject to problems with respect to frames, evidence and modes of articulation. Being disappeared is different than being invisible simpliciter, but then I make this claim in “Theorizing Jane Crow.”

Problems of large scale disappearing that affect entire populations, events, and historical formations render unknowable unknowability. This problematic seems to be what this second critique falls prey too, i.e. the disappearing of unknowability behind sense making devices (Dotson 2017). As the critique goes, if Black women are unknowable at the scale I seem to propose, then how do I know about this unknowability?<sup>5</sup> How, indeed.

I still reject this rendition of the second criticism, i.e. the one that says with all the literary production of Black womenkind we are no longer unknowable or else I wouldn’t know about a condition of unknowability. Jane Crow unknowability, in my estimation, is not subject to brute impossibilities, i.e. either we are knowable or unknowable. This is because Jane Crow is domain specific in the same ways Jim Crow was (and is). Also, Jane Crow is made of epistemological *and* material compromises. Hardison gets this. She is very clear that

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<sup>4</sup> There is a great deal about Lyotard’s account I would disagree with. But we are undoubtedly grappling with similar dynamics- though our subject population and approach differs significantly. Pauli Murray’s work pre-dates this formulation, however.

<sup>5</sup> I consider the appearance of this kind of seeming paradox to be a symptom of second order epistemic oppression. See (Dotson 2014).

“Black women continue to be ‘unknowable’ in dominant culture due to its investment in white supremacy and patriarchy,” (Hardison 2018, 57).

But, let’s get something clear, an “investment” is not only a set of attitudes. It is composed of sets of institutional norms (and institutions through which to enact those norms). Sets of norms of attention. Sets of historically derived “common sense” and “obvious truths” that routinely subject Black womenkind to Jane Crow dynamics. It is composed of social and material relations that make sense because of the investments that invest them with sense.

### **Jane Crow as a Dynamic of Complex Social Epistemology**

Jane Crow dynamics, when they appear, are built into the functioning of institutions and communal, social relations. They are embedded in the “common sense” of many US publics- including counterhegemonic ones- because I am presuming we are assuming that some Black communities indulge in patriarchy, which is what lead Murray to her observations (See, Hardison 2018). And though Black women can disrupt this in pockets it does not change the epistemological and material conditions that are reinforcing and recreating Jane Crow dynamics for every generation. And it doesn’t change the reality that there is a limit to our capacity to change this from within Jane Crow dynamics. So, we write ourselves into existence again and again and again.

Hardison acknowledges this, as she astutely notes, “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 writings irons out Jane Crow’s material paradoxes,” (2018, 62). And this is the heart of my disagreement with the second major critique of this essay. Are those critics claiming that epistemological possibilities brought by Black women’s literary production iron out material paradoxes that, in part, cause Jane Crow dynamics? Because, that would be absurd.

But here is where I appear to disagree with Hardison. Is Hardison claiming that epistemological possibilities have ironed out Jane Crow’s epistemological paradoxes? Because I sincerely doubt that. Schedules of disbelief, disregard, and disavowal are happening constantly and we don’t have great mechanisms for tracking who they harm, whether they harm, and why (on this point, see Dotson and Gilbert 2014).

This leads to a *potential* substantive disagreement between Hardison and I. And it can be found in the passage I cited earlier. She writes:

Whereas Dotson theorizes Jane Crow by outlining social features 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. (2018, 57)

There is a potential misreading of my text here that seems to center on different understandings of “epistemological” that may come from our different disciplinary foci. Specifically, I don’t necessarily focus on social features. I focus on epistemic features facilitating black women’s unknowability, when we encounter it. That is to say, disregard,

disbelief, and disavowal are epistemic relations. They are also social ways of relating, but, importantly, in my analysis they are socio-epistemic. What that means is that they are social features that figure prominently in epistemological orientations and conduct. And these features are embedded in what makes audiences and uptake relevant for this discussion. That is to say, the reasons why audiences matter, and problems of reception are central, is because varying audiences indulge in disregard, disbelief, and disavowal differently.

So, the juxtaposition that *might be* assumed in Hardison’s statement of the focus in literary studies, which is indicated by the phrase “actually a matter of,” is not a difference in kind, but rather a difference in emphasis. I am tracking the kinds of things that makes audience and problems of reception important for rendering anything knowable in social worlds, e.g. disregard, disbelief, and disavowal. Because it is there, as a philosophy-trained academic, that I can mount an explanation of “how black women’s [Jane Crow] subjugation works -or why it persists” (Hardison 2018, 56).

### **The Great Obstacles of Abolishing Jane Crow**

In the end, this may not be a disagreement at all. I tend to think of it as a change in focus. My story is one story that can be told. Hardison’s story is another. They need not be taken as incompatible. In fact, I would claim they are not incompatible but, as Hardison notes, complementary (2018, 62). They uncover different aspects of a complicated dynamic. One can focus on the problems of audience and reception. And I think that this is fruitful and important. But, and this is where Hardison and I might part company, focusing on these issues can lead one to believe that Jane Crow dynamics are easier to abolish than they are.

One might suspect, as some of the anonymous reviewers of this essay have, that all the literary production of US Black womenkind means that US Black womenkind don’t actually face Jane Crow dynamics. Because, and this seems to be the take-home point of the second critique, and as Hardison explains, “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” (2018, 57). And this is the crux of our potential disagreement.

What do we mean by “make them visible” and, more importantly, where? In the domains where they are experiencing Jane Crow dynamics, i.e. epistemological and material compromises, or in the domains where they, arguably, are not? Because the empathetic audiences of “brown girls” outside of institutions that operate to our detriment are not major catalysts for the problem of Jane Crow unknowability, on my account. This is where domain specificity becomes important and one must reject the conclusion (as I do in “Theorizing Jane Crow”) that Jane Crow unknowability is invisibility simpliciter.

As Hardison explains, Pauli Murray’s experiences with racial and gender subordination motivated her towards identifying and signifying Jane Crow oppression (along with constructing epistemological orientations with which to do so) (2018, 61). What the

anonymous reviewers and Hardison insist on is that “These fragments of knowing identify black women’s autobiography as a vehicle for positive self-concept and social epistemology.”

Moreover, Hardison claims, and rightly so, that though “Black women writers do not ‘resolve our dilemmas,’...they do ‘name them.’ In a destructive culture of invisibility, for black women to call out Jane Crow and counter with their self-representation has substantive weight” (2018, 62). I agree with all of these conclusions about the importance of Black women countering Jane Crow dynamics, even as I wonder what it means to say it has “substantive weight.”

I question this not because I disagree that such countering has substantive weight. It does. But part of what has to be interrogated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as we continue to grow weary of living with centuries old problematics, what does the abolition of Jane Crow look like? Are there other forms of “substantive weight” to pursue in tandem to our historical efforts?

In asking this I am not attempting to belittle the efforts that have gotten us to this point-with resources and tools to “call out and counter” Jane Crow dynamics. My work in this paper is impossible without the efforts of previous and current generations of Black womenkind to “name” this problem. Their work has been (and is) important. And for many of us it is lifesaving. But- and yes, this is a ‘but,’ *what next?* I want a world other than this. And even if that world is impossible, which I half believe, I still want to work towards a world other than this today as part of what it means to live well right now. So, though this may be blasphemous in today’s Black feminist academy, I don’t think that Black women’s literary production is quite the panacea for Jane Crow dynamics that it is often assumed to be.<sup>6</sup> But then, from Hardison’s remarks, she doesn’t assume this either. How we come to this conclusion (and how we would extend it) may be quite different, however.

### **The Limits and Potential of Literary Production**

And, yes, I think a focus on the socio-epistemic and material conditions of Jane Crow can help us detect the limits of relying on black women’s literary production for the abolition of Jane Crow dynamics, even if such production has an integral role to play in its abolition, e.g. producing knowledge that we use to form understandings about potential conditions of unknowability. And though I would argue that black women’s cultural production *is key* to worlds other than (and better than this). Because, as Hardison explains, such work helps us “confront the epistemic affront intrinsic to black women’s Jane Crow subjection,” (2018, 60).

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<sup>6</sup> It may be my lower-socio-economic class background that makes it hard to accept the position that writing is going to save us all. I acknowledge that Black womenkind in the places where I am from needed literature and other cultural products for our survival (especially music, social and film medias. The kind of emphasis on writing in this exchange has a tinge of classism. But we can’t do everything here, can we? There is much more dialogue to be had on these issues.) Though, some might say, as Murray did that we need a “brown girl’s heart to hear” our songs of hope. I will agree with this and still maintain that I needed far more than that. When child protective services were coming to attempt to take me from my very good, but not flawless mother, I needed not only brown girl’s hearts. I also needed hierarchical epistemological orientations *and* oppressive, material conditions to lose hold.

I will still never argue that such production, by itself, can fix the problems we face. It cannot. But then, Hardison would not argue this either. As Hardison concludes, disruption of Jane Crow dynamics means a “a complete end to its material and epistemological abuses,” (2018, 62). Indeed- this is my position as well. In making this claim, we are not attempting to overshadow what has been (and continues to be) accomplished in US Black women’s literary production, but to continue to push our imaginations towards the abolition of Jane Crow.

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