

Teaching Students How to Examine the Role of Women in August Wilson's Plays

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August Wilson's ten-play cycle is an English or theater arts professor's dream—the plays can be taught at nearly any level. Because of Wilson's ability to dramatize everyday situations so effectively, teachers can use the plays to introduce students unfamiliar with the particulars of drama as a literary genre to the art form. Teachers using his plays in lower-level courses for English and theater arts majors and minors can introduce students to literary criticism to help them enhance their interpretations of the plays. And in a more specialized course, where the plays are considered primary texts, teachers might use them to help students learn to read literature through a more nuanced lens, conducting an analysis of the plays' varied discourses that is informed by critical theory. Whatever the level, students will undoubtedly notice that men dominate the stage in all but one of the plays. Teachers should encourage students to consider the implications of Wilson's choice to foreground male characters throughout his oeuvre.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, which dramatizes the life of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, has a woman as its lead character, but Ma's onstage appearances are in no way comparable with that of her male peers. *Fences* examines discrimination in sport culture and blue-collar employment and that discrimination's effect on family, and Rose is essential to the development of Troy as a character. But, like Ma, Rose does not appear on the stage as often as either of the play's two main male characters. There are five women in the cast of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and they participate in much of the dialogue—especially Bertha, who runs the boardinghouse in which the play is set. But *Joe Turner* is indisputably Herald Loomis's play, with male characters Seth and Bynum providing a significant amount of its crucial dialogue. *The Piano Lesson* explores a brother-sister relationship to root out the broad swath of history's relation to life, death, and ancestry, and Berniece holds her ground among a cast of men. But *The Piano Lesson* is as much Boy Willie's play as *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is Loomis's. Risa, the lone woman in *Two Trains Running*, cuts herself in an outright rejection of men's obsession with her body, thereby calling attention to the role of gender in the lives of Wilson's characters. But her character does not emerge fully to be anything more than a foil that facilitates the play's larger themes. Three of the seven characters in *Seven Guitars* are women, though none seem to be particularly memorable. *Jitney* explores the lives of eight black men of different generations and different opinions to help explain how each interprets the idea of family and responsibility, engaging only one female character, Rena, sparingly throughout the play. *King Hedley II*, like *Seven Guitars*, which foreshadows *King Hedley II*, has female characters who create no signature in the

memory. As King represents the common man and the common man's struggle to find his place in an ever-changing world that continues to deny his worth, the women—his wife, Tonya, and his mother, Ruby—like Risa, are foils at best. *Radio Golf* tackles the issue of contemporary gentrification, a trope that appears in a number of the plays in Wilson's beloved Hill District and troubles the black middle class's complicit role in this somewhat cavalier dismissal of the past. Mame, the one female character in the play, embodies its theme in no small measure. *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson's only play with a female lead character, fully reveals Aunt Ester, who first appears in *Two Trains Running*, as she helps others understand the present moment by looking to the past.

Each of Wilson's plays can be taught at various levels (and across different disciplines), and in each instance the woman question will surely arise. This essay, however, focuses on three approaches to teaching the plays and women's roles in them: teaching the plays to a general education population to introduce students to the genre, teaching the plays in lower-level literature and theater courses to introduce students to literary criticism, and teaching the plays in specialized courses to help students use literary theory as a lens through which to interpret or evaluate texts.

Wilson's ten-play cycle gives a variety of options to faculty members teaching courses to a general education population. In an African American literature survey course from 1940 to the present, for example, I have used the plays to introduce students to drama as genre. Because general education courses are typically populated by students from a wide range of majors, many of whom will not take another literature course but who are expected to be well-rounded enough in the humanities to understand the features of various genres, one of the course objectives is to introduce students to the defining characteristics of at least three genres. I like to include one or two of Wilson's plays to introduce students to drama—to its mimetic impulse or its attempt to have performance imitate life: to present this imitation realistically and to use realistic dialogue to make an immediate impact on the audience.

Because reading the plays tends to be a less vivid experience than viewing their performance, I have students read crucial scenes out loud in class. When I teach *Fences*, students quickly designate as the scene they want to hear the exchange between Rose and Troy after Troy's admission of having fathered Alberta's child. Without introducing the question of gender but prompting students to take great care to examine the techniques Wilson uses to enliven the play's mimetic impulse, I am often struck by their attempt to explain the scene without giving any weight or attention to gender. They argue convincingly that Wilson develops Rose's character throughout the play so that Troy's violation of their relationship with adultery provides the conflict needed to drive plot forward. No student sees Rose's character as weak or her role as limited; rather, they claim that she is a very strong, fully developed character who wonderfully imitates life and who is essential to the plot. The dialogue between her and Troy is a realistic imitation and adds tension as the play builds to its climax. Rose is

so integral to the play's development that students are untroubled by the fact that she and Raynell, who has a limited role in the play, are the only two women who appear onstage. As Tara T. Green argues, Rose "disrupt[s] the confines of a male-dominated space" (151–52) and participates fully in the storytelling ritual that facilitates the play's mimetic impulse. So it is hard for students to begin to critique the limited role of women based on the strength of Rose's character. Because *Fences* is not the only Wilson play I teach in this course, I allow the woman question to emerge naturally by pairing *Fences* with *Two Trains Running*, where gender emerges, even if tangentially, as one of the play's themes.

To meet the specific objective of having students readily identify the genre's defining characteristics, I prompt them to identify common elements of dramatic structure—like the exposition of the plot (Is it climactic or episodic?), the rising action (Where is the point of attack or inciting incident?), the crisis or climax, and then the resolution. When reading *Two Trains Running*, then, students understand the role Hambone plays in developing the play's rising action. His repeated demand for his ham foreshadows the other characters' determination to get what is due them as members of the community in which they live. Students can also recognize the play's crisis point and, later, the resolution. The element of dramatic structure that requires them to do the most critical thinking and to make important connections typically involves pinpointing crucial elements of the exposition. I remind them that the exposition entails what unfolds both onstage and off. They quickly note that the play's title—*Two Trains Running*—is our first clue that at least two plotlines are running parallel. Then they offer Risa's self-mutilation as an example of relevant exposition that happens offstage. Because the published script actually tells the reader that Risa, "in an attempt to define herself in terms other than her genitalia, has scarred her legs with a razor" ([1993] 3), I ask them to consider the relation of her role as a woman specifically to the play's exposition. Why do we need to know that she has scarred her legs in order to grasp the plot with more depth? Then I ask students to cite specific moments in the play's development where this awareness enhances the play's mimetic impulse. Her determination to be viewed and accepted on her own terms is not terribly unlike Hambone's insistence that Lutz give him his ham as promised, nor is it unlike Sterling's resolve to find meaning in his own life by taking the ham from Lutz to place it in Hambone's casket. What the analysis of Risa's gendered act reveals is that the desire for self-definition animates every story line of the plot. So they see how paying attention to the way women function in the text is as revealing about major themes of the plot and about genre as it is about Wilson's choices in the characters he develops to dramatize black culture.

The plays are equally useful for introducing majors and minors to literary criticism. My comments here are limited to sketches of critical approaches that help students explore the role of women in Wilson's plays, but the plays contain a wide range of themes and tropes amenable to showing how criticism augments both the reading and performing of the plays. Because Wilson spoke

so openly about his aesthetic and dramatic vision, I like to use his prose (as articulated in essays and interviews) to contextualize his work. Doing so allows me to introduce students to biographical criticism. Reading certain aspects of the plays through the lens of authorial intention offers students valuable insight to very specific scenes—consider, for example, Herald Loomis's rejection of Christianity as evidenced by his slashing his chest at the end of *Joe Turner* and its reflection of Wilson's celebration of African spiritual retentions. Instructors can find ample evidence of Wilson's authorial intention. Commenting on his (then in-process but now complete) ten-play cycle that chronicles the four-hundred-year history of Africans in America—a history he calls “the story of myself and my ancestors”—he tells Sandra G. Shannon, “[Y]ou know I've got a 400-year autobiography. That's what I'm writing from. There's a whole bunch of material. I claim all 400 years of it. And I claim the right to tell it in any way I choose because it's, in essence, my autobiography” (Shannon, “Blues” 540). In that same interview, when Shannon inquires whether or not he is concerned that women had not, so far, been the focus of his plays, he remarks that he is not concerned because his perspective of the world is that of a man (550).¹ But he tells her later that while he was working on a play that was to be all male, a woman showed up on the stage (as he imagined it) insisting that she have her own scene. She asks him, “You gonna write a play about blacks in America in the 1940s and ain't going to have no women in it? How ridiculous can you get?” (553).² His point, it seems, is that he is compelled foremost to represent through dramatic art a glimpse of history through culture, and he uses whatever characters and traditions available to him to develop the ideas the particular play seeks to explore. That the characters are more often male than they are female, he intimates, is more a consequence of his own gender than a deliberate or even unconscious attempt to have more male characters than female. Students, when made aware of these statements by Wilson, are better prepared to develop and sustain arguments related to the role of women in the plays and to determine the value of this line of questioning.

One way to get students to think seriously about the role of women in Wilson's plays and, concurrently, to offer them models for producing literary criticism about the plays is to assign critical essays that explore this topic. Critics frequently concern themselves with the women in Wilson's works—their absence and then their presence, their silence and then their finding a voice, their feminism and then their seeming subordination, so there is sufficient variety from which students and instructors can choose.³ Of significance is the fact that critics, by and large, see Wilson's conversation with gender as complex. Having students read essays that grapple with this complexity allows me to show them how literary criticism can enliven interpretations of a text and how students can participate in this discourse.

When I assign Shannon's “‘The Ground on Which I Stand’: August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women,” the goal is to have students engage the argument that Wilson's feminine portrayals allow Wilson to come to grips

with the diversity and depths of black women's experiences. If I assign her “Ain't I a Woman?": Sojourner Truth's Question Revisited in August Wilson's *Female Characters*,” the goal is to have them contextualize his depiction of women as he imagines their roles throughout history among the larger question of the role of black women in American society. If the objective is to help them see the way a play like *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* challenges and confronts the limitations that gender places on women, I might have them read “August Wilson's Women,” by Harry J. Elam, Jr., or his chapter on women in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, where he argues convincingly that Wilson's women “negotiate interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression” (89). Like Elam's essay, Missy Dehn Kubitschek's “August Wilson's Gender Lesson” provides students with a good model for complicating a gender analysis by combining that analysis with another theme or trope. Kubitschek's essay examines how the plays' historical examinations of the black community require readers to pay attention to gendered interactions, especially the spiritual dimensions of those interactions. This essay helps students think of ways to write about *Gem of the Ocean*, a play that requires the audience (and readers) to suspend belief in a stable, here-and-now reality. Students, with these essays and others to complement their own interpretations and with class discussion, learn how complicated Wilson's development of women is. Stereotypical gender roles are sometimes reversed: Rose, not Troy, is in charge of the finances in *Fences*; Herald Loomis is Zonia's primary caregiver for years in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*; Bynum and not one of the play's women is the spiritual worker willing to give of himself freely and fully to bind others; and Ma is fiercely independent and unencumbered by her sexuality in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Students are charged with finding ways to articulate their critique of Wilson's seeming imbalanced portrayal of women. Accepting this charge helps them begin to see themselves as credible participants in the scholarly discourse on literary texts.

In more specialized courses for seniors in the major (English or Theatre Arts) or for graduate seminars on Wilson or on drama or contemporary African American literature, more generally, I use critics' efforts to grapple objectively with Wilson's limited portrayal of women to introduce students to critical ideas in black women's studies and, concurrently, to complicate African American literature's intersection with literary theory. In “Institutions, Classrooms, Failures: African American Literature and Critical Theory in the Same Small Spaces,” Lindon Barrett explores the ways critical theory and African American literature appear to fail each other.⁴ No doubt aware of the well-rehearsed tension between African American literature and critical theory,⁵ Barrett writes:

Theory, on the one hand, is marked by a reluctance to acknowledge itself as a political body of works with *material* determinants and consequences; African American literature, on the other, is characterized by the difficulty of acknowledging itself as anything more than the oversimple redaction of the conditions of a *material* and (by negation) political body. (219)

Many of us would dispute such a characterization of African American literature, but the challenge of helping students understand the relation of critical theory to African American literature is a real one. As Barrett observes, theory is an inherently laden political act, and, since traditional theory is marked by an "unremarked politics of reading" (219) that African American literature, in its concern with contexts and in its commitment to grappling with invisible normative assumptions, requires students to remark upon and to challenge, the tension is inevitable.⁶ Recent scholarship in black women's studies, instead of working within this tension, rejects, perhaps more aggressively than any other variety of African American critical theory, contemporary traditional theory as a viable lens through which to read black culture in general and black women's culture in particular.⁷ The irony that I am asking students to use the critical methodologies of black women's studies (its most progressive ones especially) to meet the challenge of examining women's limited roles in Wilson's distinctly cultural productions is not lost on them. Yet, black women's studies, in ways that are not characteristic of traditional academic disciplinary spaces, requires a respect for the cultural inimitability that informs Wilson's aesthetic. The discipline thus lends itself to fruitful readings of the plays in general and of the absent presence of women in them in particular.

As Barbara Christian notes in one of the earliest articulations of contemporary black women's studies critical methodologies, "Theory is precisely the problem upon which a black feminist scholar stumbles. Having been excluded so many times from so many camps, we are . . . particularly attuned to the dangers of the abstract generalization[s]" about "culture, language, literature, and gender" and toward the "philosophical and abstract logic" that characterize theory (227). Similarly skeptical about adopting mainstream theory to read black culture, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Christian's contemporary, argues that black women's studies scholars must arrive "at theoretical [framework] which will enable one to understand the complexity and diversity of the black female experience throughout the world" (139). Noting the challenges these scholars still face, she writes, "Much more is needed in the area of reconceptualizing Black Studies and Women's Studies so that the history, experiences, and cultures of black women will be more effectively taught and studied, thereby enabling both disciplines to reflect more accurately the diversity and complexity of experiences of blacks and women throughout the world" (141-42).

Undeniably, Wilson's plays are best understood when read through critical lenses that emerge from within and with full awareness of African and African American culture. His insistence on a black director for the movie adaptation of *Fences*, for example, makes this point explicitly: "We are an African people who have been here since the early seventeenth century. We have a different way of responding to the world. We have different ideas about religion, different manners of social intercourse. We have different ideas about style, about language. We have different aesthetics" ("I Want" 201-02). My objective, then, is to have students observe how the commitment of black women's studies to grappling

with and obviating the dangers that theory poses to readings of culture, literature, and gender shows how theory that emerges from within and that is driven by the culture can actually complement African American literature.⁸

This objective helps students achieve two interrelated goals: one, to understand how culturally specific theory can make visible the often invisible politics of reading and, two, to rethink traditional gender assumptions to give primacy to the politics of culture, which often requires a different line of inquiry and which subsequently yields more meaningful responses. In an attempt to reconceptualize the interfaces among African American studies, women's studies, and black women's studies (and to highlight the limitations of women's studies especially as a lens through which to read black peoples' experiences), Valethia Watkins argues that black women's studies, especially within the context of African American studies, must

rethink all of the gender assumptions that we now take for granted, before gender can be incorporated as a viable category of analysis within African American Studies. . . . Much of Women's Studies scholarship on Black women has been preoccupied with describing and measuring how much Black women's lives and experiences conform to or deviate from white gender norms. ("New Directions" 229)

I encourage students to consider their own and critics' interpretation of Wilson's portrayal of women on the basis of this rethinking.

Central to Watkins's argument is the position that black women's studies, especially as a mode of inquiry in African American studies, must involve the design of methodological and theoretical assumptions that are committed foremost to providing the groundwork "for the development of more complete, and integrated narratives of Black history and culture that will yield a more comprehensive, in-depth, and holistic interpretation and body of information about our past, representing both genders without prejudice" (238). Students notice that Watkins's objective is similar to Wilson's—to move beyond norms and pathologies to complicate representations and understandings of black life and culture. Her commentary about the unfortunate segregation of black history along gender lines, too, is revealing in the light of Wilson's unwillingness to participate in this segregation in his cycle, and her caution that black women's studies must reject assumptions about gender that are not culturally specific gives voice to critics' tendency to excuse Wilson for this unwillingness. It would seem that critics understand, at least to some extent, that gender is constructed by cultural groups; thus any representation of gender that is not culturally specific is problematic, especially when driven by theoretical abstractions that seem to be universalizing but in fact disguise a Euro-American cultural hegemony.

I ask students to consider Risa's rejection of the men's objectification of her in *Two Trains Running* and Rena's disapproval of Youngblood's plan to surprise her

with a house as examples of the failure of a universalized approach to gender. Why does either woman make the choices she makes? Both characters' behaviors at different points in the plays, I contend, illustrate the cultural dynamics of their varied experiences and help us appreciate male-female relationships as Wilson develops them in these plays. So I prompt students to find evidence of the cultural specificity of the actions they identify as gendered. One such example involves the discussion between the men about Risa. When Memphis remarks to Holloway and Wolf that something must be wrong with Risa, first for cutting her legs and then for not wanting to be with a man or a woman, he complains that he "can't figure out where to put her." Holloway responds insightfully, "That's what the problem is . . . you trying to figure out where to put her" (*Two Trains* 32). As Holloway observes, Risa rejects any interpretation of her self that is not informed by the fullness of her experiences. In *Jitney*, students are apt to recognize that Youngblood is too committed to his desire to be a traditional breadwinner to notice that Rena rejects traditional designations and wishes, instead, to be an equal partner in breadwinning and decision making. She tells him, "You supposed to know what's important to me like I'm supposed to know what's important to you. I'm not asking you to do it by yourself. I'm here with you. We in this together" (*Jitney* [2003] 75). Neither woman accepts the universal assumption that men define women's identities, and all Wilson's women reject outright the characteristics associated with traditional, domesticated white women—docility, unconditional faithfulness, simplemindedness, hyperemotionality.

At first students have difficulty understanding and perhaps accepting that a monolithic construction of Western culture—which disguises the fact that Western culture is in fact hybrid, formed of its peoples' contact with diverse global cultures—has been universalized as the standard and that other cultures possess their own traditional ways of understanding gender or give to it no meaning or value at all. Inviting students to use Wilson's oeuvre to reimagine gender from this position consistently proves revealing. It prompts them to recognize the ways that *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* troubles gender categories, most obviously with the allusions to Ma's unrestricted sexuality and her dominance over the men in the play, or the ways that *Gem of the Ocean* troubles gender categories more subtly, with Aunt Ester's almost gender-neutral characterizations. Aunt Ester has had four husbands, and Solly is her most recent suitor, but their relationship clearly finds conventional social roles meaningless. They accept the role bestowed upon each by culture and calling—Solly as a cultural conductor and Aunt Ester as a prophetic healer.

Critical examinations that explore Wilson's engagement with African traditions⁹ tend to be most successful at enhancing this line of inquiry since such scholarship, attempting to read the plays through the lens of traditional African cultures, helps students understand that all reading is informed by theory—explicit and applied or inherent and circumstantial. Students, when they begin to see the ways that culture can and must interface with deliberate theoretical

discourses, will become willing to push aside traditional assumptions about gender (and the invisible politics that attend those assumptions), to recover fully holistic narrative interpretations about African experiences in America, to ask new questions, and then to look for clues in the text and the culture to generate meaningful responses.

To help students enter this discourse, I offer these questions as initial lines of inquiry that require culturally grounded responses. What do we need to know to understand Berniece's self-assigned role as the keeper of culture in *The Piano Lesson*? What inspires Bertha to provide shelter and nourishment to the transients who visit the boardinghouse in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*? What causes at least one of the men in each play to remark upon a man's incompleteness without a woman, and what exactly does the man mean by this? Wilson's faithfulness to a historiography that seeks to answer these seemingly simple questions with complexity is incontrovertible, as is his awareness that reading black culture requires a different critical lens. He rejects outright the idea that anyone can interpret black culture authentically, and he contextualizes the error of this assumption historically. The assumption "has to do with how Africans were first viewed in this country, the residuals of which still affect and infest our society" ("I Want" 202). He reminds us:

The early plantation owners, unfamiliar and uninterested in African culture, viewed their slaves as slow, dull-witted, childlike, and otherwise incapable of grasping complex ideas. . . . African culture, its style and content, was so incongruent with European sensibilities and beliefs that Africans seemed primitive and slow and dull-witted. Elsewhere there were whites who bore a different witness and testimony . . . [seeing] Africans as black-skinned humans of a different culture capable of all the diversity of human conduct and endeavor.

The shortsightedness of the plantation owners must be thought of as willful. . . . [A]n examination of the people or their culture . . . would have led to a cultural exchange of ideas, postures, worldviews, language concepts . . . and a myriad of other cultural identities.

I suspect that to pursue a cross-cultural exchange would have done a violent damage to the plantation owners' idea of the correctness of their being and their manner . . . [which] became part of the society's consciousness and part of its truth. (202–03)

I quote at length here not simply to emphasize the thought and sensibility Wilson expresses but also to suggest ways to have students understand that the development of theory across literary traditions and cultures must be driven by primary sources rather than developed in the abstract. Theory will inevitably fail when limited by its characteristic reluctance to acknowledge itself as both a marked and unmarked political act. It has much to gain, then, by identifying with diasporic literatures in general and diasporic critical methodologies in

particular since, at their core, both understand and grapple with the reality of theory as a political act and seek to reverse and to avoid reinscriptions of the particular as universal.

Whether teaching Wilson's plays to students in general education literature classes, to majors and minors in English or theater arts, or to students in more specialized undergraduate courses or in graduate seminars, teachers will find that careful consideration of his portrayal of women helps students meet important objectives. Introducing students to the genre of drama has the potential to enhance their critical thinking skills as they explore the ways that Wilson uses characters, scenes, themes, and settings to define and dramatize a hundred years of African American life and culture. Exposing students to critical thought about a text similarly helps them develop their own critical voices. Helping them see how theory interfaces with culture challenges them to understand the ways that culture must inform theory in general and conversations about gender in particular; it prompts them to understand and to reject the universalizing impulse, which might otherwise remain invisible but would be no less influential; and, ideally, it quickens their commitment to extending Wilson's project of recovering and then developing a useful contemporary African historiography that is concerned above all with cultural specificity.

NOTES

¹ Wilson does, of course, eventually write a play where the main character is a woman—*Gen of the Ocean*, which features Aunt Ester, who first appears offstage in *Two Trains Running*, as the main character.

² *Seven Guitars* is the 1940s play in the cycle.

³ I limit my comments here to Shannon's, Elam's, and Kubitschek's essays. But consider also essays or chapters by critics like Kim Marra, Doris Davis, and Tara T. Green for excellent critical readings of the role of women in Wilson's plays.

⁴ Barrett begins the essay with an anecdote about an undergraduate student who commented that she or he was unsure how to write a paper for the African American literature course Barrett was teaching, because the student had "never been a slave and [couldn't] fully relate to this experience" (218). The student apparently associated the importance of personal experience to African American literature, an association that is not intrinsic to the study of other literatures. The anecdote illustrates that African American literature, as uniquely experientially based, "reinscribes the governing dualism" between the intellectual and the experiential (219). Barrett rightly notes that the student would not have likely made a similar comment in a course on Renaissance or Victorian literature, but he does not contest the supposition that African American literature is more experiential than other literatures. As Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, national literatures have long been used to explore emerging or threatened social, cultural, political, and economic histories and realities and are thus inherently experiential. African American literature's tendency to probe the conditions of its political body is no exception in this regard, though it is commonly characterized as being more experiential than aesthetic.

⁵ Consider, for example, Baker, *Betrayal* and *Blues*; Gates, *Figures and Signifying Monkey*; Fabre and O'Meally; and Tate.

⁶ The "unremarked politics of reading" to which Barrett refers alludes to the politics of race and class, among other things. Morrison's observation in *Playing in the Dark* that "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (xii) is a good example of the racially specific politics of reading that go unremarked more often than not.

⁷ I use *black women's studies* here in keeping with the nomenclature of the discipline. Generally, scholars who focus specifically on women of color designate their work in this way to reflect their interest in and commitment to black women's issues globally rather than nationally. Hence you seldom see references to African American women's studies than nationally. I use the term *African American* elsewhere purposefully, in general, to represent issues that are more national in orientation than global. However, my use of *African American studies* instead of *Africana studies*, for example, is for practical reasons (to be consistent with the scholars I engage), though Valetia Watkins especially tends to see *Africana studies* as representative of a discipline that is certainly concerned with black people globally rather than simply nationally ("New Directions"). I should note, too, that there is a distinction to be made between black women's studies and gender studies, which is as interested in biology as it is in culture, and feminist studies, which historically has been associated more with white women than with black women. Watkins navigates this minefield meticulously in "Womanism and Black Feminism."

⁸ Scholarship on intersections of black women's studies and black studies persists after Christian's and Guy-Sheftall's well-known rehearsals of issues that come into view almost simultaneously with the emergence of black studies as a discipline. The scholarship specific to the two disciplines and their relation to each other remains largely unchanged thereafter. Watkins offers one of the most convincing interventions to these challenges. But the subsequent introduction of the legal and sociopolitical implications into the broader conversation about the intersection of race and gender by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw ("Demarginalizing" and "Mapping") and Patricia Hill Collins does advance the general discourse on the intersections of race, class, and gender.

⁹ Consider, for example, Bogumil, "Tomorrow" and *Understanding*; Elam, *Past*; Euell; Fishman; Richards, "Yoruba Gods"; Bissiri; and Tyndall.