GRACE KYUNGWON HONG

"The Future of Our Worlds"

Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization[1]

Abstract

Taking as its point of departure an essay published in 1994 by renowned Black feminist Barbara Christian, this paper examines the U.S. university as a crucial site for contemporary transnational capital's management of race. The university adapts to the new demands of a globalized economy in at least two distinct but related ways. One is certainly in relation to issues of demography and access; in the deindustrializing economy of the United States, the university is complicit in the maintenance of wealth and resource inequities in a variety of ways. Thus, the question of whom the university excludes and whom it exploits is a very important one. However, any complete attempt to address the university's changing role under globalization requires a consideration of the university as an institution of knowledge production, a function that remains surprisingly underexamined. This paper examines these two questions—the economic and the epistemic—in relation to each other, by examining the university's management of racialized bodies as a function of its management of racialized knowledge. Indeed, if we take the university as an exemplary institution of global capital, we find that knowledge production is a key mechanism through which economic or demographic processes are organized. Against such a mobilization of knowledge, this essay situates black feminism as a site of alternative futurity.

The Soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as homogeneous or empty.
—Walter Benjamin 1969, 264

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Barbara Christian's 1994 essay entitled "Diminishing Returns: Can Black Feminism(s) Survive the Academy?" haunts me fourteen years after its publication. In it, Christian addresses the question of the future of black feminism by examining the many barriers—material, institutional, intellectual—that deny new generations of African Americans, and African American women in particular, access to college educations, much less to graduate degrees that would lead to academic positions. Christian carefully notes that it is not necessarily only African American women who have something to contribute to black feminism, and situates this condition in light of the seemingly contradictory surge in interest in black feminism and in African American literature and African American studies. In so doing, she paints a powerful picture of a bleak and ironic future, one in which the university's fetishization of black feminism as intellectual inquiry does not render impossible, and indeed in some ways facilitates, its systemic violence against black women. She writes, "It would be a tremendous loss, a distinct irony, if some version of black feminist inquiry exists in the academy to which Black women are not major contributors" (Christian 1994, 173).[2]

This essay haunts me because I cannot suppress my suspicion that we are indeed facing a moment when this "distinct irony," this "tremendous loss," is occurring, but in a way Christian might never have imagined. I am forced to consider that this bleak future may have come to pass, not only, as Christian so presciently foretold, through the dismantling of redistributive mechanisms that might have enabled current and future generations of black feminists to enter the academy, but also because so many of the black feminists of Christian's generation have died—struck down by cancer and other diseases—including Christian herself in 2000. June Jordan in 2002. Sherley Anne Williams in 1999. Audre Lorde in 1992. Beverly Robinson in 2002. Endesha Ida Mae Holland in 2006. Claudia Tate in 2002. Nellie McKay in 2006. VeVe Clark in 2007.[3]

In naming these women, these black feminists, I respond to James Baldwin's imperative to "bring out your dead." In *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, a raging meditation on the erasure and disavowal of racialized death, inspired by the murder of at least twenty-one African American children in Atlanta in 1979 and 1980, Baldwin writes,

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Bring out your dead:

Edward Hope Smith, 14. Reported missing July 20, 1979.
Found dead on July 28 of gunshot wounds along a road in a wooded area.

Bring out your dead:

Alfred James Evans, 13. Last seen July 25, 1979, waiting to catch a bus. Police identified Evans's body October 13, 1980, after it was found July 28 near the body of Edward Hope Smith. Strangulation.

Bring out your dead:

Milton Harvey, 14. Last seen September 1979.
Found dead November 1979. Cause of death: undetermined.

Bring out your dead:

Baldwin 1985, 39

And the list goes on and on.[4]

To bring out your dead is to remember what must be forgotten, to find the "evidence of things not seen": that the notion of American equality in the protection of life is a fallacy, that life is not protected if you are raced and gendered, and that you are raced and gendered if your life is not protected. To bring out your dead is to say that these deaths are not unimportant or forgotten, or, worse, coincidental. It is to say that these deaths are systemic, structural. To bring out your dead is not a memorial, but a challenge, not an act of grief, but of defiance, not a register of mortality and decline, but of the possibility of struggle and survival. It is shocking to say and impossible to prove that these women suffered early deaths because the battles around race, gender, and sexuality were being waged so directly through and on their bodies. Yet the names bear witness to this unknowable truth.

In this essay, I use Barbara Christian's essay as a guide to examine exactly how it came to be that a dominant formation of the U.S. university[5] enacts this kind of violence toward black feminists. I read Christian's essay in order to illuminate the means by which epistemological considerations, as much as political and economic ones, constitute this university formation's violence toward black feminists. That is, as I will go on to note, Christian importantly connects questions of access (who is allowed into the university) to questions of knowledge production (what can be said). Christian's essay

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reveals the ways in which this university formation constitutes particular norms governing what can be validated as scholarly knowledge, and that these norms—as much as the political and economic structures of racial hierarchy and economic deprivation—become the mechanism by which the university excludes and extinguishes black feminists. This manifestation of violence toward black feminists provides, I argue, the clearest perspective on the ways in which this university formation is implicated in the specific processes of racialization and gendering in the contemporary moment. In other words, attending to this university formation's violence against black feminists gives us insight into its strategies of racial management within the present-day manifestations of global capital.

Yet if the violence toward black feminist bodies happens through epistemological means, then the obverse also must be true: a different kind of knowledge production can carve out a space in the academy for black feminists. Thus I attempt to address how we might re-imagine and reconstitute this university formation so that it is no longer so violent toward black feminists. I argue that it is in black feminist thought that we find the method for reconstituting knowledge production within the university. This is a complex, twofold task. On the one hand, how do we claim the importance of black feminists' actual lives without reproducing a reductive positivism that would dismiss questions of knowledge production and epistemology? On the other hand, how do we valorize black feminist knowledge production in a way that does not inadvertently collude with the blanket dismissal of embodied politics as simply identitarian, a dismissal that operates to exclude or extinguish black feminist lives? In order to address this question, I turn to one important intellectual trajectory within black feminist thought that emphasizes alternative epistemological productions, focusing specifically on Christian, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective. Through the contributions of black feminist *knowledge production*, we can ensure that there are more black feminist *bodies* in the academy. In this way, we neither espouse a reductive essentialism that maintains that we only need to get more black female bodies in the academy (although this is certainly not an unimportant task), nor an equally reductive version of an anti-identitarian critique that insists that bodies are not important and that ignores the material levels at which racism and misogyny organize themselves. Instead of positing epistemological and embodied politics as incommensurate opposites, I argue that

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the materialist knowledge production pioneered by this strand of black feminist thought allows us to see them as connected.

In arguing that the examination of the university's violence toward black feminists allows us to understand the ways in which the university is implicated in global capital, I do not mean to argue that globalization is a new formation, specific only to the present day. The long histories of colonialism, enslavement, and genocide were the ways in which the farthest reaches of the globe became connected in the prior eras of a decidedly global capitalism.[6] In this essay, I offer one particular analysis of historical transition, focusing on changes at the level of epistemology. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued, the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s marked a profound shift in the mechanisms of racial management.[7] Racial formations in the earlier period operated through the ideology of white supremacy and racialized abjection. The enslavement of Africans, the genocide of indigenous populations, and the appropriation of territories through colonial conquest imply a worldview organized around a notion of the innate biological and/or cultural inferiority of racialized and colonized subjects.[8] This notion of racialized abjection was manifested as the eradication of personhood, whether literally through genocide or politically and socially through enslavement.[9] Abjection was also manifested through assimilation: through the belief that racialized subjects could and should shed their own inferior cultures and absorb the presumed superiority of Western civilization, which was always articulated through gender and sexual norms.[10] The principle of assimilation denigrates racialized and colonized culture as atavistic forms that must be relinquished if the racialized and the colonized being is to become a modern and civilized subject. This colonial era of "global" capital was organized around such an epistemology of white supremacy.

The western European model of the university was integral to this process, as an institution that, as the repository of all validated knowledge, represented Western civilization, and that disseminated through the curriculum its norms and ideals. While institutions of higher education undoubtedly had a variety of functions and while all universities did not operate similarly, the epistemological structure of Western university education was based on a sense of progress toward a singular and universalizable notion of civilization, represented by a canonical notion of Western culture.[11]

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Because so much of what constitutes modern universities descends from this rueful history, the university became an important site where the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged this narrative of racialization as abjection.[12] These new social movements, which in part established Ethnic Studies within universities across the United States, revealed that white supremacy, articulated through sexualized and gendered norms, was at the heart of the project of Western civilization, and thus that Western civilization was a racialized and gendered project. In so doing, they critiqued the very foundations of that earlier formation of global capitalism. Following C. L. R. James's lead, Roderick Ferguson has noted that Ethnic Studies was foremost a critique of Western civilization (Ferguson 2005, 78). James describes African American Studies in his essay "Black Studies and the Contemporary Student" as an intervention into Western civilization as a racialized project constituted through the intersecting histories of European slavery, imperialism, and colonization (James 1993, 397). Ethnic Studies programs were established in universities across the country by student activism that intersected with the antiwar, black power, and new left movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and with decolonization movements occurring abroad.[13] These student movements approached the university as an institution already implicated in a worldwide system of neocolonial and racialized capitalist exploitation.[14] As such, their efforts were to change the very function of the university. Rather than being a site of knowledge production that legitimated and reproduced U.S. state power—particularly egregious as the U.S. was engaging in imperialist wars in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—the university that these students imagined was a means of redistributing resources, producing counter-knowledges, and critiquing white supremacy and imperialism.[15]

Black feminists were central to this struggle. Because the racial project of Western civilization was always a gendered and sexualized project as well, black feminism emerged as an analysis of the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class within the context of global colonial capitalism.[16] We now know well that a central concern for black feminist articulations in what Joy James calls "The Movement Era" was an analytic that legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw later termed "intersectionality" (Crenshaw 1991).[17] As Rose M. Brewer notes, "what is most important conceptually and analytically in this work is the articulation of multiple oppressions" (Brewer 1993, 13).[18] In other words, the intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, and

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sexuality as constitutive processes was the revolutionary insight of black feminism in this era. The most succinct and precise definition of intersectionality can be found in the Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" in which they write, "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective 1981, 210). One of the earliest and most influential published articulations of this analytic is Frances Beal's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," which begins not with a discussion of black women, but with a critique of capitalism, which, Beal writes, "has attempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of all people, and particularly the humanity of black people. This has meant an outrageous assault on every black man, woman, and child who resides in the United States" (Beal 1970, 146). Beal then goes on to analyze the economic processes by which black men and women are differentially incorporated into the labor force, and uses this as a way to critique normative gender roles as well as to encourage black men and women to reject such roles. In this way, Beal's theorization of intersectionality is not a means to define or defend an identitarian notion of "black womanhood," but is an analytic about race, gender, sexuality, and capitalism as social processes.

While 1960s and 1970s black feminism's intersectional analytic was, as it is often narrativized, a critique of the sexism within black nationalist movements or of racism within white feminism, we must also understand the larger implications of intersectionality: it was a *complete* critique of the epistemological formation of the white supremacist moment of global capital organized around colonial capitalism.[19] This is evident, for example, in the Combahee River Collective's contextualization of their current struggle within an understanding of "how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere" (Combahee River Collective 1981, 212).

In the wake of these profoundly transformative social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, technologies of race must operate quite differently. I have argued elsewhere that the emergence of women of color feminism, centrally constituted through the insights of black feminism, can be read as one index of the restructuring of the global political economy in the post-World War II era.[20] Globalization is most often discussed in relation to the shift between

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an older form of territorial colonialism to a newer form of neocolonialism, characterized as "development" policies dictated by U.S.-controlled financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, the concomitant displacement of laboring populations, and the transnational flow of goods, capital, and labor that is attendant to this condition.[21] How black feminist thought relates to these processes is rarely discussed, and how a theorist like Christian might be commenting on an aspect of this worldwide transformation is a generally neglected topic. I argue that the university's violence toward black feminists is a manifestation of its operations in this new global political economy, and as such, Christian's critique of the university provides an analysis of this process. The university was profoundly changed by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and its contemporary retrenchment in reaction to these movements, a retrenchment that is most evidently marked on black feminist bodies, structures its role within contemporary globalization. As I have argued, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s rendered untenable the privileging of Western civilization that was the ideological and cultural basis for the earlier, colonial form of globalization. These social movements did so by critiquing Western civilization's foundations in white supremacy. With this critique of white supremacy, the logics of racial management shifted toward the rhetoric and policy of neoliberal multiculturalism, which replaced white supremacy as the dominant logic of contemporary globalization. Jodi Melamed has described the "sea change in racial epistemology" in the postwar period in the following manner: "In contrast to white supremacy, the liberal race paradigm recognizes racial inequality as a problem, and it secures a liberal symbolic framework for race reform centered in abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism. Antiracism becomes a nationally recognized social value, and for the first time, gets absorbed into U.S. governmentality" (Melamed 2006, 2).[22] Melamed calls this new formation "neoliberal multiculturalism," and argues that this, rather than white supremacy, organizes racial knowledge and inequity in the post-World War II era.

Accordingly, within the context of the contemporary university where "diversity" is tokenistically but not substantively prioritized, racialized and gendered management currently does not occur solely through the denigration of black feminism and black feminists, but also simultaneously through a form of valorization and fetishization, albeit of a limited and facile type. This is the ideological and epistemological formation of

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contemporary global capital. Black feminists of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Christian, specifically addressed this new racial and gender formation. For this very reason, black feminist thought of the 1980s and 1990s centrally examines how racist and sexist structures endure despite this seeming disavowal of overt racism and white supremacy. In particular, Christian's essay notes that the current neoliberal multicultural moment allows for, and indeed requires, the nominal valorization of black feminism as a way to deflect charges of racism and misogyny, which does not preclude and in many instances facilitates the exclusion and extinguishing of black feminists. Further, Christian focuses on the ways in which technologies of racial and gender management link knowledge production to demographic and economic processes. In so doing, Christian's essay can be read as a precise diagnosis of the regimes of racial management of our moment and of the ways in which the university is implicated in these regimes. Noting that many African American women enter the academy because they are attracted to the possibility of pursuing work organized around alternative models of research, only to be discouraged by the lack of institutional support for such work, Christian writes, "Can we conceive of the idea that sometimes their projects and the ways in which they pursue them might be incomprehensible to our sense of what scholarly enterprises should be about? Can we think about how narrowly defined our own definition of scholarship might be?" (Christian 1984, 187). Christian thus encourages us to interrogate how we might be reproducing what Patricia Hill-Collins has termed "Eurocentric masculinist criteria for methodological adequacy" (Hill-Collins 1989, 753).[23]

Christian thus importantly connects the question of who has access to the university to the question of what kinds of knowledge are produced. However, this is not presented, in Christian's text, as a reductive essentialism that maintains that African Americans, once in the ranks of the academy, will produce a certain kind of scholarship and espouse a particular kind of politics. Rather, she emphasizes the notion that changes in knowledge production are a *precondition* for the greater representation of African Americans, and African American women in particular, in the university. She makes an important point about the ways in which the *conditions* for knowledge production are determined by assumptions about *what counts as knowledge*. As such, the regulation of knowledge production acts as a mechanism of exclusion alongside the oftentimes more acknowl-

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edged issues of economic barriers and the racially hierarchized structures of the U.S. educational system.

Christian's linking of issues of access to issues of judgment, knowledge production, and disciplinary regulation makes clear that we must connect the university's demographic and political economic strategies to its politics of knowledge. Christian's work thus belies the claims of social theorist Bill Readings who argues that the supposedly contentless and race-neutral privileging of "excellence" marks a decisive break from the earlier organization of the university around the validity of Western civilization, the canon, and "core knowledges." Readings argues that, unlike the earlier era's defense of "core knowledges," the contemporary university's deployment of the rhetoric of "excellence" renders *what* is being said less important than *how* it is being said, making the "content" of knowledge irrelevant: "what gets taught and researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched" (Readings 1996, 13).

Yet in asking us to reconsider "how narrowly defined our own definition of scholarship might be," Christian urges us to understand the ways in which this emphasis on "excellence" implicitly disallows certain forms of knowledge and privileges others. A well-known literary critic once casually remarked that "Politicized discourse . . . is sometimes merely an expression of opinion, of good politics but indifferent or redundant scholarship" (Guillory 1996 7). This scholar evinces a too-common faith in a category of "indifferent or redundant scholarship," with an implied opposing category of "excellent" scholarship, both of which can be ascertained through ideologically neutral criteria that exist independently of whatever "political" content this scholarship might espouse. Christian asks us to think more critically about such supposedly neutral forms of evaluation and judgment, suggesting that the very criteria themselves are invisibly ideological, validating some forms of knowledge and disallowing others. In so doing, Christian observes, these ostensibly neutral criteria not only regulate *what* gets said but, in making the university an inhospitable place for those African American women seeking alternative models for research, also determines *who* can say it.

Christian's emphasis on the connection between questions of access (who makes up the university) and knowledge production (what is getting said and taught) highlights a relationship that is often underappreciated or apprehended too reductively. Knowledge production, for Christian, is

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absolutely circumscribed by racialized power—in the forms of judgment, discipline, and regulation. That is, the university's management of racialized and gendered *bodies* occurs through its management of racialized and gendered *knowledge*.

Christian's analysis gives us a means by which to revise Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, which he defines as the dominant contemporary mode of governance in which subjects are ruled through the production of regimes of knowledge, through the management, surveillance, and categorization of the various modes of life: its sustenance, reproduction, duration, and embodied manifestations. In this context, norms rather than laws become the regulatory apparatuses of power. For Foucault, race emerges mainly as a way of articulating blood purity, a corollary to his more central preoccupation about why sexuality becomes such a governing and governed site.[24] Yet even after its association with Nazism tarnished the notion of blood purity, race continues to have a structuring power, albeit in a different manner. Christian's analysis helps us understand that race, gender, and sexuality function intersectionally to organize how knowledge production regulates bodies in the most minute and thorough ways. If canonical knowledge deployed to demonstrate the superiority of Western civilization was the earlier norm organizing university education, a supposedly contentless excellence that obfuscates the racism and sexism of universities is the new norm within the context of contemporary globalization. These norms are exactly those that structure the violence of the university to black feminists currently. While Christian does not explicitly address such matters, her analysis, in demonstrating the embodied power of knowledge production, gives us an analytic with which to understand how the epistemologies organizing the university might manage racialized and gendered bodies to the point of exhaustion, breakdown, and death.

Christian's analysis sheds new light on Foucault's concern over what he called "subjugated knowledges," which he defined as "a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as non-conceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition and scientificity" (Foucault 2003, 7). His concern was not simply that these knowledges would be unappreciated by institutions of "science" but that they would become *too* appreciated—appreciable—in their aspirations to be true "sciences." In that case, such seemingly subjugated knowledges would

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be in collusion with the mechanisms of power that constitute hierarchies of knowledge. Foucault cautions that "we should be asking the question, asking ourselves, about the aspiration to power that is inherent in the claim to being a science" (Foucault 2003, 10). While Foucault specifically addressed the fields of Marxism and psychoanalysis, we can see that the study of *race* and *gender* has had this trajectory as well.[25] If we are to center the U.S. university as the object of our analysis, we must understand the regulation and disciplining of the study of race and gender as centrally and constitutively organizing its mechanisms of power. Another way of posing this question is: what happens when the study of race and gender is hailed as a sign of the university's "excellence," as the familiar slogan "excellence through diversity" implies? What happens when we who study race and gender ourselves champion a limited notion of "excellence," thereby preventing ourselves from recognizing, as Christian suggested, how "narrowly defined our own definition of scholarship might be?" In so doing, she implies, we are contributing to the very processes that enable the university to be so violent to black feminists.

While black feminism has become incorporated, albeit often tokenistically, into many institutions, black feminists are hampered in these institutions insofar as knowledge production is regulated by the normative category of "excellence." This category claims to be objective and neutral because it subjects all scholarly production to the same criteria. Yet Christian's analysis implies that these norms exist in antagonism to black feminists whose work might not fit such a narrow view of what counts as knowledge. I would argue that it does so because so much of what black feminists produce is done in the context of studying of what cannot be known. That is, rather than treat knowledge as transparently available, much of black feminism has maintained that what counts as knowledge is always ideologically determined. "Black feminism" can be defined not as a discrete and knowable set of objects, but instead can be deployed as one of the names for what has been rendered unknown—unknowable—through the very claim of a totalizing knowledge. While black feminism has always had to maintain the validity and existence of alternative forms of knowledge, an important thread within black feminist thought also exists that simultaneously gestures toward what cannot be known, what has been erased, and how. At the moment when this modality of black feminism fulfills its project by acknowledging the unknowable, it undermines the norms of scholarly authority and mastery upon which the university is based.

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Yet if the university wields the norm of excellence and objectivity in order to exclude and marginalize black feminists, this is also the terrain on which we struggle to reimagine the university as a site where different kinds of epistemological, methodological, and intellectual projects, as represented in black feminism, might emerge. Such projects challenge, rather than reproduce, the norms of the university. Herbert Marcuse writes, "In order to identify and define the possibilities of an optimal development, the critical theory must abstract from the actual organization and utilization of society's resources, and from the results of this organization and utilization. Such abstraction which refuses to accept the given universe of facts as the final context of validation, such 'transcending' analysis of the facts in the light of their arrested and denied possibilities, pertains to the very structure of social theory" (Marcuse 1991, xi). The organization of the university around this "given universe of facts" marginalizes and devalues the intellectualism of black feminists.

Yet black feminism's challenge to the "given universe of facts," its necessary acknowledgment of what cannot be known, can make knowledge production within the context of the university a process that enables, rather than extinguishes, black feminists. As Joy James has argued, black feminism is not monolithic, but has liberal, radical, and revolutionary trajectories (James 1999a).[26] Yet in the work of black feminists across a variety of traditions, we see evidence of such epistemological critiques. I have elsewhere provided readings of this critique of epistemological closure and the stability of knowledge in the work of Angela Davis and Barbara Smith, so here I will turn my attention to writings by the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde.[27]

The Combahee River Collective, in the "Black Feminist Statement" cited above, describes revolutionary action as a kind of epistemological unknown: "We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective 1981, 215). This language of the "leap" is evocative; revolutionary action requires a moment in which one refuses the status quo. A leap defies the real—the demands of physics, of gravity—in order to be impossibly airborne, even if for a moment. The "clear leap" implies a work of imagination, the ability to believe that a different future might be possible, despite the seeming

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inevitability of a crushing present. It does not concede the future to the present, but imagines it as something still in the balance, something that can be fought over, "in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (Benjamin 1969, 263). In this way, the work of culture, of imagining, is revolutionary. Christian takes this leap, imagining the potentiality of a bleak future in order to mark it as something that is hanging in the balance, something over which we can and must struggle. Christian's essay is itself a work of imagination in the tradition of women of color feminism, and as such it "designate[s] the imagination as a social practice under contemporary globalization" (Ferguson 2004, 117).

In this tradition, the work of imagination is not a frivolous or superficial activity, but rather a material and social practice toward "revolutionary change." Audre Lorde writes in her foundational essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," "Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" (Lorde 1984, 39). The imaginative capacity inherent in poetry doesn't merely reflect the material world, nor is it an epiphenomenon of it, but rather is the "skeleton architecture," its "foundation." In language that resonates with, in order to critique, a Marxist vocabulary for culture, Lorde situates poetry as the *base*, not the superstructure.[28] For Lorde, dismissing as "luxury" the imaginative work of poetry has severe and bleak consequences: "we give up the future of our worlds."

Black feminism reminds us to imagine a different future, for "the future of our worlds" hangs in the balance. So what might our future within the university look like? Is there a version of the university that does not reproduce a "reality" forcibly determined by an invisible ideology of color-blind neutrality, but one that labors mightily against it? If that is what our future might look like, I'd like to propose that perhaps, in fleeting, contingent, and provisional ways, the future is now. In this essay, my intention has been to recognize the surviving work of black feminists, work that does indeed, if even for a moment and with some grave consequences for its authors, make the university a site where a different kind of knowledge is produced. In so doing, these black feminists imagine the university as a different institution altogether, one that makes central an intellectualism of the type best exemplified by black feminism. In its redistributive project, black feminism imagines a university in which a less disciplining definition of knowledge allows more black feminists to enter,

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and makes the university a less hostile place for black feminists. This is the work that black feminism does now and in the future, for the future, and is the work that we must take up in solidarity.

But this is a joyous responsibility, a life-affirming work. I want to end with another passage from Christian's essay. She writes, "besides, the point is, and it is an important point, that there is joy in struggle. . . . We will survive in the academy" (Christian 1994, 177-8). And she will.

Notes

1. I thank Victor Bascara, Maylei Blackwell, Roderick Ferguson, Helen Jun, Brenda Plummer, Myisha Priest, and Cherene Sherrard for generously and rigorously responding to this essay in earlier draft form. I thank the anonymous readers from *Meridians* for their illuminating comments, which helped improve this essay greatly. All errors of fact or judgment in this essay are entirely my own.
2. This essay is also republished in a landmark collection of Christian's writings, *New Black Feminist Criticism*, 1985–2000. See Bowles, Fabi, and Kaizer 2007.
3. In listing these women, I do not aim to be comprehensive, although I do not relish the thought that there are more black women intellectuals who have died about whom I do not know. Instead, I mean to impress upon us the magnitude of this crisis. If we keep in mind that most of the women listed are literary critics, the extent of the crisis becomes even more staggering, since this list, being mostly of women from one particular field, is undoubtedly partial. I also mean to pay tribute to these women, some of whom I knew personally and some of whom I know only through their work, but all of whom have enabled me to do my own work in ways both direct and oblique. For an eloquent commentary on this phenomenon, see Priest 2004. There have been a number of published memorials for individual black feminists who have died. For a tribute to Claudia Tate, see Painter 2003. For a memorial for Christian, see Jordan 2000. For a collection of moving and thoughtful essays about Nellie McKay and her work, see Moody 2006. See also Painter 2006.
4. I wrote this section of the essay prior to having read Priest's article. When I found Priest's moving tribute to black women intellectuals, I found to my amazement that "The list goes on and on" was a phrase she used as well. There was apparently something that resonated about this phrase for both of us. While I would, in other circumstances, remove it so as to avoid any seeming impropriety or plagiarism, I have decided to include it here to retain this resonance, with this acknowledgment that Priest's use of it was written and published earlier.
5. I realize that in using the term "the university" I risk implying that there is only one monolithic university formation, which is certainly untrue. Within each university, there are localized operations of racialized and gendered management that might differ based on whether a university is public or private,

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research- or teaching-oriented, well-funded or under-funded, and whether a university is a historically black college or university (HBCU) or, as the majority tend to be, a historically white institution. There are institutions that are organized around religious faiths, mainly Catholic or Jewish, one university for the deaf, and another for Native American students. Certainly, how black feminists and black feminism might fare in these varied sites will surely differ. While HBCUs cannot be exempted from critiques of sexism and male-dominated organization, and while black feminism undoubtedly faces challenges of different sorts in HBCUs than in historically white colleges and universities, the attacks on affirmative action have made HBCUs that much more important for the education of African American students currently. Indeed, Beverly Guy-Sheftall's account of the successful establishment of black feminism as a central component of the curriculum at one historically black college—Spelman College—leaves open the possibility that HBCUs may become the center of black feminist teaching, theorizing, and knowledge production within the academy in the future. See Guy-Sheftall 1993. It is an important and worthwhile project to examine the differentiated histories of black feminism within the various kinds of institutions that make up the American academy, though such a project is not within the scope of this article. In this essay, when I refer to the university as a formation, I am speaking mainly about historically white, research, or liberal arts institutions in the context of which many of these black feminist deaths have occurred, and in which affirmative action rollbacks have severely impacted the recruitment and retention of African American students. For the sake of clarity and expediency, I use the term "this university formation" or "the university" rather than specify which type of university with every usage in the text.

6. For discussions of an earlier form of global capital and its dependence on racialized labor and enslavement, see Rodney 1974 and Williams 1994.
7. See Omi and Winant 1994, especially chapter 6, "The Great Transformation."
8. See Goldberg 1993.
9. For an analysis of the non-person status—what he calls the "social death"—of the slave, see Patterson 1982. For a discussion of how the "terror" of non-personhood survived the shift from enslavement to "emancipation," see Hartman 1997.
10. For analyses of the ways in which imperialism was necessarily organized around gender and sexual norms, see George 1998. See also Stoler 2006.
11. See Readings 1996, particularly chapter 5, "The University and the Idea of Culture."
12. Of course, the university was not the only site radically transformed by these movements. Even within educational institutions, scholars have noted the ways in which the earliest and most radical movements for self-determination for students of color and for a curriculum relevant to these students emerged not at the university level, but in high schools and community colleges. See Bernal's useful analysis of the role of Chicana leadership in the 1968 East Los Angeles "blowouts," in which over ten thousand Chicano students staged a walkout to protest the poor conditions at their high schools and middle schools (Bernal 1998).

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13. For a brilliant account of the many ways in which activists of color in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s situated themselves in alliance with decolonization struggles in the Third World, see Young 2006.
14. One very early and important struggle occurred in 1968–69 at the City College of New York, where Christian was teaching while finishing her Ph.D. at Columbia University. Christian participated in struggles around ethnic studies and equitable education for black and Puerto Rican students at City College. Her activism continued at the University of California, Berkeley as she worked for the establishment of the African American Studies department as well as the protection of the Ethnic Studies department and of affirmative action programs. See Christian 1998.
15. For an analysis of the movement for ethnic studies at San Francisco State University that makes evident the connection between this movement and larger decolonizing struggles, see Murase 1978.
16. Several useful anthologies and collections of black feminist thought exist. An early collection is Cade 1970. Barbara Smith has been one of the most important editors of such collections; her *Home Girls* and *Some of Us are Brave* are foundational texts. See Smith 1983 and Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982. The most comprehensive collection is Guy-Sheftall 1995, which collects African American feminist theory beginning from 1831. James and Sharpley-Whiting (2000) collect more recent work from the 1970s onward.
17. James's "Movement Era" dates from 1955 to 1975 and "includes the black civil rights struggles, the American Indian Movement (AIM), Chicano activism, Puertorriqueño insurrections, and militant feminism" (James 1999b, 74).
18. Using Patricia Hill Collins's work as an example, Brewer insightfully notes that black feminist scholarship has successfully centered lived experience as central to black feminist epistemology. Brewer argues, however, that analyses that link lived experience with "social structure," or in other words, political economic structures, are less available, and endeavors to correct this lack with her rigorous examination of black women's labor and African American class formation. My analysis of Christian's work argues that Christian makes the link between lived experience and political economic structures from another vantage point: by noting the ways in which epistemologies are themselves political economic forces.
19. For the most famous example of black feminism's critique of white mainstream feminism's singularity of focus on gender and its consequent reproduction of racism, see Lorde 1984. For an early example of black feminist critique of sexism and patriarchy within black nationalist movements, see Weathers 1970.
20. See Hong 2006.
21. For discussions of the shift from colonialism to neocolonialism, see Pomeroy 1970 and Arrighi 1994.
22. For insightful discussions of multiculturalism, see Gordon and Newfield 1996. See also Lee 2004 for a discussion of the "long decade" of the 1980s in which multicul-

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turalist celebrations of the cultural production (particularly literary) of people of color did little to alleviate, and instead obscured and legitimated, the economic and political assault on racialized communities. Christian's "Diminishing Returns" essay was clearly her intervention into a politics of multiculturalism, and was published in a volume specifically addressing this topic. See Goldberg 1995.

23. For an analysis of how the "epistemological racism that limits the range of possible epistemologies considered legitimate within the mainstream research community" affects the retention, promotion, and tenure rates of scholars of color, see Scheurich and Young 1997; Ladson-Billings 2000; and Bernal and Villalpando 2002.
24. For Foucault, race emerges at this moment as a function of blood purity: "Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, 'biologizing,' statist form); it was then that the whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the race and ensuring the triumph of the race" (Foucault 1990, 149).
25. Indeed, this is exactly the question Christian addresses in another essay that meditates on the promises and perils of institutionalization. In "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway?" she offers an intellectual history of black feminism and meditates on the "positives and negatives of what it means to become institutionalized in universities" (Christian 1989, 73).
26. James makes this argument in her essay "Radicalizing Black Feminism," originally published in the journal *Race and Class*. Much of this essay appears in some form throughout her book, *Shadowboxing* (cited above). I cite from the essay version.
27. See Hong 2006, xxx–xxxi, for a discussion of Davis, and Hong 2007 for a discussion of Smith.
28. For a description of the traditional Marxist characterization of culture as the "superstructure" to the economic "base," see Williams 1977.

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