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## "The Metalanguage of Race," Then and Now

### Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham

**I**n the twenty-five years since "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" (Higginbotham 1992) appeared in *Signs*, both historical scholarship and current events have brought renewed attention to the ideas presented in the article. It is truly an honor to glean the rich insights of the contributors to this forum organized by Sherie M. Randolph. In situating the article in relation to current scholarship, each of their essays brings a unique emphasis. Robin D. G. Kelley (2017) focuses on the literal

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and figurative violence done to the representation of black women's gender and sexual normativity, noting especially historical studies on black women and the carceral state. Tamar W. Carroll (2017) identifies examples of multi-racial and cross-gender activist organizations, observing that "the suppression of difference, rather than difference itself . . . inhibited movements for progressive social change" (603–4). Dayo F. Gore (2017) stresses the importance of power relations as lived experience and the need for attentiveness at this level to the mutually constitutive production of identity/identities and of multiple systems involved in "categories of difference" (609). Marlon M. Bailey and L. H. Stallings (2017) urge greater analysis and theorization in regard to black sexuality, given today's political, intellectual, and health climate in the United States, and they posit a "metalanguage of sexuality" in order to consider not merely sites of racialized sexual violence but also sites of pleasure, joy, and eroticism at the individual and collective levels. And Sherie M. Randolph (2017) emphasizes the centrality of the American legal system as a technology of race, while also situating my "metalanguage of race" within a genealogy of similar and complementary conceptual rubrics developed between the 1960s and the 1990s by black feminist lawyers Pauli Murray, Florynce Kennedy, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.

The breadth of the new scholarship discussed in this forum makes clear the fluid and adaptive character of racializing logics and processes in multiple and varying contexts over time. But it also does more than this when put in conversation with my article and with the work of other black women's historians and feminist theorists writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This generational juxtaposition, as evident in the contributors' essays, convincingly demonstrates the "power of race to mean" (Higginbotham 1992, 268) in the construction and representation of the discipline of history itself. Indeed, until the mid-twentieth century, American history textbooks and monographs conflated discourses of race, discourses of region, and discourses of civilization. In 1935, W. E. B. Du Bois referred to the academy's prevailing historical interpretations as the "propaganda of history" for their racialized assumptions and biases (Du Bois 1935, 711). Thirty years later, Southern segregationists' investment in such interpretations, especially in histories of slavery and Reconstruction, led historian John Hope Franklin to write, "they summoned history to support their arguments that age-old practices and institutions could not be changed overnight, that social practices and customs could not be changed by legislation" (1965, 448). In thinking about the discipline of history and the ideas and events that inspired my *Signs* article, I find it useful to look backward and forward from 1992, thereby covering what amounts to three generations of scholarship. The position in the middle offers a unique vantage point,

since it allows me to reflect upon the "then" and "now" of African American women in history, with the hindsight and foresight of the metalanguage of race.

I want to begin with what might seem to be an unlikely story since it commences in 1965 with a speech by Malcolm X in Detroit on February 14, seven days before an assassin's bullet would snuff out his life. Malcolm's home had been firebombed the night before, which destroyed most of his family's belongings. With a certain sense of propriety that linked manhood and attire, Malcolm felt obliged to apologize and to explain why he hadn't worn a tie, but he soon turned to the subject of race in America with his usual unapologetic candor and hint of humor, stating at one point:

When you get the white man over here in America and he says he's white, he means something else. You can listen to the sound of his voice—when he says he's white, he means he's boss. That's right. That's what "white" means in this language. You know the expression, "free, white, and twenty-one." He made that up. He's letting you know all of them mean the same. "White" means free, boss. He's up there. So that when he says he's white he has a little different sound in his voice. I know you know what I'm talking about. (Malcolm X 1990, 163)

Malcolm's audience knew exactly what he was talking about because the catchy expression "free, white, and twenty-one" had been popularized in American films in the 1930s and remained popular well into the 1950s (Heisel 2015).<sup>1</sup> Black newspapers assailed the film industry for promoting this insensitive trope that tantalized the American social imagination. However, Malcolm X was not completely accurate in his gripping depiction of "what 'white' means in this language." The ubiquitous usage of "free, white, and twenty-one" had been brought to the public primarily through the voices of white women actors, not men. In differing movie subplots that had no explicit connection to race relations, "free, white, and twenty-one" resounded in messages about women's independence from male prerogatives or from other societal conventions that were perceived to be outdated. No matter how pithy and entertaining the performance of those words, black women did not identify in any literal sense with their resonant meaning.

<sup>1</sup> In 1963, the phrase was explicitly associated with race relations by filmmaker Larry Buchanan in his film *Free, White, and Twenty-One*. A courtroom drama, the film told the story of a black hotel owner (played by Fred O'Neal) who is accused of rape by a Swedish immigrant and civil rights activist (played by Annalena Lund). See the trailer for the film at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_PjogFreuM8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PjogFreuM8).

Although Malcolm X did not ponder such gender particularities, he persuasively conveyed to his black listeners the discursive power of race in representing and determining social identities and power relations as he laid out the concrete implications. It would not have been uncommon in 1965 for some of the black women who heard Malcolm to think of “boss” as the white women whose homes they cleaned and whose children they cared for. Such black women would have resisted the idea of a woman’s culture or homogenous womanhood, perhaps so much so that, to them, Malcolm’s “white man” encompassed all white people because, as he stated, “all of them mean the same.” Malcolm instilled in his people a race consciousness capable of challenging and rejecting the idea that “‘white’ means free, boss.” That consciousness, as great as it was, did not preclude blurring, if not masking altogether, social relations of power among blacks themselves, especially in regard to gender and sexuality.

I offer this rumination on Malcolm X and the absent presence of women in his speech as an analogy to the problem of normativity, which figures significantly in the metalanguage of race. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians were writing against the backdrop of struggle for blacks’ civil and voting rights, for employment and fair housing, for access to equal education, for justice in the courts, and for black pride and power. Those historians, black and white, overturned the older, racist narratives about slavery, Reconstruction, and race relations in general. Yet few interrogated black history’s portrayal of a monolithic community and experience. Few contemplated whether women’s lives and experiences could simply be enveloped in a narrative overwhelmingly populated by men. History, like Malcolm X, articulated a message of gendered revelations and limitations.

With the rise of the women’s movement in the mid-1960s—including black feminist organizations—there emerged growing recognition that the omission of black women in black history ironically paralleled the omission of black people in American history. In the academy, women’s history grew at an ever-accelerating pace beginning in the 1970s, as second-wave feminism became institutionalized in women’s studies departments and research centers in universities across the nation. Yet the problem of normativity persisted, since the “woman” in women’s history and in such concepts as “womanhood” and “woman’s culture” was white. The point of my article in 1992 was not simply to call attention to the unique intersectionality of black women as historical actors on their own terms. I also criticized monolithic and essentialized renderings of black women, questioning the idea of the “*singularity* of an Afro-American women’s standpoint” (Higginbotham 1992, 271) and stating that “even black women’s history, which has consciously sought to identify the importance of gender relations and the inter-

workings of race, class, and gender, nonetheless reflects the totalizing impulse of race in such concepts as 'black womanhood' or the 'black woman cross-culturally'—concepts that mask real differences of class, status and color, regional culture, and a host of other configurations of difference" (256).

A confluence of factors led to my writing "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." The article's citations testify to the explosion of theoretical studies devoted to race and to gender in many disciplines in the 1980s and 1990s. Race as a category of study could be seen in the work of literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., philosopher Anthony Appiah, historian Barbara Fields, and sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. The conceptual entanglement of discourses of race and the evolution of the white working class could be seen in the rise of whiteness studies, which had its heyday in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> I endeavored to be in conversation with scholarship on race as well as with the fascinating work being done in feminist theory. Through the interpretive frameworks and poststructuralist concepts of European thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, and others, feminist scholars questioned not only the assumptions of the traditional male-dominated social histories but also the assumptions and methodologies of women's history. Feminist theoretical scholarship had grown steadily in sophistication and influence in the academy. By the mid-1980s, and especially with the publication of Joan W. Scott's celebrated article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986) and her book *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), feminist historians took a significant methodological detour toward theory with an emphasis on language, discourse, and textuality. I found compelling feminist theory's interdisciplinarity and breadth of critical interpretive frameworks, but its normative presumptions about gender relations proved unsatisfying. Much of this theory disregarded the determining effects of race.

As the forum contributors discuss, I stood among several black women scholars who were developing new analytical frameworks in the 1980s and 1990s. For me, theory was never the sole domain of white women scholars or European philosophers, psychoanalysts, and semioticians. I learned equally from the conceptual and theoretical models of black women's historians, and here I am thinking of the brilliant analyses of Darlene Clark Hine on the "culture of dissemblance" (1989), Elsa Barkley Brown on "womanist consciousness" (1989b) and on conceptualizing and teaching history through the metaphor of quilting (1989a), Nell Irvin Painter on "Truth in Photographs" as Sojourner Truth and as historical accuracy (1996, 185–99), and Tera W. Hunter on female resistance as "blues aesthetic"

<sup>2</sup> See Roediger (1991), Ignatiev (1995), Hale (1998), and Jacobson (1998).

(1997, 168–86).<sup>3</sup> Tension even arose between blacks and whites at women’s history conferences. Some black women historians, and more prominently black women in the field of religious studies, adopted the concept of womanism in order to distinguish themselves and their analysis from feminism (Barkley Brown 1989b).

The subject of race was not purely academic. The early 1990s were marked by widespread media coverage of incidents of police brutality, particularly the March 1991 beating of Rodney King, which had been videotaped. The image of a faltering King being pummeled by several white policemen, even while on the ground, proved to be a precursor to the visualization via phone cameras of police brutality today and also a precursor of the judicial system’s response, since the Simi Valley jury acquitted the policemen of felonious assault in April 1992. In 1991 the force of race in subsuming gender conflict took on new meaning during the televised Senate Judiciary Committee’s hearings on the confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. The Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill controversy kept the public fixated on her accusation of sexual harassment and his accusation of a “high-tech lynching” (in Morrison 1992, 50, 69). The hearings appeared to galvanize white women more than any other group, leaving Cornel West to write in his iconic *Race Matters*, “what was most disturbing was the low level of political discussion in black America about the hearings—a crude discourse about race and gender that bespeaks a failure of nerve of black leadership” (1994, 35).<sup>4</sup> At this time, my late husband, the federal judge A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., published his “Open Letter to Clarence Thomas” (1992), the first of several articles critical of Justice Thomas’s ideas and judicial opinions in regard to Supreme Court cases that dealt with race.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the election of Barack Obama to two terms as president (a reality I could never have imagined in 1992), America remains far from a post-racial society. What I described in 1992 as “an entire system of cultural pre-

<sup>3</sup> See also the entire special issue of *Signs* titled “Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women’s Lives” (Morgen 1989), in which Hine’s and Barkley Brown’s works appear.

<sup>4</sup> In her contribution to Toni Morrison’s (1992) edited collection *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power*, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1992) notes the greater acceptance of Thomas than Hill in the black community immediately after the hearing, arguing that his “high-tech lynching” metaphor actually helped to increase his approval rating. An earlier version of West’s essay on Clarence Thomas also appeared in Morrison’s *Race-ing Justice* (390–401) before appearing in his *Race Matters*.

<sup>5</sup> A. Leon Higginbotham Jr.’s “An Open Letter to Justice Clarence Thomas from a Federal Judicial Colleague” (1992) also appeared in Morrison’s *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Justice* (1992, 3–39).

conceptions" (Higginbotham 1992, 259) appears now in the black urban lexicon as "racial profiling," "implicit bias," and "white privilege." The memory of racial violence in the history of this nation has been reawakened. Public awareness of injustice appreciably heightened after the 2012 fatal shooting of black teenager Trayvon Martin while he was walking home from a convenience store in his father's Florida neighborhood and especially after the subsequent acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman, a neighborhood-watch volunteer. Police shootings of unarmed African Americans, including twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland in 2014, have stirred a new social activism in cities throughout the nation. Racial disparities in income, employment, education, health, and incarceration explain, to some extent, why current scholarship in African American history continues to bring race prominently into analyses of power and also why black women's historians have largely refrained from relying on a reductionist male/female dichotomy.

Like other generations of historians, the current generation of scholars finds new historical content, new subject matter, and new perspective by bringing the vital issues and burning questions of the present to the study of the past. And they integrate their own conceptualizations and those of others into narratives that expose racialized constructions of power and subordination, as well as difference and conflict.<sup>6</sup> Equally important, the new scholarship exposes the power of race to give focus and meaning to highly influential disciplinary trends, the "turns" in history, so to speak. Today race as a tool of analysis dominates certain new fields. This is especially true of the carceral turn in history. The "power of race to mean" also figures significantly in the increasingly visible historical studies of health and of sexuality. In connecting the then and now of the metalanguage, I find these three topics especially illuminating.

In 1992, I posited that "the most effective tool in the discursive welding of race and class proved to be segregation in its myriad institutional and customary forms" (Higginbotham 1992, 260). Today, I would add (borrowing from legal scholar Michelle Alexander [2010]) that incarceration is the new Jim Crow. Harsher sentencing and the burgeoning prison industry in America since the 1990s provide the impetus for historians to go in search of black criminalization in the past. Historian Elizabeth Hinton writes that "regardless of socioeconomic status, African Americans are more likely to serve prison or jail time than any other racial group in the United States" (2016, 5). The criminalization of race, a vibrant growth field in

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Said (1993, xx) on "rival geographies" and Scott (1990) on the "hidden transcript" both are crucial to Stephanie M. H. Camp's spatial analysis of escapes by enslaved women (2004, 2, 7, 12–34).

scholarly circles of late, has a far older scholarly existence. The formulation of ideas of black criminality, according to historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2010), was an integral part of the origins of the social sciences—in the development of statistical analysis and survey data in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The ideas of social scientists provided intellectual heft and legitimacy to the Southern system of penal labor and the high arrest rate for blacks. Attributing criminal traits to blacks as a group facilitated the arrest of black men, women, and children for the smallest crimes. Their arrests undergirded the convict lease system, which allowed Southern state governments to raise revenue by providing the labor of prisoners to private companies and planters. Under harsh conditions, they worked in chain gangs on the roads; in railroad camps, mines, turpentine farms, and brickyards; and in various types of industrial work.

There were far more incarcerated black men than women in the early twentieth century. This continues to be true in the present and explains the smaller amount of research on the experiences of black women convicts. Thus Kelley's (2017) historiographical discussion on violence and imprisonment is particularly valuable for revealing how the metalanguage of race gives life to the carceral turn in African American women's history. I would like to signal historian Talitha L. LeFlouria's (2015) contribution to this new scholarship. LeFlouria describes a previously ignored group, namely black women in convict lease camps and chain gangs in Georgia. Her brilliant conceptualization of "social rape" (88) rethinks and unpacks gender and sexual identities in the process of forcible defeminization and masculinization. Social rape, according to LeFlouria, constituted a racially gendered form of physical and emotional oppression used in the state-enforced process of stripping away of black women's "choice and *right* to be socially recognized as women" (88).

The growing field of critical studies of health and medicine reveals the ways racial categories appeared as natural and appropriate in the shifting discourses surrounding the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Hunter (1997), for example, follows the increasingly racialized and sexualized medical understandings of tuberculosis (TB), commonly called the "Negro servant disease" (187) by whites at the turn of the century. Although TB was not associated with the enslaved, after emancipation white Southern physicians advanced the belief that black women's inherently lewd sexuality constituted the root cause of their contaminating bodies. White sufferers of TB received sympathy; black women met with contempt even more often than infected black men, since black women worked more closely with whites in their households. Hunter writes, "tuberculosis signified more than a purely physiological condition. The disease became a medium for 'framing'



tensions in labor and race relations, with the rhetoric cloaked in scientific and medical legitimacy" (187). This description of the black female body as always already pathologized rested on the widely held medical opinion that black women had libidinous natures and a high proclivity for venereal disease and TB. The same medical language was used to describe black women convicts, according to LeFlouria. Racial science in the late nineteenth century depicted in starkly racist language black women's and black men's pelvic anatomy, describing "'animallike' genitalia" (2015, 50). Racial comparisons included differences in the shape of black and white women's breasts and buttocks. Such phenotypic distinctions, according to LeFlouria, "furnished additional 'proof' of the Negro's inferiority, solidifying his or her place at the base in the sequence of humanity" (51). In the language of medical and social science, then, race defined black women's and men's identities as sexually deviant, diseased, and criminal. There is indeed a parallel between the racial imbrication of sexuality for diseased blacks in the nineteenth century and the LGBTQ persons with HIV/AIDS whom Bailey and Stallings (2017) describe today.

Similarly, my discussion in 1992 of James Jones's *Bad Blood* (1981, 11–29) recounted the callous medical practices of the Public Health Service's (PHS) Tuskegee syphilis experiment, which was also based on the presumption of black men's sexual deviance. Such a presumption made possible the ultimately lethal violence against these black men with syphilis. New scholarship on the racialization of health expands upon this interpretation by raising the issue of racial disparities in access to adequate health care. Susan Reverby's history of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment addresses both points: "The assumptions of racial difference shaped the Study's science from its beginning. . . . The historical fact is that the men were not given a choice and they were intentionally lied to, because the PHS doctors thought they were doing little harm to people who expected to get little attention" (2009, 232–33). New scholarship by Jonathan Metzl (2009), Jay Garcia (2012), and Gabriel N. Mendes (2015) on racialization and mental disease insightfully identifies mental health disparities between blacks and whites, the ever-present problems of racialized diagnoses, and blacks' access to care.<sup>7</sup> Harlem's Lafargue Clinic for the mentally ill, which operated in the 1940s and early 1950s, about which Mendes writes, stands out as an exceptional antiracist model. In stark contrast to the Tuskegee experiment, this clinic's therapeutic care for poor blacks connected directly to the struggle for racial equality.

<sup>7</sup> For an early discussion of racial distinctiveness in regard to mental illness, see Gilman (1985).

Finally, the turn to black queer theory and black sexuality studies signals a transformative moment in the academy. Indeed this field has grown rapidly since the turn of the twenty-first century, as seen in the faculty, courses offered, and students trained in departments of literature, film, sociology, anthropology, and performance studies, as well as in interdisciplinary departments such as African American studies, American studies, and women's studies. I believe, however, that it is not an exaggeration to say that topics of black sexuality, informed by black queer theory, continue to be sorely underrepresented in African American women's history and in the larger field of African American history, despite the existence of studies of prostitution, marriage and the family, and urban history.<sup>8</sup> When sex and sexuality are explicitly interrogated by historians, this usually occurs in contexts of victimization or other issues related to racial discrimination and power relations: in examinations of health and racial science, the lynching of black men, the rape of black women, the culture of dissemblance, the politics of respectability, and prostitution born of the vice districts in racially segregated areas. The omission of what Bailey and Stallings term "strategies of the speculative and the imaginative" (2017, 619) reflects, to a large extent, methodologies in the discipline of history that tend to follow paradigms and preexisting frames of reference, such as overt protest as well as hidden or everyday forms of resistance, state power, cultural and community life, social movements (inclusive of gay rights, as described in the forum essay by Carroll [2017]), and the social and political conditions and consciousness that give rise to movements. These frames of reference guide the content of the essays by Randolph (2017) and Gore (2017) and lead Gore to articulate her commitment "to writing history [that is attentive to] the intersection of race, gender, politics, and power" (609). I believe the same frames of reference characterize the commitment of Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor (2016, 165) to the scholarly treatment of the "largely queer and female" face of the Black Lives Matter movement and of other new groups that represent contemporary black activism against state violence. This activism originated in response to the painful reality of police killings of black lives—whether straight, queer, or transsexual; whether sitting in a car, standing on a corner, or running down a street; whether baby boomer, millennial, or preteen. The police shootings and choke holds have made no distinctions.

The dearth of black sexuality theory in African American women's history, specifically in regard to the body as a site of pleasure, does not mean

<sup>8</sup> One exception is Mumford (2011).

that no historians have addressed this topic.<sup>9</sup> As Kelley (2017) notes, two exceptions to the traditional treatment of the racial sexual body can be found in Hunter's (1997, 168–86) groundbreaking analysis of "dancing and carousing" in her book on Southern black laboring women (mostly domestic servants) after the Civil War and Stephanie M. H. Camp's equally groundbreaking analysis of the "the intoxication of pleasurable amusement" (2004, 60–92) in her book on enslaved women's patterns of escape. Offering innovative engagements with black women as sexual beings, Hunter and Camp remain within the analytical framework of everyday resistance, specifically the analysis of infrapolitics as developed by James C. Scott (1990). Both historians situate their work within the larger project of interpreting racial contestation over the ownership of black laboring bodies.

Neither Hunter nor Camp had published their books before 1992, so their absence from my article does not mean that the concept of race as a metalanguage—as a fluid set of overlapping and dialogic discourses and as a global sign that gives power to a host of expressions and to myriad aspects of life—in any way forecloses discussions of pleasure, the erotic, or other affective moments and movements. I say this with confidence in the generation of historians who recently attained doctoral degrees or are still writing dissertations. For example, Emily A. Owens, whose PhD dissertation I advised, combines historical methodology with black queer theory and black sexuality studies in her examination of African American women in pre-Civil War New Orleans. Attending to "fantasies of consent," Owens interrogates the historic relationship between pleasure and violence, and she explores the ways black female sexuality creates, negotiates, performs, and mobilizes pleasure with(in) structures of law and violence (Owens, forthcoming). Other examples of recent PhDs who combine historical methodologies and queer theory are Jessica Johnson and Vanessa Holden, founders of the Queering Slavery Working Group.<sup>10</sup>

The critique of pleasure raises an important and arguably more overlooked aspect of the metalanguage of race. In describing the metalanguage as a doubled-voiced discourse—one of oppression but also one of liberation—I find that the latter voice is too often underemphasized or misunderstood. I wrote in 1992: "Blacks took 'race' and empowered its language with their own meaning and intent" (Higginbotham 1992, 267).

<sup>9</sup> At present, theoretical work on black sexuality, much like black queer theory and critical race theory, is found less in history departments than in black studies and women and gender studies departments. For a discussion of theoretical studies of black pleasure and sexuality, see Nash (2012).

<sup>10</sup> See the group's website at <http://qswg.tumblr.com/>.

In my article I used the example of terms like “race man,” “race woman,” and “race work,” all of which convey a sense of dignity and honor related to vindicating black people, or “vindicating the race,” as was commonly heard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such usages complement what I called the politics of respectability.<sup>11</sup> In 1992 this was my emphasis when I asserted that race “leaders argued that ‘proper’ and ‘respectable’ behavior proved blacks worthy of equal civil and political rights” (271–72).

But there are other words that imply a different message and one that revels in affective scripts and spaces. They, too, function in service to a consciousness of commonality, to sensibilities of cultural coherence, and to feelings of individual and collective self-appreciation. Perhaps the most recognizable is the word “soul,” as in “soul man,” “soul sister,” “soul brother,” “soul food,” “soul music,” “Queen of Soul,” or the title of the television program *Soul Train*. The individuals and things that “got soul” are associated with blackness. While “soul” may be used less today than in years past, few Americans mistake the word’s association, despite the flawed and essentializing racial logic. (There are nonblack musicians whose “soulful” sound and style have led to their being initially confused for black.) And yet, we think we know soul when we see it because of its beat, its feeling, its movement.

This is why humor can be useful for theorizing pleasure, pain, eroticism, and black sexuality. Decades before Gates wrote of the “signifying monkey” (1988) or Glenda R. Carpio (2008) unpacked the irreverent humor about slavery in several art forms, historian Lawrence Levine (1977, 358) wrote of the black “community of laughter,” taking seriously black humorous tales about injustice and lynch mobs as well as highly sexualized stories of pain, loss, and “baad” heroes.<sup>12</sup> Playing the dozens, woofing, and regaling one’s listeners with stories of Shine, John Henry, and Stagolee are but a few examples of the performance of racializing discourses of sexuality, gender, and class. Such humor is expressed through conversing, dueling, lampooning, improvising, eroticizing, and definitely historicizing, always at the level of lived experience—in clubs, in prisons, on street corners, in beauty

<sup>11</sup> See my theoretical critique of the dually progressive and conservative elements of the politics of respectability (Higginbotham 1993, 185–229).

<sup>12</sup> Discussion of sexuality appears throughout Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977, 298–440), Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), and Carpio’s *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008). Levine adds yet a third “a” as in “baaad,” as instructive for phonetic purposes. However, the more common spelling is “baad.” See also Stephane Dunn’s *Baad Bitches* (2008) and Anand Prahald’s “Baad” (2016).

parlors, barbershops, homes, schools, military bases, and even churches. In the multiple and varied cultural discourses of African American humor, the metalanguage of race does its best political and apolitical work. Now I urge more scholarly consideration of the complicated liberating voice of the metalanguage of race. It, too, is incredibly tireless in its totalizing and subsuming of other social relations, in the blurring of its own involvement, in its masking of difference, in its technologies of power, and most of all in its constant adaptation to sites of dialogic exchange and contestation. And yet these very qualities have given the discipline of history and African American women's history, in particular, their creativity and imagination.

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