

# Introduction

## Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy

*Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy* explores the connections between the traditions of black feminism and continental philosophy. Several of the chapters collected here use resources in continental philosophy to engage in discussions about gender and race and/or use black feminism to shed new light on themes within continental philosophy. Others draw from both traditions in a call for the further development of black feminist philosophy and black feminist ethics. Contributors include both women of color and white women as well as both established and emerging scholars. Overall, the project has been conceived as a discourse between black feminism and continental philosophy that encourages the reader to consider what these traditions offer one another or can learn from one another. The purpose of this book is *not* to argue that continental philosophy should provide the justification or conceptual framework for black feminism, as if black feminism had not yet established itself as an autonomous theoretical discourse, and as if it would stand in need of a conceptual grounding. Rather, this volume seeks to engage in a critical and constructive dialogue over how black feminism, as both a discourse and a practice, has thus far been treated/untreated in the space of continental philosophy and over the resources that it may offer to the continental tradition, in turn.

By addressing black feminist issues specifically within the context of the continental tradition, this book clearly opens up a space for a new and important set of questions to be addressed, including the dialogical tension between race and gender, the negative inscription of the black female body and sexuality, the black female as other, the denial of agency, voice, and language to black women, the exclusion of black women from the definition of woman, along with issues of performativity, sisterhood, and community within the black feminist tradition. Such a project is pertinent, even crucial, at this historical juncture, not only because the face of philosophy in general is slowly changing to include more women and people of color, but also because there is a small but critical mass of black women philosophers emerging on the philosophy scene.

These changes increasingly pose new questions for the identity of philosophy, including continental philosophy and feminist philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

The history of black women in philosophy in the United States is short but significant. Joyce Mitchell Cook made her mark by becoming the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy just over forty years ago in 1965. She earned her degree from Yale University and specialized in value theory. The first African American woman to be tenured in philosophy is Adrian Piper who earned her Ph.D. from Harvard in 1981. In addition to having John Rawls as a supervisor, Piper also studied Kant and Hegel with Dieter Heinrich. Her specializations and publications in philosophy have been on Kant, ethics, and metaethics. Anita Allen-Castellitto is the first African American woman to hold both a Ph.D. in philosophy (University of Michigan) and a J.D. (Harvard University). The growing number of black women in philosophy led to the establishment of the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers by Kathryn T. Gines in 2007. But as this is being written, there are still fewer than thirty black women (including black women who are not African American) holding a Ph.D. in philosophy and working in a philosophy department in academia. These women have various philosophical interests in both the continental and the analytic traditions. Of course, there are also several black women holding doctorates in other disciplines who are still actively engaged in philosophical scholarship and inquiry.

Today, there is a small but steady increase of women of color who insist on inserting their voices, collectively and individually, into the discipline of philosophy. This, at a time when philosophy has wielded the discourse of the social construction of race and gender, often with a heavy hand, which poses real challenges to acknowledging the concrete existence of these raced, sexed, and gendered women who have raced, sexed, and gendered identities. These women are insisting on inserting their voices at a time when the mantra that race and gender do not exist could again attempt to displace the presence of those long made absent from philosophical life and thought. Even as these mantras aim to address past deficiencies in thought regarding the nature and place of many displaced groups, women of color are seeking to make themselves known. We must, for we cannot go another hundred years without acknowledging the ever-present relationship between philosophy, even continental philosophy, and its outcasts.

The lengthy history of black feminism in the United States has taken up how race, gender, class, religion, education, labor/work, and sexuality are interrelated aspects of black women's identities. This black feminist intellectual and activist tradition, going back at least to the early 1830s, has long exposed and confronted the racism of white men *and* women alongside the sexism of black *and* white men while simultaneously making efforts to build coalitions both within and across concrete and imagined boundaries. Early manifestations

of black feminism emerged with black women abolitionists and suffragists. This tradition would persist with the Black Women's Club movement and continue to gain momentum during the civil and women's rights movements. The black feminist literature and scholarship, thought by many to have commenced with the publication of Anna Julia Cooper's *Voice of the South* (1892), would find myriad more voices and gain recognition in the many decades that followed.

In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall notes, "While black feminism is not a monolithic, static ideology, and there is considerable diversity among African American feminists, certain premises are constant."<sup>2</sup> Guy-Sheftall identifies the following five premises of black feminism:

1. Black Women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources;
2. This "triple jeopardy" has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men;
3. Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously;
4. There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other "isms" which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism;
5. Black women's commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.<sup>3</sup>

When black feminism is accurately and historically situated, it becomes clear that it has its own origins, commitments, and trajectories. Still, black women intellectuals have always engaged the important philosophical ideas of their time, utilizing, developing, and critiquing these ideas as they saw fit in order to address concerns of race, gender, and more specifically their place in social systems in which their race, gender, and sexuality designated them as absences from intellectual life. More often than not, their works have been taken to be merely political with little or no basis in philosophical content because of the political goals they hoped to achieve or illuminate.

That black women's intellectual work is absent from the broader philosophical canons is a sign of the long history of philosophy's exclusionist tendencies. Indeed even today Beauvoir's *Second Sex* is not included in anthologies of classical philosophical texts despite its foundational use of existential thought

and principles to describe and critique the role of “woman” in philosophy and the particularized situation of women. *The Second Sex* was a groundbreaking work that not only could temper the inclination to see existentialism as an extreme form of apolitical individualism but also was an important foundation for a whole school of thought known now in the American context as French feminism. Even as Europe’s well-known female intellectuals are still on the fringes of the canons, so too are black women’s intellectual work cast out beyond the fringes.

If all the women are white and all the blacks are men,<sup>4</sup> black women’s voices are lost to philosophy’s pretensions to universality, even in what we understand to be the continental tradition. Caught in a nexus of scholarship dominated by white men in the broader continental tradition, by white women in continental feminism, and by black men in philosophy of race, black women’s scholarship, which has not only been informed by these areas but also has informed these areas of their limitations, is cast out of philosophy’s light. And yet we find that philosophy, and in this case the continental tradition, has much to offer.

Like black feminism, what has come to be called “continental philosophy” is neither static nor monolithic. The term is often used to describe philosophy on the rise in post–World War II Europe—particularly existentialism and phenomenology in Germany and France—that eventually spread to Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. As black feminism is habitually thought in contradistinction (or even in contradiction) with white feminism, continental philosophy is frequently juxtaposed with analytic philosophy. In “What Is Continental Philosophy,” Simon Critchley points out, “Continental philosophy is a highly eclectic and disparate series of intellectual currents that could hardly be said to amount to a unified tradition.”<sup>5</sup> According to Critchley, “there exists and has existed, at least since the Second World War, a *de facto* distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy. What must be emphasized here is that this distinction is essentially a *professional self-description*.”<sup>6</sup> Of interest for this volume are some of the central threads, questions, figures, and texts that are prominent in continental philosophy.

### Charting the Terrain of Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy

The chapters in this volume on black feminism and continental thought have taken what some may see as the incommensurability between philosophy and black women hoping to find similarities where others only see difference. We have sought to be bold and to defy the established conventions and themes of most philosophical thought. Here the reader will find new convergences

between Ann duCille and Gilles Deleuze, Patricia Hill Collins and Foucault, Patricia Williams and Merleau-Ponty, to name a few. In what follows, it is suggested that this convergence of black feminism and continental philosophy resembles the creative activity described above as a bending together—a merger—of disparate elements.

Continental philosophy, in spite of its concern with a number of issues relevant to black feminism, has rarely, if ever, engaged black feminism. Continental philosophy, to be sure, offers valuable contributions to understanding issues of agency, subjectivity, the feminine, marginalization, and difference, all of which are relevant to black feminist thought. Yet its approach to these issues does not thematize the black woman *as such* or give voice to the philosophical concerns of black feminists. Since black women remain external or other to the continental tradition, this leads us to ask what resources continental philosophy might offer to black feminism, and conversely, what challenges black feminism might pose to the established patterns of continental philosophy. In taking up these key questions, the essays collected in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy* explore the possible convergences and incommensurable divergences between black feminism and continental philosophy. This convergence is not random or forced but, in some way, natural and necessary. Black feminist and womanist thinkers inevitably address the very same issues of agency, identity, alienation, power, and so on that are raised in much recent continental philosophy. Likewise, from Immanuel Kant to the feminist thinkers of the present, continental philosophy has been engaged, to some extent, with issues of race and gender.

Each of the chapters, in its own unique way, seeks to chart the terrain of continental philosophy and black feminism today. In the design of the book, we did not want the contributors to be constrained by a preestablished set of themes or issues. So, rather than imposing rubrics onto this text, each of the contributions is presented as a freestanding chapter. While remaining independent, the chapters cohere to constitute a collective discourse on both black feminism and continental philosophy. As authors' chapters place race and gender at the forefront of their philosophical engagement, the reader will notice similar themes, questions, and considerations in the authors' attempts to bring the insights of black feminism to bear upon those of continental philosophy. For instance, chapters by Davidson, James, Lee, and Russell place black feminist thinkers in conversation with prominent continental philosophical thinkers and concepts in order to show how continental philosophy can expand and help to further articulate the concerns of black feminism. Specifically, these chapters are important examples of how one can use the conceptual resources of particular continental philosophers and thus illuminate the promise of convergent analyses of continental thought and black feminism to further explore race and gender.

In other chapters, the reader will notice the approach as articulating more of a critique or problematic within continental philosophy which poses limitations for diversity as well as for inclusivity across that diversity. This approach, exemplified in the works of Chanter, West, and Glass, further radicalizes continental philosophy in a way that enables the reader to reenvision or newly vision a radical politics that rethinks humanity, common struggle, and/ or sisterhood once those limitations are addressed.

Last, some authors are more concerned with how canonical philosophical resources within and outside feminism may inhibit or simply cannot address the possibility for creating black feminist philosophy. Chapters by Gines, Mann, Marcano, and Rowe address the critiques and problematics leveled against black feminists in order to consider the conditions for theoretical work that holds race and gender to be important poles of new philosophical work to be done. These chapters highlight the challenges to black feminist philosophical thought either through the philosophy's inability to appropriately address race *and* gender or through contemporary philosophy's eschewing of the concepts of race and gender.

Diane Perpich, in "Black Feminism, Poststructuralism, and the Contested Character of Experience," is keenly aware of the challenges to "unmediated personal experience" posed by continental thinkers such as Beauvoir, Foucault, and Butler. Yet Perpich also notes that nonwhite women (specifically Chicana and black women) have used calls to experience for the purpose of "establishing the authority of the marginalized between these two diametrically opposed positions." Perpich identifies what she calls the "sticking points" and then seeks to "disentangl[e] the question of experience from a broader distrust of postmodernism" while also "considering the epistemological and political dimensions of appeals to experience."

In "Sartre, Beauvoir, and the Race/Gender Analogy: A Case for Black Feminist Philosophy," Kathryn T. Gines examines the issue of intersectionality as it relates to the race/gender analogy and the shortcomings of using racial oppression as an analogy of gender oppression. After outlining the use of the race/gender analogy in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Respectful Prostitute* and Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, Gines points to influences on their analyses from black intellectual Richard Wright. While these influences offer insights into racial oppression, still ignored is the problem of intersecting racial and gender oppression. To address this void Gines highlights two staple themes of black feminism while emphasizing the scholarship of Anna Julia Cooper. The chapter concludes by making the case for the expansion of the philosophy canon to include more black feminist philosophical thinkers and a call for the further development of black feminist philosophy.

"The Difference That Difference Makes: Black Feminism and Philosophy" explores the problems and possibilities of thinking through what it might mean

to pursue black feminism within the context and confines of the discipline of philosophy. Donna-Dale L. Marcano frames these problems from two separate vantage points, from within and without the discipline of philosophy. First, she addresses the complications for writing through a subtopic, black feminism, that is challenged by contemporary articulations of both feminism and race theory, which both hold that race and sex are socially constructed. Second, Marcano tackles the problems and critiques of philosophy and black feminism in general by black female authors who worry that theory always forecloses the articulation of difference among black women themselves. Marcano underscores that philosophy's grip on assuming its universality begs the question of whether the particularity of a black female identity can ever be seen within the domain of philosophy, and as another viewpoint, from which the fundamental questions of philosophy are confronted. Ultimately, she insists that the question of what is philosophy continues to be rethought and developed.

Sophocles' *Antigone* can be said to be one of the founding texts of continental philosophical tradition. Interpreted by Hegel and Freud, and thus scholars of the psychoanalytic and continental feminist traditions, *Antigone* has provided an analysis for the founding moments of Law, patriarchy, familial bonds, and incest taboos. Yet, in "Antigone's Other Legacy: Slavery and Colonialism in *Tegònni*: An African Antigone," Tina Chanter points out that the history of scholarly work, including Hegel's reading, has failed to attend to the dynamic of slavery present in the text. She asks, "What would the tradition have looked like had it been capable of attending to the character Antigone's apparently unproblematic endorsement of slavery?" Chanter explores the Nigerian playwright Femi Ọsafisan's *Tegònni*, a version of *Antigone* set in apartheid Africa, to show that the marker of race that qualifies some as human and others as not quite human illustrates the possibility that incest prohibitions are intimately tied to racial prohibitions. In doing so, Chanter forces us to consider how attending to race and slavery, to who is considered human or not, may have altered the philosophical tradition that celebrates *Antigone* as a founding text.

In "L Is for . . . : Longing and Becoming in *The L Word's* Racialized Erotic," Aimee Carrillo Rowe begins with a discussion of the dubious position of the "post"—that is, "postracism, postfeminism, postidentity, postmodernism"—in current U.S. "cultural politics." Rowe argues, "The organizing principle through which these post-'s cohere is marked by the loosening of boundaries of difference, a slide into a potentially productive, and potentially dangerous, uncertainty about the politics of looking." To this end, Rowe analyzes the effects on racial difference—especially in the form of interracial relationships and bodies that are "ambiguously racialized"—in the era of the "post."

"Race and Feminist Standpoint Theory" by Anika Maaza Mann revisits the debates surrounding black feminism and feminist standpoint theory. Using examples ranging from nineteenth-century black feminism to the more

contemporary 2008 Democratic primary elections, Mann contributes new insights into the significance of intersectionality and group formation in relation to standpoint epistemology. Using resources from black feminism in the work of Patricia Hill Collins and from existential phenomenology in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Mann critiques calls for universal sisterhood and the notion of a single woman's/women's standpoint proposed by white feminist philosophers such as Sandra Harding and Sonia Kruks. Mann argues, against objections raised by Harding and Kruks, that a continued development of black feminist standpoint theory is still needed, and such a project should not be reduced to identity politics.

Maria del Guadalupe Davidson's "Black Feminist Subjectivity: Ann duCille and Gilles Deleuze" evaluates the postmodern identification of black women as other. Starting from the work of black feminist thinker Ann duCille, Davidson suggests that just as the modern project has been shown to harbor violence against the other, "a similar violence is likewise carried over into the postmodern exaltation of otherness, in spite of its best intentions." From the vantage point of duCille and many other black feminists, postmodernism's othering of black women has further "solidified" black women's position as errant and marginalized. Davidson then calls on the work of Gilles Deleuze, specifically his notion of the *fold*, as a possible resource for resisting black women's status as other and developing an account of radical black female subjectivity.

Despite awareness and acknowledgment that "aesthetic agency and pleasure are, in the West, deeply racialized and gendered," Robin James contends that "recent attempts to rethink the politics of aesthetic pleasure have not adequately addressed the intersection of race, gender, *and* the aesthetic." Her essay "From Receptivity to Transformation: On the Intersection of Race, Gender, and the Aesthetic in Contemporary Continental Philosophy" underscores the critical merits of contemporary continental philosophy's attempt at deconstructing the racialized and gendered metaphysics of the aesthetic paradigm. James pays particular attention to the insights of the works of Julia Kristeva, Robert Gooding-Williams, and Angela Davis in order to theorize the intersection of race and gender with the aesthetic. She argues that despite the limitations of these accounts, they can "provide us with a powerful diagnostic tool to apply to contemporary cultural politics."

In "Extending Black Feminist Sisterhood in the Face of Violence: Fanon, White Women, and Veiled Muslim Women" Traci C. West seeks to "conceptualize a notion of sisterhood that extends to women whose social status is distinctly other than that of African American women, such as sexually objectified white women or veiled Muslim women in a foreign nation." Toward this end, West reflects on a black feminist method placed in conversation with Frantz Fanon. She explores both the theoretical tools available in Fanon's scholarship



(underscoring, for example, how he is a “resource for crafting a black Diasporic framework [that] destabilizes the Eurocentric continental emphasis that dominates Western religious studies and philosophy, especially in the subfield of Christian studies) as well as the limitations of Fanon (explaining that “some of Fanon’s reflections on race, gender, and sexual violence include disturbing depictions of women’s culpability that I reject”). Rather than presenting her own project as incompatible with Fanon’s, West considers how the projects might productively converge in a way that allows “possibilities to emerge for a more expansive black feminist ethic.” She proposes a common freedom struggle that does not ignore the realities of racism and an antiviolenace ethic that is “built by embracing the truths of how certain forms of complicity in dehumanizing practices and histories of subjugation divide us and hide the means of supporting one another’s self-determining spiritual, bodily, political, and socioeconomic well-being.”

In her essay “Madness and Judiciousness: A Phenomenological Reading of a Black Woman’s Encounter with a Saleschild” Emily S. Lee employs Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “horizon” as a “conceptual framework to understand the depth of the racial association we make during our perceptions of our own and others’ embodiment.” Using as her example the well-known encounter between Patricia Williams and a Benetton store employee in which Williams was refused entry into the store, Lee argues that despite the critiques that such a notion naturalizes racist and sexist beliefs and behaviors, the framework of the horizon shows us how meanings and associations attached to embodied subjects are both sedimented and contested. Indeed, as Lee explains, Patricia Williams seems to be “doing” phenomenology in her account of the encounter; and, by utilizing the notion of horizon, we can account not only for the behavior of the “saleschild” but how in a world with given meanings attached to bodies, the saleschild’s refusal is taken to be reasonable and judicious even as William’s response is taken to be madness.

Camisha Russell’s “Black American Sexuality and the Repressive Hypothesis: Reading Patricia Hill Collins with Michel Foucault” puts Hill Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics* in conversation with Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. In particular, Russell is interested in the ways in which the repressive hypothesis, the notion of confession, and the emergence of populations as targets of government intervention in Foucault might contribute to Hill Collins’ analysis of black sexuality and potentially create new possibilities for developing a genealogy of black sexuality in America. Additionally, Russell examines connections between Foucault’s notion of power and Hill Collins’ notion of controlling images. She concludes that “while her analysis must necessarily go beyond what Foucault has to say there about racism and resistance, Collins indeed has every reason to follow Foucault in his rejection of the ‘repressive hypothesis’ and turn instead

to a more Foucauldian, productive model of power, exploiting his insights to give her own arguments better explanatory force.”

In the final chapter, “Calling All Sisters: Continental Philosophy and Black Feminist Thinkers,” Kathy Glass shows how black feminist thinkers and continental feminists have both actively participated in “feminist politics” and “community building strategies.” Though they share similar concerns, Glass contends that they remain divided along racial, cultural, and even economic lines. The French feminist tradition, according to Glass, is marked by “racial exclusion” and an adherence to patriarchal patterns that have complicated the relationship between these two groups. Using as a resource the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, Glass seeks to establish a “transracial sisterhood,” which she suggests is necessary if the “radical social transformation” that both black feminists and French Feminists advocate is to occur.

Convergence is “the action or fact of converging; movement directed toward or terminating in the same point (called the “point of convergence”).” It is derived from the Latin prefix *com-*, which means “together,” and the Latin noun, *-vergere*, meaning “to bend.”<sup>77</sup> Convergences can take place either as matters of fact or as the result of deliberate actions. As matters of fact, convergences occur when two disparate things come together naturally, while deliberate actions produce convergences by bending two disparate things so that they can be joined together. If this volume signifies a convergence between black feminism and continental philosophy, then an obvious question is how this particular convergence has come to take place: has it occurred as a matter of fact or as a deliberate choice? A simple reply to this question is that the convergences between black feminism and continental philosophy explored in this volume have occurred in both ways: as a matter of fact and a calculated, deliberate choice. As a matter of fact, black feminists have frequently used the resources made available through the continental tradition, such as the critique of agency and issues related to embodiment and identity. Due to the value of these connections, the convergences explored in this volume also result from a calculated and deliberate choice on the part of the contributors to take up this connection explicitly and to pursue it further. In either case, the key point is that convergences are essentially generative of new meanings. By bringing together what some might consider two disparate fields of inquiry, something distinct—a *new* space for inquiry and a *new* combination of concepts—can be created. As such, the convergences generated in this text do not seek to end the conversation or to act as the definitive discourse; instead this text strives to open up a neoteric space for critical analysis and to provide a model for further investigation in the convergences between black feminism and continental philosophy.

## Notes

1. For detailed information on the lives and philosophies of Cook, Piper, Allen, and other black women in philosophy, see George Yancy's *African American Philosophers, Seventeen Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
2. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New, 1995).
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. A reference to *All of the Women Are White, All Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1982).
5. Simon Critchley, "What Is Continental Philosophy?" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 5, no. 3: 350.
6. *Ibid.*, 348; emphasis in original.
7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online, "Convergence."