

# Black Women's Political Labor

## An Introduction

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Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, widely lauded as a foundational Black feminist text, speaks to Black women's self-definition and self-actualization in the face of the interlocking and multiple forms of oppressions they confront in their daily lives. The novel foregrounds a number of recurring symbols and motifs that communicate this larger theme of Black women's self-actualization, including, for instance, the protagonist Janie Crawford's hair, which serves as a symbol and site of bodily and community control, and the mule. At the beginning of the novel, Nanny, Janie's grandmother, expounds on the complexity of race-gender politics that (some) Black women encounter. In her counsel to her granddaughter, Nanny states:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (Hurston 1990, 14)

In this conversation with young Janie, Nanny offers a nuanced but incomplete understanding of Black women's often perceived role in race-gender, social, economic, and political hierarchies. Specifically, Nanny speaks to the ways in which Black women's labor is often used in the service of others. Furthermore, she speaks to a form of mistreatment and betrayal of the mule, and thus through this metaphor she speaks to how Black women are represented and treated by those both within and outside their racial group. This appropriative labor extends to emotional labor, a theme powerfully examined by Audre Lorde (2007) in her analysis of the use of Black women's emotional labor. In a similar vein, bell hooks (1995) suggests that even Black women's anger is pressed into service of the liberation of others and not themselves.

Despite its accuracy in capturing the appropriation of Black women's labor, Nanny's analysis is only partially complete, a fact that Janie recognizes at the end of her own epic journey. Whatever external exigencies constrain or coerce Black women's labor, it is evident that internal psychological, ethical, and economic commitments also propel Black women's labor. That is to say, in whatever circumstances they may labor, as self-defining and self-authorized agents, Black women are equally, if not primarily, motivated and self-directed to till their own fields. Through this largely unexplored dimension of the mule as metaphor, Hurston depicts and celebrates the process of Janie engaged in the process of self-actualization. For example, Janie's first two husbands, Logan and Joe, own mules, and these mules metaphorically embodied their treatment of Janie. Her first husband, Logan, overworked his mule in the same manner in which he overworked Janie. Joe, the second husband, treated his mule as a showpiece; similarly, Janie was used as a symbol of his stature and self-importance. In both cases, neither man valued Janie for herself. By the end of the novel, the mule disappears from the story. And what we are left with is Janie engaged in a relationship with Tea Cake, a man who values her as a partner.

The mule is often thought of as stubborn in addition to being a beast of burden. Mules, stereotypically or not, are thought of as possessing a stubborn and determined spirit. The mule is constructed as being resistant to the "master's" efforts to tame and control. As such, via this metaphor, Hurston is offering a particular view of Black womanhood—one that is stubbornly committed to realizing Black women's sense of self in spite of oppressive structures that seek to control. Within the metaphor of the Black woman as the mule who is ploughing or tilling<sup>1</sup> for others, Hurston offers a complex and rich analysis of the intersection of race, class, gender, and other forces in the lived realities of Black women.

As a way of critiquing and disrupting this appropriation of Black women's labor, Hurston, in the vein of Black feminists, questions the use of Black women's labor—physical, emotional and political—in liberation efforts by bringing to the forefront the positionality of Black women. Drawing on the metaphor of the mule and its use as a means of production, Black women academics and others have asked: For whom are Black women tilling? Is their labor for their liberation or solely to be used as part of the liberation efforts of others? And how do Black women envision the manifestations of their political labor?

In this collection, building on the interventions of other Black feminists who seek to highlight the appropriation of Black women's labor and Black women's responses, we deploy the metaphor of tilling to be understood in its broadest sense as the cultivation and preparation of fields or landscapes to optimize various types of production/productive processes. Specifically, we highlight tilling as a metaphor for political work, whether through formal or informal means, such as elections or grassroots organizing, respectively. This allows us to ask: How have Black women creatively responded to the challenges and opportunities with which they have been confronted in various geographical and political contexts and epochs? We also examine the ways in which scholars who examine Black political women have tilled their own intellectual fields, using their energies to question what constitutes knowledge and its various means of production and its ends, thereby creating space for investigating Black political women. In circles, especially in political science, where Political Man (Lipset 1960) and Political Woman (Kirkpatrick 1974) are still seen as White, and in the study of Black politics, where the focus is often on Black men, we examine intellectual work forged about Black Political Women in the African Diaspora (Prestage 1991).

Diasporic Black women indeed have a long history of political engagement. Although there is no one Black women's political identity, their centuries of efforts have sought to liberate Black women and other oppressed groups from economic, social, health, housing, cultural, and incarceration-related inequalities. To map and further clarify Black women's status along a number of fronts, as well as their efforts at social change, scholars across various disciplines have studied the mutually constitutive forces that shape Diasporic Black women's lives, most notably under the marker of intersectionality (see, e.g., Crenshaw 1989, 1990–1991; Berger and Guidroz 2009; May 2015; and Collins and Bilge 2016). Within political science in particular, despite a growing body of work on race and gender politics and intersectionality, extant research from both Black politics and women and politics as subfields tend to marginalize the voices of Black women. Such research, in some

cases even if it relies on intersectionality—a paradigm developed by Black women and other women of color to address their oppression—pays little attention to the lives of Black women. Thus, we are left with the question: How do Diasporic Black women engage in politics? *Black Women in Politics* addresses this larger question.

In what follows, we situate *Black Women in Politics* in terms of its contributions both to the discipline of political science and to the interdisciplinary study of Black women in politics in areas such as literature and health policy as a whole. Debates concerning intersectionality are of particular relevance to the two general audiences we engage, and we first claim what we believe is our stake as Black feminist political scientists in this regard. We then extend the metaphor of tilling by turning to an examination of the ways in which the author of each chapter “tills” new intellectual ground by creating or expanding intellectual space through her chapter’s contribution.

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a key frame for the book because of its connection to securing democratic values. Radical democratic theory presupposes substantive equality, not only on an individual level, but also for groups and communities within and among nations. This focus on substantive equality emphasizes social justice, and this commitment is one, as the chapters in this collection attest, that resounds throughout the lives and political efforts of Black Diasporic women.

In political science, scholars have explored a range of important issues that have derived from an “intersectional approach” (Berger and Guidroz 2009). We have expanded our definitions of what constitutes the political (Prestage 1991; Braxton 1994). We have examined the connections between stereotypes, symbolism, and narratives regarding Black womanhood and the production of ideology and creation of public policy (see, e.g., King 1977; Lewis 1985; Hancock 2004; Alexander-Floyd 2007; Jordan-Zachery 2009; Lewis 2016). We have explored the relationship between feminism and political consciousness (Simien 2006), as well a range of factors, such as gender, class, and sexuality, in the production of Black political ideology (see, e.g., Willoughby-Herard 2008). We have studied political movements in different times and places (see, e.g., Harris 2001; Smooth and Tucker 1999) and in and across various cultures (see, e.g., Wallace 2014). We have elaborated the operation of gender, class, age, sexuality, and other forces in

the construction of institutions and the circulation of power therein (see, e.g., Smooth 2006; Brown 2014). We have examined Black girlhood and its link to prevailing ideologies and worked to maximize the visibility of the political stakes in their politicization and political potential (Brown 2007). We have worked alongside and produced research about the Black political women who operate in formal and informal political contexts and the rich range of political participation in which they engage (see, e.g., Berger 2004; Nealy 2008). We have theorized about Black women's relationships to the state, legal system, and civil society (see, e.g., Cohen 1999), as well as our claims to political values such as justice (Threadcraft 2016). And, of course, we have been engaged in articulating the ways in which intersectionality can be productively employed in the disciplinary space that is political science (see, e.g., Hancock 2007; 2016, Smooth 2006; Simien 2007; Jordan-Zachery 2007; Alexander-Floyd 2012; Lindsay 2013). Although an exhaustive survey of work produced on Black political women in political science is beyond the scope of this introduction, the preceding review nevertheless conveys the sense in which intersectionality, broadly defined, has been an important basis for remaining, in the words of Jewel Prestage, the "founder" of the field of Black women in politics in political science, "in quest" of Black political women (Prestage 1991).

Given the foregoing, it is unsurprising that intersectionality, as a research paradigm, remains a vibrant basis for research across disciplines such as political science and in multi- and interdisciplinary spaces, such as women's and gender studies and Black studies. Indeed, the number of special issues that continue to be published on the subject, most notably in *Signs* (2013), the leading journal in women's and gender studies internationally, and *New Political Science* (2015), a journal published by a left-leaning section of the American Political Science Association of the same name, as well as books and edited volumes by noted figures, such as Bonnie Thornton Dill (Dill and Zambrana 2011) and Vivian May (2015), two past-presidents of the National Women's Studies Association, among others (e.g., Berger and Guidroz 2009; Collins and Blige 2016), speak to the dynamism of the research agendas produced under the aegis of intersectionality. As Berger and Guidroz explain, "The breadth of this continued interest [in the intersectional approach] suggests robust inquiry and research, and guarantees at least another decade of intersectional research in both feminist and critical gender scholarship in traditional disciplines" (Berger and Guidroz 2009) and interdisciplinary spaces.

Despite its popularity, however, intersectionality is also in some ways at the center of an intramural debate about how and to what extent race

and racialization, in particular, are relevant analytics—especially in women’s and gender studies generally. For some, intersectionality anchors essentialized notions of identity and/or does not provide a means of understanding the deep imbrication of social and political forces Black women confront (see, e.g., Nash 2008). For others, it is too closely tied to Black female and other women of color’s subjectivity to be useful as an analytic (Wiegman 2012). Other configurations, such as assemblages (Puar 2007), or concepts, such as fugitivity or social death, have emerged and been offered in some cases as alternatives to intersectionality. As Brittney Cooper notes, some suggest that, in its broad circulation and its justification for promoting institutional and intellectual diversity, intersectionality is a project whose time has come and gone.

The prevalence and nature of such critiques are instructive. “Intersectionality critiques,” as May notes, “have become something of their own genre—a form so flourishing, at times it seems critique has become a primary means of taking up the concept and its literatures” (May 2015, 98).

Yet, there is something about the sheer number of critiques as well as their nature that deserves consideration: *how* intersectionality is read and portrayed (and not) can be troubling, particularly when basic intersectional premises . . . are violated by a critic’s operative assumptions and interpretive methods. (98) (emphasis in original).

Significantly, many of the critics of intersectionality ignore or misunderstand its emphasis on social justice. The intersectional approach has always been aimed at assessing and challenging those forces that impede full expression of political participation and facilitating personal, social, and communal well-being. The identification of intersectionality with conservative notions of identity politics that settle on essentialist foundations is problematic in that it ignores its definition by radical Black feminists, as we have argued elsewhere (Alexander-Floyd and Jordan-Zachery 2014) and on which we elaborate below. At its inception, identity politics was never suggestive of essentialist views, but rather posited social location as a function of mutually constitutive social, economic, and political forces.

As a practical matter, these critiques serve to deflect attention from addressing racialization and racism. As Brittney Cooper (2016) relates:

[I] think that the calls to become postintersectional and to move beyond intersectionality are akin to and give false intellectual

heft to broader political suggestions that the election of Barack Obama has thrust us into a post-racial era. These institutional and political moves index an increasing discomfort with talking about racism. (403)

Critiques of intersectionality, in other words, often accompany and/or aid and abet a turn from discussing historical and contemporary racial projects.

We claim our stake in these debates in asserting that intersectionality remains a not only useful, but also necessary approach for studying Black diasporan political women. Debates about the nature of intersectionality and its operationalization in research will likely remain, and, as we further note below, section I takes up the issue of how political science as a field in general and intersectionality research specifically has given short shrift to Black women, particularly given their importance in politics. Still, as a mode of reading the political landscapes in which Black women operate, intersectionality continues to be generative, as Alexander-Floyd points out, as both an "idea," that is, in the specific formulation offered by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term, and an "ideograph," that is, the broader political and intellectual project of investigating the multiple dimensions of Black political women (Alexander-Floyd 2012). As it relates to the former instance of intersectionality, political scientists in fact have been among those who have paid special attention to the key elements of Crenshaw's formulations, particularly her elaboration of various form of intersectionality—structural, political, and representational (see, e.g., Alexander-Floyd 2012; Jordan-Zachery 2012; Simien and McGuire 2014). In what follows, we link the importance of intersectionality to the metaphor of tilling and use it to illuminate the contributions of the works collected herein.

### Where We Stand: Situating Black Women in Politics

At the core of this collection is the concept of power and its relationship to race, class, and gender. Power, in terms of a definition, is much contested. Although we do not seek to settle these debates, we do believe that it is important to articulate an understanding of power. Relying on Black feminist canonical texts, which include but are not limited to the Combahee River Collective (1982), Crenshaw (1989), Roberts (1997), Robnett (1997), Springer (1999, 2005), and Collins (2000), we understand power

as interrelated and relational systems and processes to control or manipulate Black women's self-actualization. Additionally, we understand power as embodying both struggle, because it is unequally distributed, and the possibilities for action.

*Ploughing* (or *tilling*), drawing from the work of Zora Neal Hurston, is a dynamic metaphor that speaks to how Black women respond to mutually constitutive forms of oppression—that is, how they understand and respond to power. This metaphor captures the ethical and political values of liberty and justice pursued by Black women on two interrelated levels. First, it signals the efforts that Black women undertake to eliminate obstructions to their political participation and to pursue the good life. Second, in a related vein, it speaks to the efforts of scholars, particularly Black women, in carving out intellectual space for examining Black political women. With the aforementioned in mind, the works collected here address both the scholarly production of work on Black political women as well as a range of themes that capture the lived experiences of Diasporic Black women. These themes include but are not limited to unmasking power structures, Black nationalism, policy making, how the Black female body is marked, agency, activism, and democratic practices. Informed by Black feminist intersectionality theory, its understanding of power, and self-actualization, the eleven chapters comprising this edited book explore a multiplicity of Black Diasporic women's political practices and behaviors.

This collection, in enacting its own effort at expanding the field of Black women in politics in political science, emphasizes interdisciplinary research and critical methodologies and methods, as these have been important in advancing feminist research across disciplines. Specifically, *Black Women in Politics* is significant for Black women's studies as an interdisciplinary enterprise in at least two ways. First, humanistic perspectives dominate the interdisciplinary field of women's and gender studies more generally, and Black women's studies is no different in this regard. Political science scholarship that includes cultural studies, historical, and literary approaches has greatly expanded political scientists' investigations of Black women and politics. Second, political science as a discipline also has much to offer for scholarly investigators committed to the interdisciplinary integration of knowledge, including, but not limited to a focus on the state; the circulation of power within and without government institutions; issues of descriptive versus substantive electoral representation; the formation and execution of public policy; the connection among ideology, political consciousness, and public opinion; the operation of symbolic and narrative frames in ideologi-

cal, institutional, and policy formation; and nonpositivistic explorations of empiricism. The chapters included herein address these issues and more.

In addition to showcasing the contributions of an interdisciplinary approach that includes political science perspectives, *Black Women in Politics* contributes to the study of Black women in politics by illuminating intersectionality's continued relevance as a research paradigm. This objective is particularly important because, as the theory/concept of intersectionality travels across various disciplines and subfields, there remains a gap in our understanding of its functioning. Particularly, there is limited research on how Black women engage intersectionality in their own political quests. Despite the fact that Black women are active political agents, there exists scant research that offers a comprehensive treatment of their political behavior and activities. This book works to fill this gap. Via a Black feminist lens, the chapters critically analyze not only Black women's engagement with conventional institutions of politics, but also how they have worked to create space outside these institutions in their efforts to demand representation and justice. Given the role that Black women play in politics—as voters, as social movement and community activists, as elected officials, and as subjects of public policy discourse—it is imperative that we expend greater energy and attention on investigating Black political women. *Black Women in Politics* provides a much-needed context for exploring recent developments in Black women in politics as a subfield of political science in its own right. It highlights three dimensions—citizenship, power, and justice—that are foundational to intersectionality theory and politics as developed by Black women and other women of color (see, e.g., The Combahee River Collective 1982; Crenshaw 1989; Berger 2004; Jordan-Zachery 2009; Alexander-Floyd 2012; Isoke 2013).

Most of the work on Black women in politics falls into two categories, namely (1) works that deal with specific geographic locations or a particular type or dimension of politics or (2) works that focus on particular time periods. Recent monographs, such as *Negras in Brazil: Re-Envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity* by Kia Caldwell and Zenzele Isoke's *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance*, which focuses on Black women's political activism in Newark, New Jersey, are examples of the former. Similarly, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* by Nikki Brown and Lisa G. Materson's *For the Freedom of Her Race: Black Women and Electoral Politics in Illinois, 1877–1932* serve as examples of works that provide in-depth examinations of Black women's politics in critical moments of Black political history.

*Black Women in Politics* builds on the extant work on black women in politics by extending beyond particular time periods, locations, or singular definitions of politics. It sets itself apart in the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field of women's and gender studies in three ways: (1) by focusing on contemporary Black politics not only in the United States, but also in the African Diaspora; (2) by showcasing politics along a broad trajectory, including but not limited to social movements, formal politics, public policy, media studies, and epistemology; and (3) by including a multidisciplinary range of scholars, with a strong concentration of work by political scientists, a group whose work is often excluded or limited in edited collections, a reality that diminishes attention to public policy, institutions, materiality, governance, contemporary happenings, and/or formal politics.

A central assumption of this volume is that politics operates in myriad, often overlapping, or constitutive domains. Accordingly, *Black Women in Politics* has chapters that consider the new challenges faced by this contemporary political moment, such as: How do Black women fare within raced and gendered institutions as Black female elected officials? How do African and African Diasporic women integrate political knowledge, concepts, and tactics to meet the challenges of organizing within different state regimes? How do media impact the reception of Black political figures, such as Michelle Obama, and what are the implications for our understanding of Black women, neoliberalism, and Black cultural pathology and middle-class respectability? These are just some of the questions that this collection uniquely answers.

In short, *Black Women in Politics* speaks to women's and gender studies and Black and Africana studies by providing an interdisciplinary examination of Black women in politics by Black political scientists and scholars based in other disciplines, assisting in reimagining Black women's studies as a subfield within Africana studies and women's and gender studies. The selected pieces were chosen because of the editors' commitment to scholarship that reflects and affirms Black women and politics as a subfield that overlaps with other fields within political science while standing as a separate subfield that crosses other traditional disciplines and newer ones such as women's and gender studies and Black studies. The chapters represent the best theoretical and methodological work within the subfield. Furthermore, within political science, it presents a guidebook through which scholars can understand the value of studying power using the tools, concepts, approaches, and ideas situated within political science, but deeply integrated with insights from other disciplines such as history. This collection contributes to the subfield

of Black women's studies and Black/Africana studies by showcasing multi- and interdisciplinary work on Black women in politics. It expands our repertoire of methodological tools and concepts in discussing and assessing Black women's lives, the conditions under which they live, their labor, and the politics they enact to improve their circumstances.

### Critical Themes in Studying Black Political Women

The contributors to this collection employ various cases and a wide range of methods to analyze how Black women, nationally and globally, are working or "tilling" in service of themselves. These approaches include critical literary analyses, narrative analysis of political frames, and interviews with previously incarcerated women, among others. Despite their different foci and methods, there are a number of common themes connecting the various chapters. Such themes include but are not limited to invisibility/hypervisibility, challenges of defining Black womanhood, agency, and citizenship. Combined, the chapters encourage us to critically think about what it means to be a Black woman in various time periods and geographic and social locations and how vectors of power mutually constitute the contours of Black women's oppression to which they respond. Although we organize the book in terms of content areas, we are mindful that there is continuity between these sections, and so we encourage the reader to engage the readings as part of a spectrum of Black women's political work and behavior as opposed to a series of separate chapters.

As an entry point into the chapters, we highlight some of the areas of convergence and divergence, but we also encourage you to use this as a springboard for discovering and critically analyzing your own themes and arguments. Doing so is in the spirit of Black feminist epistemology that recognizes there is no one "Truth." We employ the metaphor of the mule, in relation to power, to offer one reading of the chapters that constitute this collection.

### Moving From Silence to Voice

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston traces the story of Janie's journey from silence to voice. We do not argue that Janie is voiceless, but more that others in their exercise of power are either choosing not to hear Janie's

voice or are actively working to silence Janie—that is, to mute her. In her journey to voice, Janie situates her needs as central—moving from the margins to the center (hooks 1984)—and as such contradicts Nanny’s assertion that Black women are the mules of the world. Hurston charts this journey of Janie’s self-direction by situating Janie’s lived experiences. According to hooks (1984), Black women’s

lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system). It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony. (16)

The specific chapters included in this collection by Jordan-Zachery (“I Ain’t Your Darn Help”), Middlemass (Hiding in Plain Sight), Williams (“We Always Resist”), and Hall (El pan, el poder y la política) situate the voices of Black women in their approaches to analyzing Black women in politics. By “hearing” the voices of the women who inform these studies, these authors use Black feminist theory to explore “discursive narratives and lived experiences” (Middlemass, this volume) to show how Black women’s bodies are marked. Such an approach is also used to explore how Black women are rendered invisible in larger discussions of belonging and democracy. Jordan-Zachery’s analysis of political science research opens with her retelling of a social event and how she was challenged when she offered a critique of the novel *The Help*. She maps this experience, coupled with her experiences at political science conferences, to explore two forms of silences that exist within political science research. According to her, the forms of silence “can be overt; this is the complete absence of Black women as research subjects and/or the recognition of their contributions.” Or silence can be covert. This form of silence “allows for a form of memorializing the contributions of Black women,” but still renders them omitted and or invisible in our understandings of power and democracy (this volume).

Hall situates the voices of rural Black women in Honduras to explore how they engage in “pragmatic activism” to resist land grab. Through the voices of these women, we are better able to understand not only how they

organize, but, more importantly, why they organize around the production of *ereba*, or cassava bread. As she writes,

Catalina talked about how important *ereba* is to the overwhelming majority of the village: “The only hope we have to be able to move forward is the sale of *ereba* because that is our work. And I know that if one day the moment arrives in which *ereba* has a demand at a global level, we will be able to say that the community will be able to develop because that is the agricultural work of almost 95 percent of the people in the community. (this volume)

As such, *ereba* becomes so much more than simply cassava bread; it is a means through which tradition is maintained, a means for challenging land grab, and a way for women, in particular, to advance the larger agenda of autonomy for their communities.

In “Hiding in Plain Sight,” Middlemass’s chapter, we are introduced to Eve and Janaye, among others, who poignantly articulate how policies consistently fail them and other previously incarcerated Black women—those who become permanently marked with the nomenclature of ex-felon. In explaining her use of personal narratives, Middlemass posits that

quantitative methods . . . do not adequately capture reality. The prevailing methodological approaches make many women invisible in reentry discourse, and Black women are further marginalized because criminal justice scholars tend to focus on race, gender and criminal involvement as distinct characteristics and separate issues, when in fact they are not autonomous. (this volume)

The approaches used across these chapters represent one method of moving Black women from silence to voice—by situating and centering their lived experiences. By locating and giving voices to diverse Black women—ex-felon, college professor, and cassava bread-making women in Honduras—via Black-feminist approaches, these authors advance methods that deconstruct the relationships between identity and power. Through the counter-narratives of Black women, they are also advancing methods that challenge systems of power, particularly ways of knowledge production that result in the invisibility and or omission of Black women.

## Invisibility and Unmasking Power Structures

This brings us to the second dominant theme running throughout the chapters—the notion of invisibility and Black womanhood. Through the metaphor of the mule, Hurston shows how power structures, within the Black community particularly, are made invisible. Consider how her two husbands treated her—neither one saw her as a woman with needs. How power structures engender the invisibility of Black women has been a long-standing research subject of Black feminist researchers. It was the impetus for Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) coinage of the term intersectionality, although she was not the first individual to articulate the concept. In *Black Women in Politics*, the theme of invisibility is explored differently across the various chapters. For example, Alexander-Floyd and Jordan-Zachery explore how the politics of omission, evident in political science research, results in the invisibility of Black women as research subjects. In "Why Political Scientists Don't Study Black Women, but Historians and Sociologists Do: On Intersectionality and the Remapping of the Study of Black Political Women," Alexander-Floyd, comparing political science to sister disciplines, considers the extent to which political scientists investigate the lives of Black women and issues of race, class, and gender more broadly. Using insights from Black feminist geography, she compares the production of research on Black women across four fields: political science, sociology, history, and economics. Her analysis shows the "absented presence" of Black women in political science research and how garreting can provide a means of responding to such treatment of Black women. Although some might question the utility of promoting intersectional approaches in traditional disciplines such as political science, particularly when there are interdisciplinary and other more welcoming intellectual environs, she highlights how the critiques of Black women's absented presence in political science and garreting constitute a decolonial project. Alexander-Floyd contends that to re-create the intellectual geography of political science into a space that intellectually and professionally addresses the presence of Black women would require a Perestroika-like effort to restructure the discipline. Jordan-Zachery takes up the question: How does the politics of research, specifically intersectionality research, result in the further marginalization of Black women? According to Jordan-Zachery, there is an omission project occurring in published political science research generally and within intersectionality research specifically. To explore the politics of intersectionality research, she examines the relationship between the novel *The Help* and intersectionality

research to show how these cultural and academic phenomena mirror each other and reinforce and normalize the treatment of Black women. She posits that the misappropriation of intersectionality as a theory and approach to research, wherein Black women's theories are invoked only to silence their voices through exclusion in this same intersectionality research, parallels the misappropriation of Black women's voices for the advancement of the white female main character in *The Help*. In both instances, Black women's voices are muted and their quest for social justice stymied.

Williams also investigates the concept of invisibility in her exploration of Black women's reproductive justice activism. Williams sets as her purpose the interrogation of "the representational activism of black women-directed reproductive justice organizations that prioritize the political interests of intersectionally marginalized subgroups in their advocacy work, set against the backdrop of healthcare reform" (this volume). In doing such, she excavates the deep history and the extent to which Black women's organizations, located in the US South, engage in political activism on behalf of their constituents with regard to health care reform. As Williams shows, these organizations have been afforded an opportunity to engage in policy advocacy that amplifies the reproductive experiences, concerns, and subsequent political demands of intersectionally marginalized populations, the primary targets of their efforts, spanning the Clintons' attempts at health care reform through to the Obama administration's crafting and implementation of the Affordable Care Act; yet their activism remains invisible in our explorations, across multiple disciplines, on reproductive justice activism.

Invisibility, in the case of Howard's contribution, is addressed through what she terms "discursive distance" which was central to President Obama's deracialization project. As such, she argues,

Michelle Obama's anti-obesity campaign, *Let's Move!*, allowed her to participate, from a safe, discursive distance, in debates about reproductive health and sexuality. By invoking the threat of low-income urban black pathology in the "obesity crisis," and sweeping in with a remedy couched in traditional, "True Womanhood"-style mothering, Michelle Obama was able to achieve two strategic goals for the campaign: she was able to signal a non-threatening "pro-woman" stance without substantive engagement in controversial gender issues, while simultaneously distancing herself, and the rest of the Obama family, from racialized and gendered stereotypes about black families. (this volume)

This form of discursive distancing results in the removal of some issues that are experienced by poor Black women from public discourse and the policy agenda of the Obama administration. Furthermore, via Michele Obama's discursive distancing, what becomes visible is a particular understanding of womanhood, one that is aligned with the concept of True womanhood (i.e., white womanhood) that suggests that she is committed to a specific "true womanhood"-style nursing, where nursing is defined as feminine care-giving, healing, and culinary skill" (this volume). Those women perceived as not fitting into this understanding of womanhood are maligned. Also, ignored in this form of invisibility is the legacy of slavery and how it continues to influence, for example, poor Black women's access to food (Howard, this volume).

Douglass's and Jordan-Zachery's analyses highlight the impact of research and policy gaps that result in invisibility. Jordan-Zachery argues that narratives of HIV/AIDS-orphaned children tend to privilege the Global South. Consequently, there are no similar narratives used in the United States to speak on the impact of HIV/AIDS and motherless children. She offers a national- and state-level analysis of policies of five areas defined as "HIV/AIDS" hotspots where HIV and AIDS disproportionately impact Black women. Specifically, she analyzes policies, or the lack thereof, targeting non-positive HIV/AIDS orphans. Extant research (although limited) suggests that these children are negatively impacted as a result of the death of their mothers, who tend to be their primary caregivers. Yet there is an absence of policies targeting these orphans. To explain this policy gap, Jordan-Zachery suggests that the absence of policy is a response to the intersectional stigma, which is mapped onto the "construction of the Black mother as 'bad.'" The bad Black mother results in these children being "out of place" and invisible to policy decision makers. In an attempt to address research and resulting policy gaps, Jordan-Zachery offers an intersectionality-based policy analysis.

The invisibility of Black women as research subjects, as activists, and as policy subjects is explored in these chapters as a means of unmasking power structures. Additionally, in unmasking these power structures the authors articulate approaches for addressing such invisibility. "For example, Douglass argues that African-Caribbean women are largely invisible in the health literature. As such, her chapter, and the others in this volume, allow for the deconstruction of negative images used in the social construction of Black womanhood. Consequently, she and other authors suggest that an intersectional approach is necessary to uncover and respond to these forms of omission as such an approach allows for an exploration of how race,

class, and gender results in Black women's experiences. Doing such would allow us to better "explore the meanings, beliefs, and experiences of black women and relate this to the cultural, ethnic, economic, and demographic context of black women" (Douglas, this volume) and explain Black women's lived experiences.

### Black Women's Self-Actualization and Black Masculinist Politics

Part of the challenge faced by Janie in her journey to self-actualization is that she is performing her Black womanhood in a rather masculinist setting. As Klaus Benesch (1988, 633) argues, the mule "signifies on the role of black women as well as on the male-female relationship." This is not only an intimate relationship, but it also connotes Black women's communal relationship within a hierarchy where maleness, regardless of race, is privileged and works to constrain Black women's vision of themselves. Nanny, as part of her conversation with Janie on how the black woman is the mule of the earth, tells her,

Ah didn't want to be use for a work-ox and a broad-sow and  
Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. . . . Ah  
wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin'  
on high, but there wasn't no pulpit for me. . . . Ah said Ah'd  
save de text for you. (Hurstons, 1990, 15–16)

Nanny is speaking directly to how race-gender structures constrain Black women. This type of constraint, experienced as a result of patriarchy, is the third theme connecting many of the chapters in this volume.

Thame offers an analysis of the first female head of government in Jamaica. She asks: What is the meaning of "Portia Simpson-Miller in Jamaican politics," and what does her election mean for the position of Jamaican women and gendered and classed norms more broadly? Thame concludes that while the election of "Mama P" opened up potential positions for women in Jamaican politics, it did little to transform realities on the ground. This is the case because Miller-Simpson was unable to radically shift the classist and masculinist machinery of Jamaican politics.

How Black women walk a "tight line" of disrupting and/or maintaining race-gender politics vis-à-vis paternalism is also taken up by Howard. According to Howard, "[w]hile community gardening [as advocated by Obama]

is a practical, perhaps even radical, solution to some of these disparities, when the suggestion comes from a person in an elite institutional position, even if their position was as institutional wife and mother, it rings more paternalistic than radical” (this volume). Keisha N. Blain, in “We Want to Set the World on Fire,” explores another form of Black women’s limits and tensions around self-actualization. According to her, “these tensions unfolded on the pages of the *New Negro World* newspaper” (this volume). For example, “Adelia Ireland articulated a masculinist vision of black liberation, emphasizing the absolute necessity of strong black male leadership” (this volume). Elinor White (1942) and Florine Wilkes (1944) also made such assertions. What this shows is that although these women recognized the value of their voices in the larger conversations on global oppression of Black people, they continued to maintain patriarchal structures by arguing that men must lead.

These researchers show the challenges faced by Black women in confronting Black nationalism that results in the marking of Black women’s bodies and politics. What results is that some narratives are not included in public discourses, the promotion of masculinist politics, and the maintenance of stereotypes that control Black women.

### Space Making and Self-Actualization

Finally, there is the theme of self-actualization and space making. The metaphor of the mule suggests Black women’s resistance to conventional race-gender expectations and resulting authority. However, by the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the mule disappears. This is symbolic, as it suggests a type of self-actualization experienced by Janie. We learn that “only here, [Janie] could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to” and that she eventually gets to the place where “[s]he got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (Hurston, 1990, 128). This form of self-actualization, making space for her voice, is a final theme evident in all of the chapters.

Alexander-Floyd speaks of space making as a project of garreting that allows for the insertion of Black women as research subjects. More importantly, the concept of garrets and garreting affords Black women the opportunity to invert the gaze—engage an oppositional gaze—that can afford them a space for freedom. Space making can occur at multiple points for Black women and may include intellectual space, physical space, emotional

space, and even spiritual space. However, space making, as detailed in the various chapters, is intimately connected to democracy, freedom, and justice.

What the chapters show is that space making is not an easy process for Black women, who must work to confront multiple and interlocking forms of oppressions. Sometimes space making can result in the reification of the negative construction of Black womanhood, as shown by Ryan, Howard, and Thame's individual chapters. However, as Hall shows, the political activity of the *ereba*-making women, vis-à-vis their efforts to preserve and actively resist the erasure of their culture, is being woven into larger political efforts by and for Afro-descendent women between sustenance farmers and urban professionals. What this suggests is that these women are crossing physical space, rural and urban, in their efforts to resist land grab. She also shows their self-actualization in their conscious decision making to identify as Black, thereby allowing them to situate themselves in global discussions of Black womanhood. This type of construction is also explored by Blain, who claims that Black US women in their writings for the *New Negro World* newspaper engaged in a politics of creating a global community to challenge the global system of white supremacy by inserting the voices of Black women in a space that was masculinist in tenor. This suggests another form of space making that transcends geographical boundaries to resist white patriarchal structures and oppressions.

Douglas, like Middlemass and Jordan-Zachery, explores exclusion policy and research and how such spaces of exclusion result in the marginalization of Black womanhood or what Douglass refers to as "intersectional invisibility." Williams's and Douglas's chapters show Black women's response to these types of spaces that result in the invisibility of Black women. In Williams's chapter, we are introduced to how Black women's reproductive activism space making is best understood as a "liberatory politic around bodily autonomy."

Jordan-Zachery and Judylyn Ryan explore space making at the intersection of culture and politics. While Jordan-Zachery explores how culture and politics are mapped onto each other and result in the disappearance of Black women, Ryan takes up the question of democracy and how it is advanced through Black women's literature. In her chapter, Ryan examines Toni Morrison's writings as a representative expression of Black feminist political engagement on the part of Black women literary artists. Morrison's novels implicitly argue and explicitly demonstrate that US democracy requires a literature whose textual strategies and discursive practices can expand democratic narrative participation, promote "narrative knowledge," sharpen

the moral imagination, and provide opportunities for self-discovery. What Ryan argues, among other things, is that Morrison deploys textual strategies that revive historical thinking, thereby enabling a more meaningful analysis of both historical and current events.

The collected chapters show how Black women work on behalf of themselves to achieve self-definition and actualization, thereby articulating their visions of democracy, freedom, and justice. Combined, the chapters capture the journey, its joys and challenges, of Janie in the sense that they explore how Black women are constructed as the “mules of the earth,” and as such their labor is viewed as benefiting others and not themselves, and Black women’s resistance to such constructions. What the chapters show is how Black women’s articulations of self, via their activism, writings, knowledge production, and so forth—in essence, their labor—is used in service of themselves and their communities.

## Conclusion

Centering Black women as subjects of research has been a fundamental component of Black feminist theory and politics. *Black Women in Politics* adds to this body of research by centering the Black political woman. As the Combahee River Collective states in its classic statement of Black feminist ideology: “This focusing on our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity . . .” (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16). Significantly, whereas mainstream feminist theory views identity politics as a limited, monovocal definition of women’s experiences and politics, one that attempts to speak for women as an essentialized category of difference, radical Black feminists operate from a complex and variegated framework, that captures the differences among Black women’s lives and looks at a range of important factors related to oppression, as opposed to attempting to foreground one single dimension of identity. This form of identity politics, as Duchess Harris relays, is “polyvocal” (Harris 2001, 300). Furthermore, according to one of the Combahee River Collective’s founders, Barbara Smith, the term identity politics was first promulgated by this Black feminist organization; as she remarks, “We [the Combahee River Collective] came up with the term ‘identity politics’” (Smith, quoted in Harris 2001, 300). The idea of identity politics, first espoused by Black feminists in the Combahee River Collective, has been