

# Introduction

Some time after my parents died, my brother Earl found in our attic an oral history of my mother's life. As part of a larger oral history project on older black people in Wilmington, Delaware, a student had interviewed my mother and then published the findings in a school publication. Few of the facts were right. The oral history told of a black woman who was fortunate enough to have married a professor and had the opportunity to rear their four children on a college campus. Well, my mother did have four children.

In fact, my mother raised us in segregated Wilmington, first in a largely working-class community that was being devastated by urban renewal and later in a "middle-class" black community on the edge of town. The "middle-class" community was actually economically diverse: It included teachers; a doctor; and members of the steady working-class, such as my father, James "Dick" White. My father's main job was as a postal worker, but he always worked at least one other job, usually as a handyman or "delivery boy."

The contrast between my life's experience and the oral history's fictional account has led me to think about the importance of life stories for the formation of black identity. Our families prepare us for life in a racist world by telling us stories or narratives that help us make sense of our experiences as black people. Although I do not believe this is the only way we come to understand race—the media, for

example, also have a major impact on us—I believe that our family narratives play a significant role in helping us determine how to respond to our experiences.

### The Making of a Race Woman

My family worked hard to develop strong black egos in its children. Every summer we were sent to spend a week or two with our paternal grandfather. In the 1920s he had been a follower of Marcus Garvey, and later he had been a founding member of the Afro-American Historical Society of New Haven, Connecticut. He had an impressive library filled with everything he could find on Africa and its diaspora. It did not matter to him whether a book was racist or uplifting; if it was about black people, he would buy it. It was in my grandfather's library that I first encountered both a history of the Ku Klux Klan, written by a klansman, and C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, a book that deeply influenced my development as a historian. I am fortunate to have inherited many of my grandfather's books.

At least one evening during our stay each year, my grandfather would tell us our official family history. I remember best the stories of resistance. He told about a daring escape north on a raft in the 1850s after white members of our family warned that the black members of the family were about to be sold illegally to the Deep South. He told us about his grandaunt, Affie Weeks, an Afro-Indian who worked in the Underground Railroad. My grandfather remembered her as an old woman who sat on the porch smoking a corncob pipe. My favorite story was about the relative who lost a leg in the Civil War. Granddad had a picture of him dressed in his uniform and holding his crutch. At one

point he had to use the crutch to fight off a mob of whites who tried to keep him from voting.

My grandfather's stories were so wonderful that I began to believe that they could not be true. According to Granddad, our ancestors were free blacks as far back as the eighteenth century. In the 1850s, after they had escaped north, they resisted the slave regime through the Underground Railroad and the Civil War, and they fought for the right to vote during the imposition of segregation. These seemed like black nationalist fairy tales if ever there were any. But the more I learned about black history, the more I realized that these could have been true accounts of my history. Many blacks who lived in the upper South were free by the end of the eighteenth century. Tragically, a thriving slave trade in that region recaptured free blacks and marched them to the Cotton Belt, just as those who had been captured in the interior of Africa were marched to coastal areas before being shipped across the ocean. We know that Africans and Native Americans in Virginia often intermarried or had children together. My grandfather's Afro-Indian grandaunt Affie Weeks warranted mention in William Still's classic, *The Underground Railroad* ([1872] 1968). It would seem that I am certainly justified in writing this introduction as if all my grandfather's stories were true, as if this were my history.

Yet I no longer worry, as I did as a young historian, about whether these stories are true. The message I got from Granddad was that I had much to be proud of because our family had been part of the Resistance. In fact, I came to believe that I was to continue that tradition of resistance. The truth of my grandfather's tales is secondary. What is important here is that my grandfather *told* me the stories;

the stories made sense to me; and, most important, the stories made sense of the world for me.

A number of writers have pointed out that it is through stories—from the everyday to commercials to the meganarratives of states—that we make sense of the world. (See Hayles 1999; H. White 1978.) Without these narratives, we would be confronted with a bewildering array of disconnected experiences. Stories allow us to deal with forces over which we have no control. They give our desires meaning and make beliefs comprehensible and communicable. There could be neither religions nor ideologies without stories. My grandfather's stories were effective because they invited me to participate through my imagination. And his collection of photos further stimulated my imagination. The pictures of Affie Weeks and of my ancestor in his Civil War uniform holding his crutch stand out in my memory. By engaging my imagination, these stories reached my unconscious and communicated, *inter alia*, meaning, morals, and a sense of purpose.

Former slaves understood the power of stories when they wrote slave narratives and spoke on the abolitionist lecture circuit. Narratives were consciously designed to persuade whites to join the abolition cause; the stories did so by creating a disturbance in the audiences that could be quieted only through the fight against slavery. Stories told by former slaves were the abolitionists' best mobilizing strategy.

Although white northerners constituted the primary audience for the abolitionist storytellers, black people formed a crucial part of their audience as well. Many historians overlook the importance of the black abolition movement in the North. But not all free blacks had firsthand knowledge of slavery, and many of the northern blacks who

did needed the impetus to rise up against slavery hundreds of miles to the south. The narratives were just as important in mobilizing black resistance as in influencing white opinions. In fact, despite some white abolitionists' heavy editorial hand on the written texts, narratives played an important role in developing African-American self-image. Many African Americans heard these stories firsthand at the black abolitionist meetings that were held in the northern states. Narratives, then, were a crucial part of a counterdiscourse that spoke outwardly against racism and inwardly to the black community about appropriate behavior and worldview. In my 1990 article "Africa on My Mind," I take up the issue of the Janus-faced nature of counterdiscourse. I suggest that for whites *and* for blacks, narratives can serve to counter the virulently racist images of African Americans that circulate in hegemonic discourses. And, as I demonstrate in that essay and herein, in the process of developing a counterdiscourse, some stories are suppressed. Throughout this book, I consider how the suppression of certain stories and the careful crafting of others help regulate our social and political behaviors.

I also examine the way that narratives fulfill wishes and meet desires. I will never know, for example, whose wish was fulfilled in that oral history of my mother. Did the student invent my mother's story, or did my mother remake her own history? I no longer worry about what combination of desires led to the creation of that story. My mother had a strong desire to go to college. She was an extraordinary woman who had a lasting impact on the many young people she worked with when she became a teacher's aide late in life. The stories that I tell about Pearline Tildon White are a tribute of my love for her. I am an intensely loyal daugh-

ter; my doctorate was a gift to my mother. I scrambled to finish my dissertation so that she could attend my graduation before she died. I went on to spend most of my adult life living on college campuses and in university housing. And I have refused to marry. The relevance of this last decision will become apparent shortly.

## My Story

I needed the armor that my grandfather's stories provided. I came from an upwardly mobile family that was poised to make a run for success as formal segregation crumbled. We were a typical family whose main breadwinner worked in the post office. My parents desperately wanted for their children to reap the benefits of the promises that desegregation appeared to hold out for African Americans. We followed the Civil Rights movement carefully, discussing its progression at the dinner table. My parents wanted to get out of the so-called ghetto. We discussed the pros and cons of the efforts of family friends who tried to move into white neighborhoods only to be bombed back to the black ghetto.

I suspect that my parents' longstanding dream of living in a trailer seemed a way to freedom. But they found only white trailer parks, and they knew we would be risking our lives if we moved to one of these. They finally gave up the trailer dream after finding a house in a largely black neighborhood at the edge of town. This, they felt, was a good, safe neighborhood in which to raise their two youngest children, my brother Earl and me.

The closest elementary school to our neighborhood had been historically white. Much to my surprise, my mother asked me if I wanted to continue to attend my old segre-

gated school or transfer to the white school. I did not need to think about this. I knew that it was my responsibility to enter the white school.

From the start, I encountered racist resistance to my presence at the school. There was a struggle over which classroom I would enter. The teacher who taught the most advanced class was adamantly opposed to having black students in her classroom. She had declared her opposition to desegregation on the local radio, and she already had two “colored” students in her class.

In my corner were my former principal and my mother’s best friend, Henrietta Henry. Aunt Hen was one of the success stories of integration in the Wilmington public school system; for many years she was its highest-ranking black administrator (Nutter 2000). With her intervention, we won the battle. Only later would I find out that we had lost the war.

When I got to the classroom, I saw that the students were divided into clusters. The two black students were seated in the same cluster with two white students. My teacher introduced me and asked if anyone wanted me to join his or her cluster. Fortunately, a good friend and fellow black student invited me to join her group. Thus I sat in the same cluster with the other two black students until I made new friends and moved across the room.

It seemed odd to me that one student sat by himself. I was in college before I realized that he sat alone because he was the only Jewish child in the class. To me, all white people were the same; I had no understanding of ethnicity or class. I had thought that the teacher just did not care for him. Only later did I realize that she was treating him as a descendant of the murderers of Jesus. In the middle of the school year, a fourth black student transferred into our class.

The teacher put her with the Jewish student. Apparently the teacher had no problem with mixing blacks and Jews.

I had thought that once I was in the class, the struggle would be over. After all, I faced no threats to my life or property, as had many of the heroic people I had heard about on the news. To me, racism came in the form of bombs and German shepherds. I was not prepared for the new kind of racism that was being institutionalized in schools—a racism that still reigns today—which was manifested by segregation through tracking, lip service to meritocracy, and disproportionately heavy punishment for small infractions.

Like many African Americans of the crossover generations, I faced barely disguised hostility punctuated by an occasional slap or public humiliation. I remember my art teacher singling me out from a group of giggling girls. She slapped my face and sent me to my seat, her words still stinging my ears: “That’s what happens when You People come here. Don’t you ever leave your seat again!”

I could not discuss this with anyone except my brother Earl. I imagined my mother’s anger spilling out over the school and causing me further humiliation. Besides, I was having experiences that my parents had never encountered. The slap and public humiliation were the least of my worries. My sixth-grade teacher was setting me up to be tracked to the bottom when I entered junior high school the next year. I could not figure out why no matter how hard I worked, I could not seem to get good grades. I worried that my black school had not prepared me well enough, and sometimes I even worried that I just was not smart enough. But mostly, I blamed myself for not working harder. My family’s intense drive for upward mobility combined with



pride in our blackness helped shape my response to this new form of racism.

Even the realization that my classroom was not a meritocracy would not have helped me. There was nothing that could be done. We had won the battle of getting me into the best class at Lore Elementary School, but we had lost the war of getting me a good education. When I moved on to Bayard Junior High, I found myself in classes with a few learning-disabled white students and many black students with a wide range of skills. We were deliberately taught nothing.

Fortunately, with little understanding of the many forces against me, I felt it was my responsibility to my family and to the race to work my way back up the track system so that I could go to college. I read on my own and learned from my brothers and my parents. Clearly, my paternal family's political and moral beliefs created an important foundation that helped me make my way through public school without becoming completely damaged. They developed a counter-discourse that worked.

### **My Mother's Narrative**

My maternal family had a somewhat different story. I learned most of what I know about the Tildon family from my mother. Pearline was a very ambitious woman who found few paths open to the upward mobility she so desperately desired. From her, I learned that segregation turned the brilliant sparkle of hope into self-destruction. Like the ancestors of my paternal family and those of many blacks living in Maryland, my maternal ancestors had been free since the late eighteenth century. My mother's family had come to own a significant amount of land, only to have the

government take most of it as part of its development of the Aberdeen Proving Ground just after World War I. After being dispossessed of their land, the Tildons began migrating to the various mid-Atlantic cities, with major clusters moving to Baltimore and Wilmington. Many were grouped within a half-mile radius within Wilmington until government-sponsored urban renewal began dispersing them again. I remember that my Aunt Clara's house was the only remaining structure on her block as she held out against the government that eventually forced her to move to the new ghetto it had formed in the northern part of the city. I suppose that she stood firm as long as she could because she particularly resented being uprooted twice in her life. After the hurry to remove my aunt, her block remained completely undeveloped for over a decade.

The Tildons were particularly driven to retrieve their Maryland land from the government or to obtain a fair settlement. They invested heavily in education, which they believed would equip them for this fight. They became known as eccentric intellectuals. Still, most ended up in dead-end jobs. One cousin, for example, graduated from Howard University with honors but could never find meaningful work. She developed a kind of oddball, life-of-the-party personality and managed to live by her wits, often relying on help from relatives. My mother would take her in from time to time, and she explained to me that my cousin's way of life was a result of racist barriers to her success. But my mother certainly did not want me to follow in my cousin's footsteps. As my mother came to see her own ambitions as stunted by both racism and sexism, her stories about her generation became increasingly intertwined with feminist perspectives. Her story of her own life gained force in

part because it was so closely tied to issues of race and gender. In 1929 my mother graduated with honors from Howard High School, one of only two black high schools in the entire state of Delaware. College seemed like the next logical step for her, she thought. But her family could afford to send only one family member to college at that time, and they chose her brother Hollis. Although my mother was very close to her brother, she felt that he had been favored over her because he was male.

Disappointed but not defeated, my mother sought and won a scholarship to attend a teacher's college in nearby Pennsylvania. When the college discovered that she was "colored," however, the scholarship was withdrawn. The injustice of it all plunged her into a depression. She fled to live with an older sister in New York City, where the only work she could obtain was as a maid. Finding New York difficult to manage on her maid's salary, she reluctantly returned to Wilmington and settled on marriage.

I learned many lessons from what Audre Lorde would term my mother's "biomythography." First, I learned that she saw marriage as a consolation prize. Although she loved and respected my father, a similarly ambitious man whose desire for a college education was no less intense than her own, she considered her decision to marry to be a sign of surrender to a life imposed on her by her race and her gender. Second, I learned that succeeding at upward mobility was a form of resistance. I was determined to overcome the impact of racism and succeed for my mother and for the race. Indeed, for me, my fate and that of my family became intertwined with the fate of my race.

Hazel V. Carby (1998) describes this process in her discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois. She shows how quickly autobi-

ography fuses with “we, the black community” because of the experience of racism (30). Carby notes that, to make this link, “Du Bois had to situate himself as both an exceptional and a representative individual: to be different from and maintain a distance between his experience and that of the masses of black people, while simultaneously integrating his existential being with that of his imagined community of people” (30–31). My mother’s stories about her family taught me that, however different or exceptional I might be, my fate was tied to that of all black people. The segregated, racist world kept our fortunes linked. As I suggest in Chapter 1, “Black Feminist Interventions,” it is easy to confuse one’s personal and class-based needs with the needs of “the race.” My family prepared me for upward mobility by helping me construct my personal goals as race goals.

Carby is particularly concerned with showing the way that Du Bois was formed as a gendered intellectual. She argues that the needs of the black male elite became synonymous with the needs of the race. Much of my book is designed to expose the black feminist revisions of this narrative. Fortunately for me, my mother’s counterdiscourse was consciously gendered.

Of course, there was much that Pearline did not tell me. After her death, I learned about some of the stories she suppressed. Most important, she left much unsaid about her mother, Sade. I knew that Sade had been a midwife and had delivered my two oldest brothers. My mother told me that Grandmom Sade had experienced bouts of severe depression and had often refused to leave her room for months. Yet her reputation as a healer and wise woman was such that she received many visitors in that room. Even as my mother told me of Sade’s influence in the community and the trust that

many placed in her knowledge of folk medicine, I sensed that my mother felt, at best, an ambivalence about my grandmother. I sensed that Pearline wanted to be the kind of mother that she wished she had had herself, and we did indeed become very close. I asked for more details about Sade, but my mother's stories were uncharacteristically vague.

Some time after my mother died, her only remaining sibling out of nine started to fill in the picture for me. Aunt Clara, then in her eighties, began by telling a story about a horse she had as a young girl. I had always loved her animal stories because she could make the animals seem to come alive. Suddenly, she spoke to me as if she had something to confess. It seems that Sade was a midwife who did abortions. She was arrested after a failed abortion that sent a young white woman to the hospital. My grandmother was fortunate to serve only a short sentence, after which she promised both the authorities and her children that she would stop performing abortions. But she was arrested again for performing an abortion on another young white woman. This time my grandmother served over a year in jail.

I do not know why Aunt Clara chose to tell me about Sade at that time. I was shocked to learn that my mother kept this secret from me. Now my grandmother's depression began to make more sense to me. I asked my father if he knew about my grandmother, and he filled in more details. These events in my grandmother's life had occurred when he and my mother were still in high school, before they were married. Apparently, my mother had been very angry with my grandmother for being arrested a second time. Both my father and my aunt told me that the arrest had mortified my mother, and she had created quite a scene. My grandmother had defended her own actions by saying she had

always done abortions “down the country” without trouble and she did not see anything wrong with them. But my mother’s desire for respectability was undermined by Sade’s jailbird status, the sexualized nature of her “crime,” and its link to white people.

So why do I tell a story that would humiliate my mother? First, I believe that, if she were alive, I could bring her not only to understand the feminist implications in this story but also to think of her mother as a heroic woman from the country who performed a service for women that the state unjustly sought to regulate. Second, I think the story illustrates the way messages can be passed along intergenerationally by suppressing certain narratives or by omitting key facts. In the case of the silenced story about my grandmother, the messages were multiple, including the need to be careful with white people and the importance of respectability around issues of sexuality.

Throughout the essays in this book, I interrogate the ideology of respectability that has motivated many African Americans, from black nationalists to black feminists. The ideology of respectability is one of a number of strategies that African Americans have developed to create unity. I am particularly concerned with the ways that we build political cohesion and form community by drawing too narrowly the boundaries of our (imagined) community. As I suggest in *“Africa on My Mind”* (1990), our efforts to form community often depend on the demonization of too many people. And as I demonstrate in Chapter 1, the politics of respectability are double-edged. Yet I do not want my writings to be taken as an argument that African Americans pay too much attention to racism. Racism is real and destructive; it needs a consciously political response. But I believe that a

successful response needs to take into account the reality that African Americans are structured in dominance by class, gender, sexuality, and more.

Given this fragmentation, we often struggle over who gets to define the race, who is in the race, and what the meaning of blackness is. As Cathy Cohen (1999; Cohen and Jones 1999) argues, the failure to recognize that the boundaries of blackness should be expansive leads to inadequate political responses. Besides limiting the effectiveness of great thinkers such as James Baldwin, narrow boundaries lead to other negative consequences. For example, the homophobic tendency to exclude gay and lesbian African Americans from the black community weakens the entire community. Homophobia causes gay and bisexual men to feel compelled to keep their sexual practices secret, which allows AIDS to circulate uncontrollably. Also of great concern is the growing number of homeless gay, lesbian, and transgender youth who end up on the streets because they have been thrown out of their homes or harassed out of their neighborhoods. We cannot afford to lose these children.

This book tracks back and forth between a focus on the racism of the larger society and the narratives that African Americans develop to counter racism. As the chapters explore black counterdiscourses, they expose the ways that race, gender, sexuality, and class categories intertwine and transform each other. Categories such as race and gender are created to help the world make sense to us. These categories do not exist “out there” in the world. Rather, they are analytical categories that are always structured hierarchically and that have real consequences for real people.

This book explores the relationships between categories such as race and sexuality and the narratives we tell about

ourselves. In navigating this difficult terrain, the book exposes the boundaries that we have constructed to create blackness. Boundaries are not bad in and of themselves. Rather, they must be constructed to be effective in the political arena. As part of our struggle, we must include the placement of those boundaries. And we must make the boundaries as elastic and expansive as possible.

### Outline of the Book

The first chapter in this book, "Black Feminist Interventions," is designed to help people read black feminist theory. I have been frustrated by the tendency to read this body of literature uncritically. I think that black feminists will grow as thinkers if we engage each other's ideas more seriously. We need to put aside the beliefs that racists are looking for us to reveal our failures and that we must not evaluate each other's work honestly. I believe we are strong enough to withstand critical scrutiny.

In 1983, the editors of *Radical America* responded to my concerns and asked me to write a review essay of nonfiction black feminist writing. The article that resulted from that effort was "Listening to the Voices of Black Feminism." Because I remain concerned about the lack of critical engagement with black feminism, I have updated that review and given it a new frame as Chapter 1 in this book.

As with the earlier essay, Chapter 1 explores the intertwined relationships between race, gender, class, and sexuality and the black feminist probing of these relationships. As the chapter explores the rise of second-wave black feminism, it exposes the limitations of the hegemonic narrative that tries to convince us that feminism is an exclusively white



affair that has little to do with black realities. Then the chapter turns to what black feminists have had to say about four common themes: the slave past, class, family, and sexuality.

The chapter as a whole examines the contradictory project of representation on which black feminists have embarked. It asks the following: Where is class in black feminist analysis? What is the relationship between middle-class feminists who are based in the academy and other black women about whom they write? What is the impact of sexuality on black feminist thought? Here and in other chapters in this book, I ask who speaks for the race and who gets to define the race.

In a book that focuses so heavily on African-American counterdiscourses, it is necessary to remember that not all discourses have the same power. Racists have greater ability to mobilize institutionalized power in this society than do antiracists of any kind. Chapter 2, "The Dark Continent of Our Bodies," stands as a reminder of the kind of narratives that circulate about blacks' and women's inferiority. It also demonstrates that the structure of racist thinking jointly constructs race and gender as categories of analysis.

A colleague of mine who teaches biology suggested that I read science, starting with Charles Darwin, in order to better understand feminist critiques of the life sciences. As it happened, I loved reading nineteenth-century science. Darwin is full of surprises. First, he is a wonderful writer of natural history. Clearly, as many historians of science have pointed out, at least some of his success is a result of his ability to write cogent and convincing prose. Second, although I had been led to believe that evolutionary biology (as opposed to evolutionary sociology) was free of racism and sexism, much of the structure of Darwin's thought was

grounded in racial and gender prejudice. Finally, I was surprised to find that ideas about women and people of color were interdependent in his work; in nineteenth-century science texts, race and gender were constructed in relation to each other.

Chapter 2 is part of a black feminist effort to “talk back” to the scientists who have been so influential in framing a hegemonic and authoritative narrative that is both racist and sexist. Many black feminists have been captivated by the Hottentot Venus, a southern African woman who came to be known under, among other names, the name Saartjie Baartman. In the 1810s, she was taken to England and France as an oddity to be exhibited for profit under carnival-like circumstances. She eventually became an important “specimen” used by Georges Cuvier, the French naturalist and surgeon general to Napoléon Bonaparte, who dissected her in his effort to understand the “missing link” between man and animal. Her dissected body can be found in the Musée de l’homme where it was once a popular exhibit.

The black feminist response to this dehumanizing use of Baartman has come in many forms, including poetry, prose, performance art, and visual art (see, for example, Alexander 1990; Edwards 1997; Green 1994, 1996–97; Sharpley-Whiting 1999; and *Thunder Thigh Revue* 1986). I have noticed that we share certain characteristics in our approach to this topic. We use both hyperbole and understatement to distance ourselves from the pain we experience when we think about this story. And our ironic and sarcastic tones barely mask the anger we feel toward the scientists and carnival hucksters who exploited Baartman. I suspect that black feminist anxiety runs particularly high when we think about this case because so much attention was given to Baart-

man's buttocks. Too many of us are uncomfortable with our own African-like posteriors. It is as if we imagine that we ourselves are being led around by a rope for the pleasure of an audience of boisterous white men. Fortunately, a number of creative artists have managed to find some humor in this identification (see, for example, *Thunder Thigh Revue* 1986).

Chapter 2 places Baartman in the context of Darwin's argument that Africans were of the same species as, but less civilized than, Europeans. I find his efforts both amusing and depressing. He uses humor to describe the Hottentot Venus, but the joke is partially on him: I—a black woman and Baartman's figurative descendant—can critique his arguments. But I am saddened by the reality that his line of thinking still reigns in the popular imagination. Race is seen as “out there in nature,” even as most scientists now believe that race has no biological basis. Even though we have moved into an era of gene splitting, biotechnology, and cyborgs, race remains immutable in the minds of most Americans.

Every three or four years, a new theory emerges that excuses discrimination and gives the scientific basis for supposed African-American inferiority or women's inability to lead. Books such as Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, which we know help condemn many to lives on the margins of this society, come into mainstream discourses on race that try to force us into polite debates. Furthermore, black women's bodies remain the targets of institutionalized racism. In March 2000, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) published a report about the race and gender of airline passengers subjected to searches by the U.S. Customs Service. The GAO found that “race and gender interacted” in such a way that “Black women were

found to be 9 times more likely than White women who were U.S. citizens to be x-rayed after being frisked or patted down in fiscal year 1998 . . . [but] on the basis of x-ray results, Black women who were U.S. citizens were less than half as likely to be found carrying contraband as White women who were U.S. citizens" (GAO 2000a:10). According to the full report, in 1997 and 1998, black women were, respectively, three times and nearly twice as likely as white women to be strip-searched (GAO 2000b).

The GAO report did not offer an explanation for why black women were more likely to be x-rayed and strip-searched than white women even though they were less likely to be carrying contraband. However, it is clear to me that part of the explanation is the racist tradition of viewing black women's bodies as accessible to physical manipulation. Black women are strip-searched to reveal the "truth" of their genitalia and buttocks.

Black feminist efforts to reclaim the life of Baartman and "talk back" to nineteenth-century scientists must be seen in this light. This history resonates for us, because we remain under a regime in which our bodies are open to racist controls. Baartman's case causes especial anxiety, because her experiences represent the physical vulnerabilities that we still face.

In Chapter 2, I also examine the era in which science emerges as the authoritative voice on black women's bodies. I argue that nineteenth-century scientists often used race to explain gender and gender to explain race. And it was partly because these scientific narratives helped make sense of changing race and gender relations for Europeans and Euro-Americans that they became the authoritative discourse in Western life. I look closely at this racist discourse by isolat-

ing the intertwined narratives about race and gender found in Darwin's *The Descent of Man* ([1871] n.d.) and in nineteenth-century issues of *Popular Science Monthly*.

In Chapter 3, "Africa on My Mind," I turn from the analysis of racist discourse to a consideration of Afrocentric discourse. This chapter is a revised version of an article that was first published in the *Journal of Women's History* in 1990. I wrote most of the original essay in Banjul, The Gambia, where I lived for six months on a grant from the Kidder Peabody Foundation. I lived in an exciting compound called Barrakunda, where people spoke many different languages and came from a wide range of class backgrounds. Living in this compound, I felt quite distanced from the nationalist texts I had taken with me to read. What I was reading seemed to have little to do with contemporary Africa. And I came to think that the texts had little to do with the history they purported to represent.

These thoughts led me to take a closer look at the texts to determine what ideological structures underpinned their arguments. Especially because what they had to say about gender in Africa seemed to have little to do with what I was seeing around me in Barrakunda, I wanted to understand in what ways sexism structured their arguments. At the same time, I wished to acknowledge the value that many Afrocentric narratives have in revealing the nature of racist discourses.

Since the first publication of "Africa on My Mind," Paul Gilroy's work on nationalism (1993, 2000) has had a major impact on our understanding of black nationalism. Much of what he has to say about what he calls *raciology* in African-American thought I find useful. Gilroy demonstrates that the structure of African-American *raciology* is like that of nationalist socialism in Nazi Germany. Although I find this

argument provocative and illuminating, I believe that the differing contexts between the two matter more than Gilroy seems to suggest. As I argue in Chapter 3, lack of access to state power distinguishes Afrocentric thought from white supremacy, American patriotism, or German fascism. Moreover, Gilroy dismisses black nationalist insights too quickly. Afrocentric counterdiscourse is Janus-faced. Admittedly, much Afrocentric thought constructs narrow, sexist, and homophobic narratives that help confine black life. I argue, however, that black nationalism helps us understand white racism's impact in our lives.

What I find most distressing about Gilroy's work is that it contributes to the invisibility of the variety of black voices. He writes as if all African-American intellectuals are nationalists. This strategy may make his work seem fresh and unique to an uninformed audience. To those who know the range of black writing, however, it seems remarkably uninformed. I wonder why Gilroy is not in dialogue with non-nationalist voices beyond that of Henry Louis Gates. My own work has circulated in feminist circles for the most part; I do not expect that he has read it. But where are, to name just a few, Adolph Reed, Paulla Ebron, Herman Gray, Patricia Williams, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Phil Harper?

On one hand, Gilroy points out that African Americans are not a unified community and we should not pretend otherwise. On the other hand, he treats us as if our voices are not similarly fragmented. My goal in Chapter 3, as in the rest of this book, is to contribute to an understanding of black society as fragmented and to show respect for the variety of these voices.

The final chapter, "The Evidence of Things Not Seen," brings questions of sexuality to the foreground. I presented

my first version of this essay as a talk at the 1994 Race Matters conference at Princeton University in honor of Cornel West and Toni Morrison. My intention was to help the audience think through the ways in which sexuality and race are intertwined in our thinking. Perhaps because the essay included a call for Morrison to take homosexuality more seriously, it received a mixed reception. Some people seemed offended that I criticized Morrison at all. Some of my comments were also misinterpreted as (1) being unsympathetic toward Baldwin and (2) using standards that emerged only after his death to judge him unfairly.

When it came time for the conference papers to be published, I was informed that my essay was “too personal” and it would be omitted from the volume. This charge reminded me of the dismissal of feminist critiques in the 1970s as too apolitical. At that time, raising questions about gender did not seem scholarly or political. Feminists responded with the now well-known phrase: The personal is political.

Clearly, my essay was transgressive. I had indeed used Morrison’s ideas from *Playing in the Dark* (1992b) and “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (1989) to read her own work and to reveal her tendency to escape from knowledge about queer life among African Americans. As for what were interpreted as criticisms of Baldwin, they were, in fact, largely criticisms of the circumstances around him that made him pay for revealing his homosexuality. In Chapter 4, I argue that there is a connection between African Americans’ willful oblivion to queer lives in our midst and Baldwin’s vulnerability. His life reveals what he showed us in his work: In this country, race and sexuality are inextricably linked. I do not take commenting on Baldwin and offering criticisms

of Morrison lightly. I have learned so much from both writers, and I owe much to the trails that they have blazed. I look for the boundaries of their insights precisely because I hold their work in the highest regard.

The stories that we refuse to tell, like the stories in my own family about breaking unfair state laws, do matter. In the arena of sexuality, we have allowed our history under racism to dictate what we tell about ourselves. It is true that racists have equated blackness with perversity and out-of-control libidos. But the silence around queer lives will not counter that racist narrative. Most important to me, it is in this context of willful oblivion, as Morrison might term it, that queer youth are forced into homelessness and an increasing number are murdered for breaking with the politics of respectability. This book is part of a process of constructing new narratives so that we no longer bear such casualties.