

Breaking Bread

Insurgent Black Intellectual Life

by

bell hooks and Cornel West

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process by which they came to be should provide valuable insights, but they should serve as models to neither imitate nor emulate. Needless to say, these forms thrive on incessant critical innovation and concomitant insurgency.

The Future of the Black Intellectual

The predicament of the Black intellectual need not be grim and dismal. Despite the pervasive racism of American society and anti-intellectualism of the Black Community, critical space and insurgent activity can be expanded. This expansion will occur more readily when Black intellectuals take a more candid look at themselves, the historical and social forces that shape them, and the limited though significant resources of the community from whence they come. A critical "self-inventory"—which this essay schematically sets forth—that scrutinizes the social positions, class locations, and cultural socializations of Black intellectuals is imperative. Such scrutiny should be motivated by neither self-pity nor self-satisfaction. Rather this "self-inventory" should embody the sense of critique and resistance applicable to the Black community, American society, and Western civilization as a whole. James Baldwin has noted that the Black intellectual is "a kind of bastard of the West." The future of the Black intellectual lies neither in a deferential disposition toward the Western parent nor a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation, and insurgent transformation of this hybrid lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world.

Black Women Intellectuals by bell hooks

Often I was in some lonesome wilderness, suffering strange things and agonies...cosmic loneliness was my shadow. Nothing and nobody around me really touched me. It is one of the blessings of this world that few people see visions and dream dreams.

Zora Neale Hurston
Dust Tracks on the Road

We have an obligation as Black women to project ourselves into the revolution...

Kay Lindsey
The Black Woman as a Woman

The enormous space that work occupies in Black women's lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women's existence. It would seem, therefore, that the starting point for an exploration of Black women's lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their roles as workers.

Angela Davis
Women, Race, and Class

Living in a society that is fundamentally anti-intellectual, it is difficult for committed intellectuals concerned with radical social change to affirm in an ongoing way that the work we do has meaningful impact. Within progressive political circles, the work of intellectuals is rarely acknowledged as a form of activism, indeed more visible expressions of concrete activism (like picketing in the streets or traveling to a Third World country and other acts of challenge and resistance) are considered more important to revolutionary struggle than the work of the mind. It is this devaluation of intellectual work that often makes it difficult for individuals from marginalized groups to feel that intellectual work is important, that it is a useful vocation. Throughout our history as African Americans in the United States, Black intellectuals have emerged from all classes and conditions of life. However, the decision to consciously pursue an intellectual path has always been an exceptional and difficult choice. For many of us it has seemed more like a "calling" than a vocational choice. We have been moved, pushed, even, in the direction of intellectual work by forces stronger than that of individual will.

Offering an account of the factors that may motivate Black folks to become intellectuals, Cornel West asserts in his essay "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," "The choice of becoming a Black intellectual is an act of self-imposed marginality; it assures a peripheral status in and to the Black community. The quest for literacy indeed is a fundamental theme in Afro-American history and a basic impulse in the Black community. But for Blacks, as with most Americans, the uses for literacy are usually perceived to be for more substantive pecuniary benefits than those of the writer, artist, teacher, or professor. The reasons some Black people choose to become serious intellectuals are diverse. But in most cases these reasons can be traced back to a common root: a conversion-like experience with a highly influential teacher or peer that convinced one to dedicate one's life to the activities of reading, writing, and conversing for the purposes of individual pleasure, personal worth, and political enhancement of Black (and often other oppressed) people." Though these may be common reasons Black people choose intellectual work, they may co-exist with motivations that are more difficult to name, especially in public space. In my case, I turned towards intellectual work in a desperate search for an oppositional standpoint that would help me survive a painful childhood. Growing up in a segregated, southern, poor and working-class community where education was valued primarily as

a means of class mobility, "intellectual life" was always linked to the career of teaching. It was the outward service as a "teacher" helping to uplift the race, where teachers could gain an individual acceptance within Black community, rather than a privatized, intellectual "inner" life. Growing up in such a world, it was more than evident that there was a socially understood difference between excelling academically and becoming an intellectual. Anyone could teach but not everyone would be an intellectual. And while the role of teacher earned one status and respect, being "too learned," being too intellectual, meant that one risked being seen as weird, strange, and possibly even mad.

Learning early on that good grades were rewarded while independent thinking was regarded with suspicion, I knew that it was important to be "smart" but not "too smart." Being too smart was synonymous with intellectuality and that was cause for concern, especially if one was female. For a smart child in underclass and poor Black communities, to ask too many questions, to talk about ideas that differed from the prevailing community world view, to say things grown Black folks relegated to the realm of the unspeakable was to invite punishment and even abuse. There have yet to be extensive psychoanalytic studies discussing the fate of gifted Black children raised in homes where their brilliance of mind was not valued but made them "freaks" who were persecuted and punished.

During adolescence, I underwent a conversion process that pushed me towards intellectual life. Constantly persecuted and punished in our family, my attempts to understand my lot pushed me in the direction of critical analytical thought. Standing at a distance from my childhood experience, looking at it with a detached disengagement, was for me a survival strategy. To use psychoanalyst Alice Miller's term, I became my own "enlightened witness," able to analyze the forces that were acting upon me, and through that understanding able to sustain a separate sense of my self. Wounded, at times persecuted and abused, I found the life of the mind a refuge, a sanctuary where I could experience a sense of agency and thereby construct my own subject identity. This lived recognition of how the mind engaged in critical thought could be used in the service of survival, how it could be a healing force in my struggle to fight childhood despair enabled me to become an autonomous self in the dysfunctional household and led me to value intellectual work. I valued it not because it brought status or

recognition but because it offered resources to enhance survival and my pleasure in living.

Never thinking of intellectual work as being in any way divorced from the politics of everyday life, I consciously chose to become an intellectual because it was that work which allowed me to make sense of my reality and the world around me, to confront and comprehend the concrete. This experience provided the groundwork for my understanding that intellectual life need not lead one to be estranged from community but rather might enable one to participate more fully in the life of family and community. It early confirmed what Black leaders in the 19th century well knew—that intellectual work is a necessary part of liberation struggle, central to the efforts of all oppressed and/or exploited people who would move from object to subject, who would decolonize and liberate their minds.

When Black scholars write about Black intellectual life, they usually focus solely on the lives and works of Black men. Unlike Harold Cruse's massive work *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, which focuses no attention on the work of Black women intellectuals, Cornel West's essay "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual" was written at a historical moment when there was a feminist focus on gender that should have led any scholar to consider the impact of sex roles and sexism. Yet West does not specifically look at Black female intellectual life. He does not acknowledge the impact of gender or discuss the way sexist notions of male/female roles are factors that inform and shape both our sense of who the Black intellectual is or can be, as well as their relation to a world of ideas beyond individual productions. Despite the historical evidence that Black women have always played a major role as teachers, critical thinkers, and cultural theorists in Black life, particularly in segregated Black communities, there is very little written about Black female intellectuals. When most Black folks think about "great minds" they most often conjure up male images.

Whenever I ask students to name Black intellectuals, without requesting that they be gender-specific, they invariably name Black men: Du Bois, Delaney, Garvey, Malcolm X, and even contemporary folks like Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates are mentioned. If I request that they be gender specific they readily name these Black men and hesitate as they mentally search for the names of Black women. After much pause, they begin to call out the names of famous contemporary Black women writers, usually Alice Walker or Toni Morrison. Now and then Angela Davis's name ap-

pears on the list. They do not know the work of 19th century Black women intellectuals. Black women critical thinkers who would be perfect counterparts to Du Bois and Delaney are not known. The names of Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell and even the more widely circulated name of Ida B. Wells are not on the tip of everybody's tongue. In her introduction to the Schomburg edition of Anna Julia Cooper's 1892 text *A Voice From The South*, Mary Helen Washington emphasizes both the importance of Black female intellectual work and the reality that it has yet to receive deserved acknowledgement and recognition. Washington asserts: "Without women like Fannie Barrier Williams, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Jackson Coppin, Victoria Earle Matthews, Frances Harper, Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper, we would know very little about the conditions of nineteenth-century Black women's lives, and yet the Black intellectual tradition, until very recently, has virtually ignored them and devalued their scholarship as clearly subordinate to that produced by Black men."

While it is not too surprising that students are unable to name 19th century Black women intellectuals, it is shocking that they do not know the work of contemporary Black women thinkers like Hortense Spillers, Hazel Carby, Patricia Williams, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, to name a few. Sexist subordination in Black intellectual life continues to obscure and devalue the work of Black female intellectuals. This is why it is so difficult for students to name us. And those students who invoke the names of Walker and Morrison have rarely read their non-fiction work, and often have no clue as to the scope and range of their thought. Black women intellectuals who are not "famous writers" (and not all writers are intellectuals) remain virtually invisible in this society. That invisibility is both a function of institutionalized racism, sexism, and class exploitation, and a reflection of the reality that large numbers of Black women do not choose intellectual work as their vocation.

Working with Black female students within the academy who express extreme reticence about the value and importance of intellectual work has motivated me to critically examine the relationship of Black women to intellectual work, to ask questions: how many Black women would see themselves as being intellectuals? How do we make a living? Are we all in the academy? Where are our essays on intellectual production, etc.? Many of the Black female students I encounter are uncertain about intellectual work. I am awed by the depths of anti-intellectualism they are assaulted by and internalize. Many of them express contempt for intellectual

work because they do not see it as having a meaningful connection to "real life" or the realm of concrete experience. Others who are interested in pursuing intellectual work are assailed by doubt because they do not feel there are Black female role models and mentors or they feel the individual Black female intellectuals they encounter do not receive rewards and recognition for their work.

Black female intellectuals working in colleges and universities confront head-on a world that outsiders might imagine would welcome our presence that most often views our intellectuality as "suspect." Folks may be comfortable with the presence of Black female academics and may even desire that presence, but they are less welcoming of Black women who present themselves as committed intellectuals who need institutional support, time, and space to pursue this dimension of their reality. Black woman law professor Patricia Williams in her new collection of essays, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, writes eloquently of the way Black female students and professors engage in critical thinking, intellectual work that threatens the status quo and makes it difficult for us to receive necessary support and affirmation. Naming that racism and sexism combined ensures that we will be seen by colleagues with narrow perspectives as intruders. Williams makes it clear that "outsider status is a kind of unresolved wound." Some of us choose then to deny our intellectual ability so as not to confront this reality. Others may choose to be academics but eschew the category "intellectual." In his recent collection of essays *The Significance of Theory*, Terry Eagleton includes an essay "Criticism, Ideology and Fiction," wherein he clarifies the difference between academics (who may or may not be intellectuals) and intellectuals. If one looks at the traditional Western understanding of the intellectual, then it seems to me to be characterized by at least two distinct questions. An intellectual is not simply somebody who trades in ideas. I have many colleagues who trade in ideas whom I'd be extremely reluctant to call intellectuals. An intellectual is somebody who trades in ideas by transgressing discursive frontiers, because he or she sees the need to do that. Secondly, an intellectual is somebody who trades in ideas in their vital bearing on a wider political culture. Eagleton's distinction rests on the assumption of a quality of critical openness that enables transgression. Clearly, he considers it essential that intellectuals be creative thinkers, explorers in the realm of ideas who are able to push to the limits and beyond, following ideas in whatever direction they might take.

It is the sexist/racist Western conception of who and what an intellectual is that rules out the possibility that Black women will come to mind as representatives of intellectual vocation. Indeed, within White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the entire culture works to deny Black women the opportunity to pursue a life of the mind, makes the intellectual realm a place "off limits." Like our 19th century female ancestors, it is only through active resistance that we claim our right to assert an intellectual presence. Sexism and racism working together perpetuate an iconography of Black female representation that impresses on the collective cultural consciousness the idea that Black women are on this planet primarily for the purpose of serving others. From slavery to the present day, the Black female body has been seen in Western eyes as the quintessential symbol of a "natural" female presence that is organic, closer to nature, animalistic, primitive. Exploring the conflation of woman and nature in *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant writes:

The image of nature that became important in the early modern period was that of a disorderly and chaotic realm to be subdued and controlled...wild uncontrollable nature was associated with the female. The images of both nature and woman were two-sided. The virgin nymph offered peace and serenity, the earth mother nurture and fertility, but nature also brought plagues, famines, and tempests. Similarly, woman was both virgin and witch, the Renaissance courtly lover placed her on a pedestal; the inquisitor burned her at the stake. The witch, symbol of the violence of nature, raised storms, caused illness, destroyed crops, obstructed generations, and killed infants. Disorderly woman, like chaotic nature, needed to be controlled.

Among those groups of women murdered as witches in colonial American society, Black females have been historically perceived as embodying a "dangerous" female nature that must be controlled. More so than any group of women in this society, Black women have been seen as "all body, no mind." The use of Black female bodies in slavery as incubators for the breeding of other slaves was the practical exemplification of the notion that "disorderly woman" should be controlled. To justify White male sexual exploitation and rape of Black females during slavery, White culture had to produce an iconography of Black female bodies that insisted on representing them as highly sexed, the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism. Such representations im-

pressed on everyone's consciousness the notion that Black women were all body and no mind. Their cultural currency continues to inform how Black females are perceived. Seen as "sexual sign," Black female bodies are placed in a category that, culturally speaking, is deemed far removed from the life of the mind. Within the sex/race/class hierarchies of the United States, Black women have always resided at the bottom. Lowly status is reserved in this culture for those deemed incapable of social mobility because they are perceived in sexist, racist, and classist terms as deficient, inadequate, inferior.

Overall representations of Black females in contemporary mass media continue to identify us as more sexual, as earthy freakish, out of control. And the popular success of a polemical work like Shahrazad Ali's *The Black Man's Guide to Understanding The Black Woman*, which insists that Black women are the intellectual inferiors of Black men, have smaller brains, etc., indicates the extent to which many Black people internalize sexist/racist thinking about Black female identity. Like those misogynist Renaissance treatises, Ali's book associates Black women with nature, with sexuality, asserting the primary thesis that we must be "controlled."

Running counter to representations of Black females as sexual savages, sluts, and/or prostitutes is the "mammy" stereotype. Again, this image inscribes Black female presence as signified by the body, in this case the construction of woman as mother, as "breast," nurturing and sustaining the life of others. Significantly, the proverbial "mammy" cares for all the needs of others, particularly those most powerful. Her work is characterized by selfless service. Despite the fact that most households in the United States do not have Black maids or nannies working in them, racist and sexist assumptions that Black women are somehow "innately" more capable of caring for others continues to permeate cultural thinking about Black female roles. As a consequence, Black women in all walks of life, from corporate professionals and university professors to service workers, complain that colleagues, co-workers, supervisors, etc. ask them to assume multi-purpose caretaker roles, be their guidance counselors, nannies, therapists, priests; i.e., to be that all nurturing "breast"—to be the mammy. While these Black women are no longer forced by racist exploitative labor practices to "serve" solely in jobs deemed menial, they are still expected to clean up everyone's mess. And it is not simply the White world that brings these expectations to bear on Black women; they are also imposed by Black men and children who also believe that Black

women should serve them. Sexist assumptions about women's roles inform the Black communities' expectations of Black women. Many Black folks share the assumptions held by diverse groups in this society that women are "inherently" destined to selflessly serve others. This thinking is often reinforced in Black communities by religious teaching emphasizing the necessity of selfless service as the highest expression of Christian charity. Collectively, many Black women internalize the idea that they should serve, that they should always be available to meet the need of someone else whether they want to or not.

Cultural insistence that Black women be regarded as "service workers" no matter our job or career status as well as Black female passive acceptance of such roles may be the major factor preventing more Black women from choosing to become intellectuals. Intellectual work, even when it is deemed socially relevant, is not seen as "selfless work." Indeed, a prevailing cultural stereotype of an intellectual is someone who is usually self-centeredly preoccupied with their ideas. Even in those cultural arenas where intellectual work is most respected, it is most often seen as work that emerges from self-engagement and self-involvement. Even though Black intellectual men like Du Bois have linked the life of the mind to various forms of political activism, they were self-focused in their pursuit of ideas. Talking with Black women, both academic and non-academic, about our relation to the world of ideas, to seeking knowledge and knowledge production, one of the consistent themes that emerged was the fear of appearing selfish, of not doing work that was seen as directly recognizable as extending beyond the self and "serving" others. Many Black females, myself included, described childhood experiences where the longing to read, contemplate, and talk about a broad range of ideas was discouraged, seen as frivolous activity, or as activity that indulged in too intensely would lead us to be selfish, cold, cut off from feelings and estranged from community. In childhood, if I did not place household chores above the pleasures of reading and thinking, grown-ups threatened to punish me by burning my books, by forbidding me to read. Although this never happened, it impressed on my consciousness the sense that it was somehow not only "wrong" to prefer being alone reading, thinking, writing, but was somehow dangerous to my well-being and a gesture insensitive to the welfare of others. In adulthood, I spent years believing (and therefore making it so) that it was important for me to complete every other task no matter how inconsequential before doing intellectual work.

Of course, I would often arrive at the space intended for such work tired, weary, lacking in energy. Early sexist socialization that teaches Black women, and indeed most women, that mind work must always be secondary to housework, childcare, or a host of other caretaking activities has made it difficult for women to make intellectual work a central priority even when our social circumstances would indeed offer rewards for this activity.

Among Black women thinkers who work as academics, many individuals that I spoke with, felt that their longing to devote time and energy to intellectual work could not be fulfilled because they found themselves perpetually juggling multiple demands. Rightfully complaining that they lack time to pursue intellectual work freely and fully, they also expressed fear that too passionate pursuit of intellectual goals would cut them off from meaningful relational activity. Still, they did not seem eager to interrogate the reasons why they are reluctant, or in some cases downright unable, to claim intellectual work as worthy of primary attention. Focusing particularly on Black females who had completed graduate courses but had stopped at the dissertation writing level, I found they were the most mired in contradictory feelings about the value of academic and/or intellectual work, and that these feelings psychologically blocked their ability to complete this final requirement. It occurred to me that dissertation writing is that moment in one's graduate work where we confront most directly what it means to engage in solitary thinking and writing. For most students, it is that graduate experience which best exemplifies the individualistic character of scholarly thought and work.

One writes alone, usually spending much time in isolation. Often it is difficult to maintain a sense of engagement in community. Black women who have been socialized to devalue or feel guilty about time spent away from others may not be able to claim or create space for isolated writing. This is especially so for Black women who are parents. Single parents must often grapple with concrete material hindrances that do not enable them to focus intensely on thinking and writing even if they so desired. Still, there are individuals without relational or material constraints who are as reluctant as their less advantaged counterparts to claim intellectual work as their primary vocation. Again and again the fear of "isolation" from community or the sense that life was not well lived if not experienced in community was identified as a barrier preventing Black women from wholeheartedly choosing intellectual work. For these barriers to be overcome, individual Black women who are

able to remain devoted to an intellectual vocation even as we experience ourselves as connected in community must chart this journey, naming the process.

In "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," Cornel West addresses the conflicts that arise when Black intellectuals are faced with a "bourgeois model of intellectual activity" that puts us on the defensive: "There is always the need to assert and defend the humanity of Black people, including their ability and capacity to reason logically, think coherently, and write lucidly. The weight of this inescapable burden for Black students in the White academy has often determined the content and character of Black intellectual activity." These conflicts seem particularly acute for Black women who must also fight against those racist/sexist stereotypes that continually lead others (and even ourselves) to question whether or not we are competent, whether we are capable of intellectual excellence. For Black women scholars and/or intellectuals, writing style may evoke questions of political allegiance. Using a style that may gain one academic acceptance and recognition may further estrange one from a wider Black reading audience. Again, one confronts in a different way questions of isolation and community involvement. Choosing to write in a traditional academic style may lead to isolation. And even if one writes along the lines of accepted academic style there is no guarantee that one's work will be respected.

Often Black thinkers fear our work will not be taken seriously by a larger audience, that it will be seen as lacking in some manner. Such fears inhibit intellectual production. Writing essays that include confessional reflections, I initially felt uncertain about whether they would speak to an audience beyond myself and my friends. When I published my first collection of essays, *Talking Back*, I was surprised by the many letters I received from Black women discussing the essay which focused on the difficulties I faced as a graduate student. Stories of persecution by professors, peers, and professional colleagues poured in. Accounts of Black females being interrogated by those seeking to ferret out whether the individual was capable of completing work, of thinking logically, of writing coherently were a norm. These forms of harassment often undermine Black women's capacity to convey skill and intellectual ability. Then there were the stories—told through letters—of depression and life-threatening despair. Overall, these letters confirm that the choice to pursue an academic and/or intellectual career in the socially legitimate manner continues to be an arduous

task for Black females. Even though there are certainly many more Black women academics than ever before, they are often anti-intellectual (a stance which is often a consequence of the pain they have endured as students or as professors who are regarded with suspicion and contempt by peers). In their daily life they may insist that work which speaks directly to concrete experience is more valuable than those forms of intellectual work that are not produced to be marketed to a mass audience. Given the lack of sustained public affirmation and support for Black females choosing intellectual vocations, when confronting such work in isolation, in private spaces, it is not surprising that individual Black women may find themselves overwhelmed by doubts, that such spaces may intensify fears of lack, fears that one's ideas could not possibly be worthy of a hearing. Black women must re-vision notions of intellectual work that enable us to embrace a concern with a life of the mind and the welfare of community.

In "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," West is extremely critical of those bourgeois models of intellectual life that conceive of it solely in individualistic or elitist terms, offering the "insurgency" model as an alternative. He asserts: "Instead of the solitary hero, embattled exile, and isolated genius—the intellectual as star, celebrity, commodity—this model privileges collective individual work that contributes to communal resistance and struggle." While the idea of insurgency provides a useful counterpoint to the bourgeois model in theory, West does not address the concrete reality of what circumstances, what material conditions enable and promote intellectual work. Indeed, without privileging the notion of "isolated" genius one must honestly name the reality that much intellectual work takes place in isolation, is informed by time spent in contemplation, reverie, and active writing. How can Black women grapple with choosing needed isolation without buying into the bourgeois model? Any discussion of intellectual work that does not emphasize the conditions that make such work possible misrepresents the concrete circumstances that allow for intellectual production. Indeed, Black women struggling to strengthen and deepen our commitment to intellectual work know that we must confront the issue of "isolation," our fear of it, our fear that it estranges us from community inhibits full pursuit of intellectual work. Within patriarchy, men have always had the freedom to isolate themselves from family and community, to do autonomous work and re-enter a relational world when they chose, irrespective of their class status. It is the image of a male figure seeking aloneness to do the

work of the mind that is common in mass media, and not that of the female. That patriarchal world which supports and affirms male re-entry into family and community after time apart often punishes females for choosing to do autonomous work. Recent studies (like Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift*) which examine the gendered nature of household chores indicate that working women continue to do most housework. So, before that isolated Black woman intellectual can re-enter a relational community, it is likely that she must first assume responsibility for a variety of household chores.

Clearly, Black women academics and intellectuals often are unable to claim necessary alone time to do their work. Discussing the question of isolation with Black women peers and students, I was not surprised to discover that the majority of us had little experience of being alone or working alone. This may be especially true for Black females from poor and working-class backgrounds where limited space and sheer numbers of bodies in a given household made time alone an impossibility. Raised in a large household, it was only when I went to college that I realized I had never been alone a day in my life. Black females raised in sexist households were not placed in situations where we could spend time alone. In fact, it was usually the opposite. We were constantly placed in settings with chaperones or company (in the old days, of course, this was to protect female virtue). Concurrently, it was deemed "unnatural" for a girl who needed to learn how to parent and be a homemaker to spend time alone.

Feminist research on parenting indicates that females are socialized to develop relational skills that enhance our ability to care for others. Such socialization was and is usually made explicit in traditional Black households. Since many Black females have been raised in homes with working mothers, they assumed responsibility for household chores and the care of others early on. Time alone for thinking has not been traditionally valued for Black girls. And even though poor and working-class Black males may not have been raised in settings that overtly valued time alone, males were able to inhabit spaces by themselves, to stand on corners alone and contemplate the universe, sit on rooftops etc. In discussion with other Black females, I found that our time to think usually happened only when domestic chores were done. It was often stolen time. And at times one had to choose between having that space or relational pleasures, hanging out with friends or family. Black women intellectuals know the value of time spent alone. Many Black female thinkers that I interviewed talked about finding

it difficult to sit down and write for long stretches of time. Some of this difficulty emerges because individuals may not know how to be comfortable in alone space with alone activity. Certainly not all intellectual work occurs in isolation (some of our best ideas emerge in the context of exchange) but this reality co-exists with the reality that solitary contemplation of ideas is a crucial component of the intellectual process. To feel we have a right to solitary time, Black women must break with conventional sexist/racist notions of woman's role.

Within a White supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal social context like this culture, no Black woman can become an intellectual without decolonizing her mind. Individual Black women may become successful academics without undergoing this process and, indeed, maintaining a colonized mind may enable them to excel in the academy but it does not enhance the intellectual process. The insurgency model that Cornel West advocates, appropriately identifies both the process Black females must engage to become intellectuals and the critical standpoints we must assume to sustain and nurture that choice. To counter the internalized low self-esteem that is constantly actively imposed on Black females in a racist/sexist, anti-intellectual culture, those of us who would become intellectuals must be ever vigilant. We must develop strategies to gain critical assessment of our worth and value that do not compel us to look for critical evaluation and affirmation from the very structures, institutions, and individuals who do not believe in our capacity to learn. Often, we must be able to affirm that the work we do is valuable even if it has not been deemed worthy within socially legitimized structures. Affirming in isolation that work we do can have a meaningful impact in a collective framework, we must often take the initiative in calling attention to our work in ways that reinforce and strengthen a sense of audience.

As a Black woman intellectual writing feminist theory from a standpoint that has as its central scholarly agenda understanding the specific nature of Black gender politics, and as its political task challenging racist and sexist thinking, I began this work in an academic context even though few people in the academy affirmed my efforts. Talking with working-class Black people at various jobs, with folks in the communities I was raised and/or lived in, I found individuals to affirm and encourage my work. This encouragement was crucial to my success. I could not have continued to work in isolation—my spirits would have been depressed. And even though my work is now widely affirmed in academic settings,

I remain most grateful for those non-academic individuals who encouraged me when that support was not there in the socially legitimate place. It is impossible for Black female intellectuals to blossom if we do not have a core belief in ourselves, in the value of our work, and a corresponding affirmation from the world around us that can sustain and nurture. Often we cannot look to traditional places for recognition of our value; we bear the responsibility for seeking out and even creating different locations.

The politics of patriarchy makes the situation of Black male intellectuals distinct from that of Black women. Though they confront racism, they do not confront gender biases. And as has already been stated, since they are seen as legitimate members of an established intellectual tradition, their work is less suspect and often more rewarded than that of Black women. Importantly, Black female intellectuals need the support and encouragement of Black male peers. Often sexism stands in the way of Black males offering this support. Concurrently, academic competitiveness militates against the formation of Black intellectual communities that cross institutions and disciplines. Such communities emerge from the resistance efforts of Black women and men who recognize that we strengthen our positions by supporting one another.

West insists that "the major priority of Black intellectuals should be the creation or reactivation of institutional networks that promote high-quality critical habits primarily for the purpose of Black insurgency." Taking this proposition a step further, it is crucial that such efforts encompass Black intellectuals who may not have any formal institutional affiliation. This is especially crucial for Black women since many exceptional female critical thinkers do not work in academic settings. Asserting that "the central task of postmodern Black intellectuals is to stimulate, hasten, and enable alternative perceptions and practice by dislodging prevailing discourses and powers," West offers a paradigm that allows for an emphasis on ending sexism and sexist oppression as a necessary pre-condition for Black intellectual insurgency. For it is only as Black females and Black males work against the sexist conditioning that promotes the assumption that intellectual work is exclusively the domain of males, or that their work is more important, that we can create communities and environments, that fully promote and sustain our intellectual work. And it is only our vigilant interrogation of sexist biases and practices that will enable Black men to encourage and value the work of Black female peers. This would mean that Black male intellectuals would take our work se-

riously, that they would cease to pay lip-service to the idea of ending sexism while continually ignoring or appropriating ideas. When Black male intellectuals refer to the work of Black female peers and use it constructively in diverse settings (classrooms, lectures etc.), they help bring greater visibility to Black women, strengthening bonds of solidarity. We see this in the work of Black male intellectuals, Manning Marable, Derrick Bell, and Kobena Mercer, to name a few. Concurrently, non-Black allies could best express solidarity by not condoning and supporting Black male appropriation of Black female scholarly labor.

As diverse Black communities grapple with issues of gender, and as the work of feminist scholars is read and/or talked about more widely in such settings, Black female intellectuals will not only have greater recognition and visibility; there will be greater encouragement for young scholars to choose intellectual paths. Despite the many difficulties that surface when Black women choose intellectual work, the possibilities of meaningful reward serve as a counterforce motivating and sustaining us. These rewards may not always be conventional expressions of regard. They may be given by communities who have no contact with academic institutions. Letters from Black men who are in prison and using that time to educate themselves for critical consciousness have been a source of inspiration for my work. When an imprisoned Black male comrade writes me to say, "Your work has touched me in ways that made me strive to be whole," it affirms that intellectual work can connect us with a world outside the academy, can deepen and enrich our sense of community. This is the message I most want to share with young Black females who fear that intellectual work estranges us from the "real" world. In fact, when we do insurgent intellectual work that speaks to a diverse audience, to masses of people with different class, race, or educational backgrounds, we become part of communities of resistance, coalitions that are not conventional. Intellectual work only estranges us from Black communities when we do not relate or share in myriad ways our concerns. That sharing has to go beyond the written word since many Black folks are barely literate or are illiterate. Talking in churches and homes, in both formal and informal ways, we can share the work we do. By acknowledging that reward, understanding, and recognition is, can be, and will be given to us from unconventional places and by valuing these sources of affirmation Black intellectuals call attention to a counter hegemonic system of legitimation and valuation that either in conjunction with the work we

do in institutions or as an alternative to it can legitimize and sustain our work.

The affirmation that has come to me from individuals and locations that are on the margins strengthens and inspires me. I call attention to it not to be self-serving but to provide a countertestimony, one that opposes the usual insistence that there can be no meaningful exchange, contact, influence, of intellectuals with everyday folks who may have no educational background. West ends his essay "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," with the uplifting comments: "The predicament of the Black intellectual need not be grim and dismal. Despite the pervasive racism of American society and anti-intellectualism of the Black Community, critical space and insurgent activity can be expanded. This expansion will occur more readily when Black intellectuals take a more candid look at themselves, the historical and social forces that shape them, and the limited though significant resources of the community from whence they come." Ongoing critiques of sexism expand that space and make it possible for the contributions of Black women to be valued. Until then, racism and sexism will continue to inform how the work of African American women is regarded.

My awareness of the particular dilemmas Black women intellectuals face was deepened when I began my first full-time teaching job at Yale University. At that time, I was one of two African American women in Yale college. During my stay there the senior Black woman, art historian Sylvia Boone, was tenured. Whenever I called attention to the relative absence of Black women scholars at this institution, naming the impact of sexism and racism, I was told again and again by White male colleagues, "If Black women are not here, it is not because Yale is racist, it is that Black women are simply not good enough." These comments compelled me to critically focus on the ways sexist and racist representations of Black women intellectuals inform the way we are perceived, put in place structures that legitimate the devaluation of our work.

Until my time at Yale, I had not really thought it important or necessary to openly declare myself an "intellectual" and to encourage other Black women to do the same, to make their presence known, to convey our thoughts about the intellectual process. Yearly, I see many brilliant young scholars turn their backs on intellectual work because they feel so diminished in institutions, because they feel their voices are not valued in the larger society. Concern for the future of Black female students, whose intellectual ideas, scholarship and writing are sorely needed has motivated me

to do the "critical self-inventory" West advocates and to publically discuss personal experience, giving personal testimony that may encourage and uplift. In the process of critical self-evaluation I realized how I had been socialized not to speak about commitment to intellectual life, but rather to see that as a private, almost "secret" choice. By not speaking about this choice, I was also not conveying to Black female students the joys and pleasures of intellectual work. If I and other Black women, particularly those of us who work in academic settings, only talk about the difficulties, we paint a gloomy picture that may lead students to see intellectual work as diminishing and disabling. Often in conversations with students, particularly young Black females, I am asked by students to discuss aspects of my personal journeying. This passionate inquiry and interrogation often challenges my sense of privacy (such as it is), yet it is rooted in a profound desire on their part to understand the process by which Black women choose intellectual life, where and how we find personal fulfillment. Their longing for Black women intellectuals to chart the journey often places a demand for openness, for candid, honest revelation that may not be placed on male colleagues, or non-Black women. Yet, Black women intellectuals committed to insurgent practices must recognize the call to speak openly about the intellectual life as we know it, about our work as a form of activism.

Oftentimes intellectual work compels confrontation with harsh realities. It may remind us that domination and oppression continue to shape the lives of everyone, especially Black people and people of color. Such work not only draws us closer to the suffering, it makes us suffer. Moving through this pain to work with ideas that may serve as a catalyst for the transformation of our consciousness, our lives, and that of others is an ecstatic and joyous process. When intellectual work emerges from a concern with radical social and political change, when that work is directed to the needs of the people, it brings us into greater solidarity and community. It is fundamentally life-enhancing.

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