

Black Feminism on the Edge: A Conversation between Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto

Ingrid Gessner and Johanna Pitetti-Heil

ABSTRACT: The conversation “Black Feminism in the Edge” was held as the opening keynote conversation (in lieu of a keynote lecture) at the third EAAS Women’s Network Symposium on April 28, 2021, on Zoom. Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto discuss the history and future of Black feminist thought, intersectional feminism, and identity politics. They share their own experience of creating and changing curricula, of seeing genealogies of Black feminism develop, and of institutionalizing Black feminist thought within the U.S. American academy.

KEYWORDS: institutionality; intersectionality, identity politics; bell hooks; Patricia J. Williams; Erica Edwards; Ann duCille; Hortense Spillers; Claudia Tate; Elizabeth Alexander; Brittney Cooper; Imani Perry; Alondra Nelson; Linda M. G. Zerilli

Introduction

Johanna Pitetti-Heil: It is with greatest pleasure that we, the steering committee of the EAAS Women’s Network, welcome you to our 2021 symposium. We thank you all for coming to tonight’s opening keynote conversation and for making space after a busy day of work for the conversations that the keynote event tonight will spark. After a year of scholarly work, teaching, care work, and emotional work during a pandemic, we know that every extra appointment, every additional lecture, and every extra conference adds to the languish (and sometimes sheer exhaustion) that many have been feeling. We are overwhelmed that so many showed interest in our symposium, whether by sending in paper proposals or whether by registering for the event.

We are immensely grateful that we were able to organize our symposium online, and this would not have been possible without the technical support of Paweł Frelik and his team at the University of Warsaw, who are organizing the general EAAS conference this weekend and who provided us with the videoconferencing infrastructure. Thank you, Paweł!

Organizing a conference between four different universities, with organizers with diverse research interests, we decided to choose a topic that is centered around the self-scrutiny of

women's and gender studies and feminist inquiry as critical practice. In our call for papers, we had asked for contributions that discuss and challenge these fields of study, their canons and their archives, and each individual's own situatedness and positionality. One of the main questions we had was how do we do women's and gender studies as critical practice within the institution of the university. This question is, of course, not new. But it is also a question that does not get old. It does not get old because practices of critique require constant challenge, and it is ever more important in the face of new oppositions from the right that have been forming over the past years and that claim "feminist" positions for themselves in order to strengthen their anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, and racist, discourses.

In tonight's keynote conversation between Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto on "Black Feminism on the Edge," we hope to be opening this symposium not only by exploring some of the most salient topics of women and gender studies as a field of institutionalized research, we also want to establish the conversation (and not the lecture) as the method of choice for this symposium and the general work of the EAAS Women's Network.

Ingrid Gessner: It's my great pleasure and honor to introduce our two keynote speakers who will engage in a conversation with each other.

JENNIFER C. NASH is a feminist theorist and the Jean Fox O'Barr Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke. After finishing her undergraduate women's studies major, Jen first trained as a lawyer, attending law school at Harvard University in the hopes of working on feminist legal issues. In an interview, she recently explained that she found the law training useful and classes on women particularly engaging, but much of her coursework, and I would like to quote Jen here, "left her cold," She explained: "There were social and cultural questions about the law that were not answered by my classes."

Jen earned her PhD in African American Studies at Harvard University and her JD at Harvard Law School. She is the author of two award-winning books and countless articles: Her first book *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* was awarded the Alan

Bray Memorial Book Prize by the Gay and Lesbian Quarterly Caucus of the Modern Language Association. Analyzing pornographic films featuring Black women, Jen argued that pleasure—and *our* ideas of pleasure—are “a crucial way in which race maintains its hold on our collective imagination.”

Her tendency to question long held beliefs within Black feminism also guided her second book, which took direct aim at intersectionality. It is called *Black Feminism Reimagined* and was awarded the Gloria Anzaldúa Book Prize by the National Women's Studies Association. Jen is also the editor of the handbook *Gender: Love* with entries on affect, care work, self-love, violence, and many others (2016).

In her third monograph *Birthing Black Mothers* (2021), Jen views Black motherhood as a trending political site and pushes Black feminists to reflect critically on their embrace of crisis rhetoric that casts Black maternal bodies as mere symbols of state violence marked by suffering, trauma, and grief. By examining different Black mothers' self-representations—including Black doulas as well as celebrities like Beyoncé, Serena Williams, and Michelle Obama—Jen invites us to think and envision new modes of Black motherhood.

SAMANTHA PINTO is Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, where she is affiliated faculty of Women's and Gender Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies, The Warfield Center for African American Studies, and LGBTQ Studies. After graduating with an MA and PhD from UCLA, Sam began her career at Georgetown University. There, she co-built the African diaspora literature and African Studies program and helped to establish the African American Studies department, before joining the faculty of the English Department at Austin.

Sam's groundbreaking book, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic*, was the winner of the 2013 William Sanders Scarborough Prize for African American Literature and Culture from the Modern Language Association. *Difficult Diasporas*, as one reviewer remarked, provides us with the “model of what it means to read for a feminist

poetics of diaspora.”¹ In the book, Sam Pinto has excellently strung together African American Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Studies to enable the intersecting future of those fields.

Her second book *Infamous Bodies* came out in 2020 and explores how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Black women celebrities, such as Phillis Wheatley, Sally Hemings, and Mary Seacole, come into political view. In the book, Sam carefully argues for the centrality of race, gender, and sexuality in the formation of political and human rights discourses. Samantha is currently working on a third book called *Under the Skin*. It is a book on African diaspora engagement with the inside of the body, including science discourses. Simultaneously, she is writing a book on feminist ambivalence and divorce.

Together Samantha and Jennifer have recently announced the launch of their book series from which we gladly borrowed the title of tonight's conversation: *Black Feminism on the Edge*. We are thrilled and happy to have Jennifer and Samantha with us tonight, and I am sure you are burning as much as I am to hear more from them.

Black Feminist Thought, Intersectional Feminism, and Identity Politics

Johanna Pitetti-Heil: Sam, Jen, welcome and thank you again for sharing your expertise and experiences with us tonight! Our first question circles around intersectional feminism and identity politics—two terms and approaches that are being increasingly targeted in the broader public. I recently stumbled across the essay bell hooks wrote in 1992 on the conference “Cultural Studies Now and in the Future” held at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in April 1990. She wrote that she “was reminded of the way in which the discourse of race is increasingly divorced from any recognition of the politics of racism” and that she was horrified what it meant for the world outside academia if people at that conference “could so blindly reproduce a version of the status quo and ‘see’ it” (“Representing Whiteness” 345). At that conference, though, she insinuated that in feminist studies, “she was able to use

¹ Brent Hayes Edwards, author of *The Practice of Diaspora*.

theory in a way that directly connected with the everyday life of her students” (Morris 90). I’m always baffled when I go back only thirty years and read statements like that. Do you see feminist thought and Black feminist thought now in relationship to debates around intersectionality and identity politics that started in the 1980s and 1990s?

Jennifer Nash: I want to start by saying I’m someone who works on Black feminism in the context of the U.S. university. Therefore, many of my answers to these questions have a particular U.S.-centrism that I acknowledge even as I’m tremendously interested in how intersectionality circulates globally, and in ways that I think are surprising to U.S. Black feminists. I think in the context of the U.S. academy and even in the public life of Black feminism in the U.S. we’re in this moment around intersectionality where it’s never had a more public stage. I think thanks to the election of Donald Trump and the women’s marches that followed, intersectionality has become—for better or for worse—this kind of larger-than-life buzzword that takes on and contains so many political desires and hopes on the left and so many anxieties and fears both on the right and the left.

I think that there’s this way both inside and outside of the academy, that intersectionality is at once imagined as the thing that will save us, actually save us in many different ways (I can come back to that in a second), and then it is also imagined as this thing that can undo the cohesion of feminism as an academic and political project. One of the things we can talk more about because Sam and I both have strong feelings about this and have written about this. In fact, much intersectionality gets collapsed into and onto Black feminism and Black women and this is particularly visible in the United States in the last few years where we constantly hear these refrains: listen to Black women, believe Black women, like Black women, let Black women lead, and everything that there is to know we knew at first and we told, and you just didn’t listen. And all of those refrains also, both inside and outside of the university, sort of buttress this notion that intersectionality is not a theory, method, or approach, but a truth—or maybe even an article of faith—that should simply be adopted.

Samantha Pinto: I want to echo everything that Jen said and also call, as we frequently do, to other genealogies of feminist thought and Black feminist thought at a moment where the

moral urgency of far-right governments taking leadership in Europe, in the U.S. and elsewhere is answered by a kind of responsive moral certitude from the left that has both made certain forms of feminism and anti-racism ascendant in our bubbles, but has also brought with it the language, the style, and the genre of moral certitude that frequently was the tool of the right. Instead, Jen and I in our own work and in our editorial work have been trying to push against values of absolutism. I teach Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies. I'm teaching it right now for eighty people online. And even there, I want to think about—and I want my students to see—feminism as a process, as a set of tools and mobile objects. I want to think about Black feminism in this way too, as capacious, and as something that teaches us that the horizon is always moving rather than staying stagnant. I feel that I'm really responsive to this moment in this way that a lot more people in the public eye and from the student population are interested in feminist thought post-#MeToo; they are interested in Black feminism in response to global movements that are xenophobic and racist and misogynist. I think we all want to know what to do with that, and we are trying not to solidify that into a set of doctrines, right? If Jen wants to say law school left her cold, it's partially because it can be doctrinal, or you have to rehearse the doctrine, even if it's good to know the doctrine. I've been developing the introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course within an ethics flag as a way to help us get students, and so I've been thinking about feminist doctrine. I don't know if any of your universities end up having flags, such as "cultural diversity" etc. The course already has that "cultural diversity" flag, but I've really been thinking about it as a way of thinking about the world and thinking through problems rather than a set of given solutions, as a generative way to think about my own practice, and Jen and I's practices together as writers and thinkers, but particularly as editors now. I want to embrace the ways that feminism, identity politics, and other modes of thinking have become more centralized and important and part of a much more public conversation and also not calcify those things into one way of being. Black feminism gives me a way to connect things to the real world, again not to calcify what the real world is, but instead recognizing how difficult and complex it is and that that we're going to take that in different directions and try to make that the highest function of the field—if that makes sense.

Jennifer C. Nash: I was just going to say two things to build up on what you said. One is in some ways so obvious that I feel silly saying it, but also feel it's worth saying: Historically, in the context of the U.S. academy, Black feminism is treated as a singular intervention into a tradition of feminist theory, and, as an intervention, Black feminism is thought to demand an account for Black women or perhaps Black genders and Black sexualities; and then the field resumes its work but now with an attention to so-called difference. I often say to my students, if bell hooks and Patricia Williams meet in a bar, there are going to be disagreements, and their fights are worth having. Part of our ongoing endeavors as editors and friends who write together is to always call attention not just to the heterogeneity of Black feminist scholarship but to the real live ongoing debates within the field right around almost every question.

And then the second piece, which I think is implicit in the question that you started us with, and is increasingly of interest to me, is about the tremendously public-facing work that Black feminism does now. A host of scholars like Brittney Cooper have argued that Black feminism has always been a public-facing tradition, and that Black feminists have always been public intellectuals, but the demand in the U.S. in particular and in the market for a certain kind of Black feminist writing—particularly post George Floyd when everybody went to the bookstore to buy a book to learn how to not be a racist—created an intense desire to turn to Black feminist theory and praxis to solve the problems of the present. And so many of those books were authored by Black women who identify as Black feminists. I think this is what you were saying so wonderfully that so often Black feminism is turned to as a solution. I think of a moment where one of my colleagues said the answers to everything are in Black feminism, which is such a fascinating formulation because I see Black feminism as raising a set of tremendously interesting and fascinating questions, not offering us a set of solutions.

Samantha Pinto: And just to build on when you talked about two Black feminist theorists meeting in a bar: think about the ways that in the academy and in public discourse certain figures and scholars can become ascendant at different moments and then wind up standing in for all of their field.

Jen and I both study attachment; attachment is one of the ways we do our critical work, which is again another line of connection to the thrust of the conference, which is being built around self-scrutiny. When you mentioned self-scrutiny both Jen and I listened up because that's kind of our jam, to think about self-scrutiny, to think about Black feminism and feminism as having that self-scrutiny built in.

Instead of making sacred heroines and to use Erica Edwards' terms, creating a charisma vibe around Black feminism that creates individual people who will be our leaders and our saviors for the field of feminism at large, for the world at large, we must think of it always as a field globally that has so much variety. Black Feminism has so many scholars who are writing in different moments, who could still come up and challenge different genealogies. Black feminism has different genealogies, full stop—and we want to emphasize this rather than asserting a replacement of one that is actually right or actually the best. Instead, we are trying to be careful of our linguistic and verbal and editorial formations around that kind of charismatic leadership that Erica Edwards talks about in African American fiction as being about charismatic male leadership and the way Black male leadership and is a kind of haunt in the U.S. civil rights imagination and, I would argue, around the diaspora as well. Our work as scholars and editors aims to displace that model for a more feminist vision of decentralized leadership that doesn't try to romanticize that. And I think both of us are concerned about not turning Black feminism into a *savoir* even as we deeply practice within Black feminist studies, thought, and theory.

Jennifer C. Nash: Your point Sam about the ways in which different figures wane or come to visibility in certain moments is so fascinating to me, like the framing of the question around bell hooks because she's become in the context of the U.S. academy a troubling object for so many Black feminists. When I teach my graduate students in Black feminist theory bell hooks, many of them have never read bell hooks, which is fascinating because she was such an essential part of my own intellectual formation, particularly as an undergraduate in the late 1990s. So, I often narrate these stories for them, and it sparks their curiosity about field formation. I'll say to them, I didn't read Hortense Spillers until I was in Graduate School, and

nobody was reading “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” when I was in college. It wasn’t assigned the way it is right now, which helps them disrupt what seems to be how it always was, which it is in the present tense. Indeed, it wasn’t always like this. And then I think there are these questions about who are the scholars whose work is always seen as peripheral or marginal or against the grain of Black feminist scholarship. Sam and I both love Ann duCille who writes an article that I adore, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood.” She’s writing at the same time as Kimberlé Crenshaw in this tremendously generative period in U.S. Black feminism in the late 1980s, early 1990s, but her work simply doesn’t travel with the same velocity and interest that someone like Crenshaw’s work does, even though she’s also published in 1994 in one of the leading feminist journals in the U.S. I think asking these questions about what are the kinds of scholarly production by Black feminists that Black feminism itself has felt uncomfortable grappling with. It’s certainly the case with figures like Alice Walker who has become troubling for different reasons in different moments, but I feel that by and large Black feminist work has really grappled with someone like Alice Walker. But someone like Patricia J. Williams, whom Sam and I both think about quite a bit, is someone who in my mind is sort of a troubling figure for Black feminism. Troubling for one reason: because she loves the law, because she believes in it, believes in rights, and just thinks we don’t have enough of them. And in a moment in the context of the U.S. where the word of the day is ‘abolition’ the idea that a Black feminist could have faith in law is so jarring that folks don’t know what to do with her. Sam and I have always had this collective project of thinking about what it means to push Black feminism to the edgy spaces where it’s uncomfortable with itself. What happens if we take seriously a project like Williams’s?

Samantha Pinto: For me that’s also Claudia Tate who writes seemingly within Black feminist literary studies, but really is talking about reading protocols that are political protocols around reading Black and feminist studies. She’s doing early Black erotic studies and talking about reading as a practice of “desirous plenitude.” Sadly, like so many Black feminist academics she passed away far too soon. So, in thinking about what to do about these figures who don’t fit our model and trying to narrate that as part of how we were trained in our own work, it has

also become incredibly important not just within the field, but also outside of it, to assert divergent genealogies of Black feminism.

Jen and I came up at a moment when diaspora was ascendant in Black studies, and now we have this kind of re-entrenchment of a U.S.-centric, U.S.-based version of race when it comes to Black studies, although there are lots of figures who disrupt that. I am trying to narrate to my graduate and undergraduate students that this was not always the way it was. It's been really amazing then to watch the field turn back inward—and partially this is about being back in a time now where the referent is always enslavement, which is also something to grapple with within Black feminist studies. I wish for us to view Black feminist studies as something with tension, as something with disagreement; to understand that these are all different ethical positions to hold and to trace rather than to believe our job is to determine which one is right, or which one is best, and was always right and will always be best in every situation, past, present, or future. It seems really significant to both of us and to this question and to feminism as a field in this post-#MeToo era.

Ingrid Gessner: I'm grateful that you're bringing up those questions of peripherality, curriculum, and canon. It makes me think of my own graduate training in the late 1990s and of rethinking the field right now, what are we teaching at this moment and what do we need to discuss with our students? At Georgetown, Sam, you helped to build the curriculum, programming, and connections around African diaspora literature and African studies, and you also helped establish the African American studies department. Jen, you directed the women's studies program at George Washington University. Both of you write about feminism and women and gender studies's uneasy relationship to institutionality, canonization, curriculum-building: how do you navigate the various binaries that crop up around feminist institutionality in your research and teaching? I am thinking about theory and practice, access v. elitism, white feminism v. women of color feminism?

Samantha Pinto: Jen just published a whole book about this, so, I'll be brief. The first thing I should say is that anything I helped to build was founded by years of work by Black faculty at Georgetown like Robert Patterson, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Angelyn Mitchell, and Maurice

Jackson—and I want to fully honor that—even if I was technically a founding member and helped with the searches. They were doing the groundwork for years when I showed up and sat on committees. This example, in fact, opens up a way to talk about institutionality. Both Jen and I are interested in the ways that Black feminism and Black women have invested in institutions. Interestingly, the part that Spillers doesn't get credit for is when she talks about how Black women exceed expectations in all realms, including the fact that in the United States—in percentage per demographic group—the people who get the most post-graduate degrees, are Black women. This does, of course, not erase sexism and racism, but it asks us to appreciate and honor the investments that Black women have made in institutional life and the deep normative successes that they've also experienced alongside the concept in the book *Pushout*, the fact that Black women and girls are pushed out of schools into the prison pipeline at much higher rates than non-Black women. I believe that we need to grapple with those tensions and ask how Spillers can have an essay that speaks to that and at the same time is trying to think about what she calls ungendered flesh and the legacy of the Middle Passage. And to do this is hard work: it is to think about what Black women's investment is in institutionality; what Black feminism's investment is in becoming institutional—even as Black feminism often narrates itself as always outside of institutionality; what is the field's will to become institutionalized as we all know that institutional academic work is largely thankless and involves a lot of labor, particularly for women, for faculty of color, and for queer faculty, and how invisible service can often be at a detriment to one's career paths and health? How do we grapple with how institutionality has been significant to forming Black women's identity both in the U.S. and abroad across the diaspora? How do we not give in to the romance of anti-normativity and constantly try to think about Black women and Black feminism as against institutionality and against the academy? In fact, it has often found ways through the institutions and through institutionality to do some of its most important work, to have various platforms for publication to grant legitimacy, however problematic, to Black feminist thought that is now going mainstream. So, when folks like Brittney Cooper have a children's book deal with Scholastic (which is great!) you just really want to sit down and think about how, you know, academia and the institution of academia as well as all the other things that

Brittney Cooper has experienced and written and talked about have afforded that space, even as structural racism and sexism have also been deep obstacles in Black feminism's path to great public circulation.

My favorite example is Elizabeth Alexander, who has a PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania, is a gorgeous poet, writer, and lyricist, runs the Mellon Foundation and is giving all these grants to rethink monuments and to reinvest in institutionality and institution-building. I want to know and think about that and how that is Black feminist life and living. I'm interested in all kinds of versions of Black feminism, but I want to make sure we don't lose that in our will to speak about the ways that Black women and Black feminism has been disenfranchised as well.

Jennifer C. Nash: I would say Black feminists love the university. We spent so much time writing about the university and our anxieties about the university, and if we'll survive the university, if Black feminist theory will survive, and if Black women will survive it, we've invested in it, we've given our lives to it, we've then bemoaned that we've given our lives to it, but we don't divest from it, we continue. There's a really long complicated relationship between Black feminists and the university and between Black women and the university, I think, especially in the last twenty years when the diversity machinery of the U.S. university has really kicked up. And Black women have been instrumental to that machinery, often teaching our deans and provosts how to speak the language of equity and inclusion and intersectionality.

To me, it leads us to a moment where we have to start with the proposition that Black feminists have power and wield it rather than pretending that we don't. And when I say that we have power and we wield it, I don't mean that it's the same power that the old guard has. I think it's a different kind of power, it looks different, and we wield it differently, but we cannot ignore the fact that we have accrued a certain amount of power. The question becomes: how do we want to use it and mobilize it, and in what ways?

Before I taught at Duke, I taught Black studies at Northwestern. And one of the questions we would always ask, especially when we were doing admissions, was how does Black studies make decisions about admission, what is the Black studies way of doing that? And I've been in gender studies spaces that asked similar questions: how do feminists make decisions about who we admit and who we don't admit, and should we be doing that in a different way, what does that look like? And when we make decisions about hiring: what does it mean when the folks that we hire look so much like the folks that any other department hires? Does that mean that we need to stop and think about what feminist hiring looks like, or feminist journal production and so on? I think those are important questions for us to think about. For me a conversation about institutionality becomes this conversation about labor. I think there's an attention to or at least a rehearsal of the fact that Black women do all this diversity labor in the U.S., that it kills us, that it extracts the life from our bodies. And beyond that empty rehearsal there's not much more that happens. Sometimes people make the claim that Black women should just do no work, should simply rest. I think it's worth thinking more about what do we do with these questions around labor and unequal labor distribution beyond recognizing it, or beyond presuming that Black women should simply stay home and white women should do all the work or whatever. How do we grapple with that question?

There are two other points I want to mention. The opening question asked us to think about a variety of divides: theory and praxis, access and elitism. One of the things that's so generative about Black feminist work is that it's never invested in that binary. And particularly in this moment where there's so much public-facing Black feminist work, the divide—if there ever were one—between theory and praxis has fundamentally been eroded. When students come into my classroom, especially undergraduates, they likely have encountered Black feminism through a high school class—which blows my mind. They also have encountered it on Instagram through social media instructors who teach them as much about Black feminism as I do. Those folks are also educators in a certain way, and we must take that seriously. So, I think that Black feminism sort of troubles that binary. And regarding access and elitism, this has long been a question not just for Black feminist work, but for feminist work more broadly, but we see that increasingly folks are thinking through this binary by writing differently. So,

Christina Sharpe tells us we have to become undisciplined in the way that we write. I think of someone like Matt Brim who is not working in Black feminist theory but in queer studies, who calls for queer ferrying as a method of thinking across institutions that have different resources. There's more experimentalism in Black feminist writing than there ever has been before. And I think part of that is a desire to speak to new audiences and to find new forms to speak to different audiences. Whether it works or not there's a democratizing impulse behind so many of the new forms that we see taking off. Or the fact that someone like Imani Perry will write academic books and trade books, right? Or Brittney Cooper will write academic books and trade books. There's a capital underpinning there as well, but there is also a democratizing impulse, a sense of speaking to these multiple audiences and articulating Black feminist concepts in different voices to different audiences.

Samantha Pinto: And just to add to that, I think about Alondra Nelson, a Black feminist academic who has studied the societal impacts of emerging technology, as well as racism in science and medicine and who took a position in the Biden-Harris administration as deputy director for science and society running their science and tech responses with racial inequity and other inequities in mind. It's an example where we can see the public-private divide, at least to some degree, eroding and also watch Black feminism being a link between those two spaces. And maybe we can argue that it has given us models for some time without saying Black feminists have always done it and they've always known how to do it right and how to do it best.

And to speak to Jen's point about social media: my students love Tiktok and are obsessed with Tiktok, and my partner watches fail videos, which is the only reason why I even know what Tiktok basically is. My students have schooled me in it, for example, by showing me a Tiktok about *The Crucible* when we're discussing the play. Well, that's how they know. And I see a lot of questions that are key to certain kinds of anxiety around the position of trans studies within gender studies that are cropping up in the chat without addressing them directly. Feminism is not giving us the *right* answer but different tools for understanding that. My students have a lot of different ways of understanding gender and sexual expression that I don't think many

of us had because we didn't have social media technology and access on this scale or this scale of production. Let me add here that I am aware that access to the Internet is not universal. However, my students' view of what certain kinds of expression of gender, sexual and racial solidarity can look like are influenced by the amount of people they can watch working through it and expressing it differently. These people may or may not be influenced by academic visions but are nonetheless reflecting a complex set of thought processes and understandings of expressions that blow my little mind all the time and allow a kind of opening for understanding the difficult tensions with all of these things rather than seeing them necessarily as zero-sum games. Gender studies changes, feminism and feminist thought changes. And in many ways, we have a lot more tools for thinking about how it changes more quickly than the academic publishing cycle now. I'm interested in the ways my students are keying in on that, and I am also interested in getting them to *make* social media in various forms that they already participate in, even if that is the infographic on gender and sexual expression that goes viral on Facebook with the work that we do, rather than necessarily training them to write like I write.

Jennifer C. Nash: So much of institution-building is thinking about these forms that are certainly normalized to us: like *the* scholarly journal, which for us is as normal as breathing, but it is not—at least in the context of the U.S. If we were to be honest, most scholarly journals have done little to reinvent themselves over the last few decades. They look like they looked thirty years ago except they are on JSTOR, and they might have a Twitter account. These institutions are tremendously important for not only circulating our work but ensuring that our CVs show that our work has circulated. But what might it mean for these kinds of institutions to reflect the vibrant public life of Black feminism as we're talking about it? Whether it's the fact that I was on YouTube the other day, or Blair Imani has a video on how to be less stupid about intersectionality, and it's shockingly different than how I would describe intersectionality. This is fascinating to me because I'm not invested in either being right, but I find the variety of kinds of work that are happening around this term interesting. But forms like the journal do little to capture the variety of spaces and mediums in which feminist knowledge production is happening and circulating. So, I think there's a lot more

visionary work to happen around some of these kind of conventional feminist institutions like the journal.

Samantha Pinto: And feminism has historically been invested in the idea that there are different ways to know. Feminist epistemology, like its self-scrutiny, has been a part of the formation of academic feminism. So, we need to think about that, without needing to decry academic work either. It's our field, it's our job, we're both invested in it as a job as well as in it as labor. It is a form of work; it is not exempt from all of the other things that other work and institutions are part of. It is knowing that we could know in different ways, and also knowing that we might be attached to those ways of knowing without thinking we are right, which is a very Clare Hemmings way of talking about this. I know I'm attached in certain ways, and it's partially through teaching and partially through reading and partially through editing that we can get a sense of how the field is being formed outside of ourselves and our own moments of formations and our own attachments. We need to try to be really vulnerable about that and willing to change about that without performing it as moral certitude or mistaking the field and the academic work as the same as policy or activist work. Yes, they could have connections, but we should not mistake what we do and particularly what gives us institutional currency and professional currency with the currency of social justice and social change, etcetera. So we should be able to say, I know what we do is a job, and we can get better at our job and recognize that other people are doing it in different forms that look really different and know really differently even within our own gigs, but not mistaking or conflating those things as what equals justice, even as we might be concerned internally with justice within our professions, as I would say, Jen and I both are. Yet we understand that that's not the be-all and end-all of all feminist work.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Johanna Pitetti-Heil: It's nice that your conversation has already moved us towards another question that we wanted to ask you. With part of the title of our symposium, the question where to go from here, we were imagining a kind of vision, a utopian vision of what it will need and take to keep feminist research up as a lifelong striving for a critical practice that is

not afraid to fight and still be in solidarity with other feminist positions. How do you envision the future of feminism and American studies, women's, gender, and Black studies and of movements for justice, racial, economic, and climate justice? I know it's an incredibly big question to ask. But what does it need? What do we bring? What does it need to keep that going, that spirit?

Jennifer C. Nash: I think the spirit of my answer is that—at least in relationship to Black feminist thought—we don't yet know all of what Black feminism is or can do. And so often there is this sense that Black feminism is an object, we've mastered it and we apply it. So, my interest is in starting from the position that there's so much more to Black feminist thought, theory, methods, praxis, and politics that we have not written about, thought through, asked questions about, and examined. So, I remain curious about that. I'm always interested in starting at the place of what makes us uncomfortable, which means—as Sam talked about earlier—interrogating the attachments that we bring to our disciplines and are objects of study. We all bring attachments, but in gender studies we bring them with an intensity that we have to grapple with and recognize which shapes everything, including the ways that the logics of generationality continue to structure much of academic feminism and become really hard to dismantle.

I'm not at all interested in divesting from institutionality, but I'm very interested in what feminist forms of institutionality can look like. What does it mean when we evaluate a candidate's file for tenure in gender studies? And does it look different than the way the anthropology department does it? I think it should be different. But I think we have to have conversations about what that means and what that looks like, what feminist mentoring looks like. In our field we've barely talked enough about what feminist pedagogy can look and feel like, particularly after this last year staring at each other on the screen. So, I think those questions of how we do feminist work in the space of the academy need to continue to be thought through.

Samantha Pinto: I want to echo that and use two feminist ways of thinking as orientations to the world, which Patricia Williams calls for: treating every object with mystery and distance.

I'm fascinated by this. Treating something as if it has mystery and distance from oneself goes with uncertainty. And another book that Jen and I both love is Linda M. G. Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, this sort of plunging into what we don't know, and we don't know what it looks like. I want to think about the theme that you've given your conference as self-scrutiny of the field. That is feminism's greatest tool, its self-scrutiny and its ability to—we hope—both bring attachments, but to do that with respect and distance, and mystery. And what we don't know and are not certain is what creates feminism as a horizon that's moving. Angela Davis talks about this in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, too. She says feminism was what gave her the tools to keep reevaluating the object. It's not about the object, and that object keeps changing. Following that, we are always thinking about what would it mean to not know, which doesn't mean not change but the opposite, to keep changing, and to know that you haven't reached the end of the horizon. I don't know the feminist future [laughs]. If we think about feminism as a tool of ethical thought, rather than the pronouncement of justice, it's more useful and more interesting to think about how it helps us to hold tension, and how to hold incommensurability as we all experience it in our lives, professional and otherwise.

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