“Making Knowledge without Master’s Tools”

Zenzele Isoke Responds

The publication of one’s first book is emblematic of a success and also arrival in academia. Shortly after publication, I spent about an hour browsing the library catalogs of Harvard University, the University of Michigan, Rutgers University, Clark Atlanta University, University of London, and Cambridge University searching for my book.\(^1\) Although I had immersed myself in this work for years with the hope that it would provide a clearer picture of the way Black women resist marginalization and oppression in urban spaces, it was the first time I understood that my book was available to be read and critiqued by scholars all over the world. A first generation, non-elite HBCU-educated, working-class African American female born in Saint Louis and raised in Long Beach, the presence of my work in libraries of these varied and esteemed institutions was a singular representation of my contribution, albeit small, to the world of scholarly discourse. This affirmation was important because I strove to write *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance* on my own terms and not those of a discipline whose “methods” have largely silenced the voices and made invisible the agency of Black women. Consequently, this book is truly the result of attachment and desire: my attachment to thinking about Black womanhood in cities and my desire to apply Black feminist methods in producing an account of Black women’s politics. I stayed faithful to the ideas, passions, and methods of scholars like Beth Ritchie, Irma McClurkin, Katherine McKittrick, and many others, who urge Black women to tell our truths as we experienced them, using the ideas, critiques, methodological standards, and writing practices established by feminists of color who remain actively devoted to social justice and the production of quality scholarship. I use the broader conceptual paradigm of intersectionality to tell the stories of Black political women of Newark, and to give other Black girl scholars who find themselves in university libraries the faith and hope that they could do the same, and even better.

A few months later it became clear that some readers thought the goal of my book was to bolster theories of intersectionality or promote the use of thick description. Some suggested that I had failed to provide detail and had relied on overgeneralizations. They raised questions about the methods and epistemological frameworks that I deployed rather than thinking with me about the stakes of writing Black women’s lives. Let me be clear, the aim of this book is not to exemplify qualitative methods as dictated by a previous generation of canonized social scientists, rather it is to illuminate the structural challenges that confront Black women in Newark and other US cities today. The book
works from the fundamental assumption that what Kimberle Crenshaw described as structural intersectionality—which I explicitly define as the violences jointly produced by White supremacy, Black heteropatriarchy, and multigenerational racialized poverty under contemporary urban neoliberalization—have both constrained the lives and catalyzed diverse and underexamined forms of political agency. My treatment of intersectional politics specifically includes space and place as axes of power and identity that inform Black female political subjectivity. Along these lines, my primary goal was to describe and theorize the personal and political motivations that enable Black women to resist structural violence. This is the heart of *Urban Black Women*.

I applied and extended the ideas of scholars like Katherine McKittrick and M. Jacqui Alexander who take special care to define geography outside of the conventional ways of thinking about space and scale—while soundly critiquing Eurocentric knowledge-producing practices—to critically elaborate upon distinctive elements of Black life. Specifically, they have argued that race-gender works through local and contextual modes of domination that are produced by intercontinental social and political processes like the enslavement of Africans and the transport of black bodies across the Atlantic Ocean in service to the development of capitalism (think Black diaspora). In political geography scale is conventionally understood as nested hierarchies of bounded (physical) spaces of different sizes like local, state, national, and global. Rather than taking these scales for granted as “real,” I argue that scale is politically constructed through competing discourses about blackness: this includes which bodies and social issues get politicized as “Black” and what kinds of political narratives become legible as “Black politics.” As importantly, I also argue that we should think about cities as physical centers of commerce and social interaction—but also as symbolic and imaginary spaces that are historically and actively produced by gendered processes of racialization like colonialism, enslavement, and neoliberalization and, most importantly, Black women’s communal responses to these processes. I, like other critical geographers, use scale as both a noun and a verb. As a verb, scale refers to how power and ideology are used to politically construct issues as local, national, global, or even as nonexistent and/or invisible through framing.

These ideas are discussed in considerable depth in the chapters on “Making Place in Newark,” “The Politics of Homemaking,” “Mobilizing After Murder,” and “Keeping Up the Fight.” My broader argument is that Black women’s bodies and politics get scaled, by racially liberal discourses that generally deny the complexity of intersectional subjects, like Sakia Gunn (a fifteen-year-old masculine-presenting lesbian teenager from the Central Ward of Newark who was murdered at the hands of Black men). The fact that Black women’s politics gets scrutinized so heavily under conservative-leaning liberal discourses like Black-on-Black violence and gay and lesbian rights, is one reason why Black women’s political voices and their deeply intersectional critiques of the contemporary US racial state never get heard, let alone seriously debated in or as contemporary political discourse. These ideas are taken up at length in each chapter of *Urban Black Women*.

I deploy “thick” description through the inclusion of extended ethnographic and autoethnographic writing that appears in multiple chapters—which are very much “empirical” because this writing is based upon retellings of Black women’s experiences within extant power structures—including the power embedded in the practice of writing and retelling these stories in and of themselves. The basic research design applied in this
book includes long semistructured interviews with political activists in Newark, which were solicited through community referral in Newark’s Central Ward. Their stories are complemented with participant observation and ethnography using an intersectional frame of analysis. My own deployment of intersectionality as a critical discourse aims to be in active conversation with contemporary theorizations of intersectionality that emphasize the modes and processes of identity formation for Black women that are appropriately situated within the historical and contemporary practices of gendered racialization within the city of Newark. The methodological, epistemological underpinnings of structural intersectionality, as I understand them, are clearly spelled out on pages 8-9 and again throughout the three core empirical chapters of the book: “The Politics of Homemaking,” “Mobilizing After Murder,” and “Keepin’ Up the Fight.” In a basic way, Urban Black Women seeks to transcend, if not downright castigate, the so-called academic “rigors” of political science that have consistently used claims of “good methodology” to police, silence, and discipline scholars who want to write critically in the area of Black politics. Too many brilliant minds have migrated away from this institutionalized area because they refuse, or simply are unable, to be compliant subjects to the doctrines of the field. Here, I am thinking of the multitude of Black political scientists who work in exile in interdisciplinary departments like women’s and gender studies, African and African American studies, and cultural studies. It is in these spaces that their intellectual and methodological risk taking is considered and engaged rather than thrown out with the baby and the bathwater. Interestingly enough, many scholars secure tenure in these interdisciplinary departments. Sadly, the same can’t be said for too many Black political science identified scholars who—often at the cost of their own souls—fall in step to the quasi-plantation standards of their “discipline”.

I am interested in what other Black feminists have to say about the way in which I interwove Black women activists’ voices with contemporary Black feminist critical theory and the controversial practices of blending personal narrative into my ethnographic descriptions of various spaces of the city—physical, symbolic, and political spaces. I am also interested in feedback on whether I interpreted the political stories of LaQuetta Nelson, June Dowell, Dana Rone, Fayemi Shakur, Amina Baraka, and Frederica Bey—all living activists and incredibly dynamic women who continue to shape and reimagine the city both because of and in spite of the tremendous personal hardships that have befallen them as a result of their homemaking political strategies—with clarity and integrity. These people’s lives and political principles anchor this book rather than the performances and punditry of former two-term Mayor Cory Booker (now US senator), the most powerful of all actors on the contemporary political scene in Newark who is featured in the book. Indeed, as I explain through my political history of Fannie Lou Hamer as one of the women who spearheaded the civil rights movement—which she absolutely was—intraracial hierarchies and the inability to move the Black political agenda to prioritize sexual politics while respecting leadership by working-class and impoverished Black women continues to reproduce a politics of celebrity and charisma. None of these enduring intraracial dynamics are held accountable for the part they play in the continued public deaths of young working-class and poor Black people. I explicitly challenge the reified heteropatriarchal and petit bourgeois ideals that proliferate in many of the social sciences and our own allegiance to them by thinking beyond White male
readershapes and the predispositions of audiences that care nothing about Black survival. My work is not so much about evoking empathy as it is about provoking new ways of understanding and working through the conflicts, contradictions, and im/possibilities that face future generations of Black political actors in cities.

As Audre Lorde always reminds us, “The Master’s Tools Will Not Dismantle the Master’s House.” The master’s reading and writing practices, modes of critique, and general tendency to ignore and minimize Black women’s humble but much-needed offerings to analyses of American political and civic life will do nothing to forward the project of Black feminist political storytelling nor, more importantly, illuminate the field’s understanding of the tacit yet explicit workings of power, identity, and privilege in the realm of Black politics in the US. The internal disciplinary practices of vigilantly looking to see what’s wrong before looking to see what’s right will continue to hasten the irrelevance of political science to the incredibly exciting world of intersectional scholarship that has blossomed in university settings globally.

Postscript: The young people of Newark finally got their center! For more information go to: http://newarklgbtqcenter.org and support.

Note

1. I would like to express a deep note of appreciation to Tiffany Willoughby-Herard for assembling this forum. This process has been truly enlivening. Your genius and grace does not go unnoticed. I would also like to thank Melynda Price and Ruth Nicole Brown for their helpful comments and edits on this response essay. I would also like to extend respect and gratitude to the array of scholars who took the time and care to closely read and prepare such thoughtful and courageous public responses to my work.