Black Feminist Me: Answering the Question 'Who Do I Think I Am'

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> *I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally.*

> Barbara Christian (1988: 77)

I. Introduction

> *Black feminism if studied closely really doesn't exist ... during the feminist movement black women were used to build numbers…but most of it didn't relate to the women of color…*

> Anonymous Blogger, April 11, 2010

My name is Kristie Dotson and *one way* to describe me is as a US black feminist, professional philosopher.[1] I will not haggle over my existence. I often encounter explicit and implicit denials of my existence. Whether a denial of black feminists and/or black feminism (Christian, 1994), or black women professional philosophers, or black women intellectuals as such (McFadden, 2002), the denials all amount to the same thing – an existential foreclosure. It is as if, at some point, I fell behind on my existential mortgage payments and my right to existing as a US black feminist, professional philosopher was summarily revoked. Tired of paying identity rent or suffering under predatory, recognition-based mortgages, I will simply buy my space with this pronouncement. I am a US black feminist, professional philosopher; and I will not haggle over my existence.

Instead, I will offer an admittedly incomplete sketch of my answer to the question 'who do I think I am', by explaining my conceptual location as a black feminist, professional philosopher in the US. However, as I do so, I do not make pretensions that I am speaking for an entire population, i.e., the very small population of black feminist, professional philosophers in the US. And I am not offering a model of 'Black Feminist Philosophy' as such. Rather, I am simply stating what being a US black feminist, professional philosopher means to me and how such an articulation can shed light on one of the ways Africana philosophy is being shaped and engaged. So though what is offered here is ultimately a story about Africana philosophy and a black feminist praxis, it is also a story from someone, located somewhere, with certain political commitments. That is, it is a story about a particular kind of engagement within Africana philosophy. In telling this story, I will start

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with describing my mother's rejection of professional philosophy, then, I will move on to highlight lessons I learned from some black feminist examinations of theory, which aided my understanding of my mother's stance. And, finally, I will identify a value shared by some anti-theory black feminists and some Africana professional philosophers in the US that ultimately recommends, to my mind, consistent engagement in black feminist/philosophical praxis.

This paper will proceed in two sections. First, using my mother's reservations concerning a career in philosophy as a guide, I turn a critical eye to the impetus to philosophically theorize by articulating two possible limitations of 'high' theorizing found in some black feminist writings. Second, I articulate a value that rests at the base of these black feminist examinations of theorizing that shift the focus away from the 'ways philosophers make sense' to the 'sense philosophers make.' This shift highlights a value placed on conceptual transparency. Conceptual transparency follows from communicatively determining the conceptual commitments one's actions, practices, and/or positions entail. Pursuing conceptual transparency is a mainstay practice in philosophical engagement. And, as many black feminists demand that one speak, act, and write with an eye to one's social location within networks of privilege and power, gaining conceptual transparency is a mainstay practice for many black feminists as well. The demand for this kind of transparency only scratches the surface of what makes some anti-theory black feminists work an invaluable part of Africana philosophy as a whole.

II. Now, why you wanna go and do that?

Survival and struggle for the future is not a theoretical issue.

Audre Lorde (2009e: 78)

When I told my mother I was going to pursue a career in professional philosophy, I distinctly remember her response. She tilted her head to the side, raised her right eyebrow, and said, 'huh?' Let me be clear, she did not utter a 'huh' that translated to some variation of a 'what-question'. Rather, it was a 'huh' that expressed a deeply skeptical 'why-question,' complete with a full dose of incredulity. With one look and one sound she asked me, 'Now, why in the world would you want to pursue a career in philosophy?' It is not as if she were particularly overbearing with her obvious doubts at my educational and career choices. In fact, her attitude towards my graduate work can probably best be described as a kind of proud indifference. Although my mother has always been openly proud of me, it was as if the mere mention of pursuing an advanced degree in philosophy somehow made me incomprehensible.

In our ensuing conversations, it became clear that my mother could not conceive of a legitimate relationship between real life and philosophy. Specifically, she seemed to be skeptical about the connection between philosophy as abstract theorizing and community activism. The more I learned about what passes as professional philosophy currently, the clearer her skepticism became for me. My mother was and still is very suspicious of theorizing about life, not because it is a useless activity, but because it may not be useful for producing actions. Undoubtedly, an activity can be useful for other reasons than producing further action. However, for my mother, who believes that simply living as a black woman in the US is a call to activism, an activity that does not produce some kind of directed action is, to be blunt, a waste of time. And though wasting time is part of being human, devoting a large portion of one's life to an activity that amounts to a waste of time is just plain lazy. The far worse implication of my decision to pursue philosophy, to my mind, followed from the assumption that my career choice indicated that my mother did not raise a black woman with ties to the cultures and lives of black people, but, rather, a Western philosopher. Either I could be a black feminist, an activist, or I could be a professional philosopher, but it was not clear I could be

both. The fact that she could not reconcile the two 'ways of being' was disturbing. Her assumptions exposed a strict dichotomy between activism and philosophy. *Mere* theorizing about life, which is what philosophy amounted to for her, was not compatible with being a black woman who cares deeply about her community.

Not too long into my graduate studies of philosophy, my mother's initial reservations would be shown valid. After realizing that the expectations for academic, professional philosophers within the US included studying a certain cadre of privileged, (often white) male philosophers on a very select range of acceptable topics, it dawned on me what impressions my mother might have had about philosophy that informed her initial skepticism. It is true that many professional philosophers labor in the US believing that a narrow range of questions constitutes all of the important questions. The implication of such narrow ranges is, of course, that if a question is not currently accepted within some standard conception of philosophical investigations, then that question is not an important one. At times, narrow understandings of philosophical engagement can make a choice to pursue a career in academic, professional philosophy appear superfluous. Thinking I had stumbled upon the source of my mother's less than positive attitude concerning a career in philosophy, I inquired further into her skepticism concerning professional philosophy. Her response was simple. Instead of the ready agreement I expected, she just shook her head and expressed a legitimate acceptance of the practices within philosophy. In my mother's words, 'whatever they [philosophers] thought they were doing' was just fine with her, but that did not mean she held fewer suspicions concerning those who decided to engage in such activities. And that is when it struck me. My mother's reservations about philosophy did not concern the practices of philosophy specifically. Rather, she was suspicious of professional philosophers as such. It would seem that, for my mother, the desire to engage in professional philosophy simultaneously indicated the possible possession of a suspicious character.

I immediately wondered if there were other black feminists who shared her reservations concerning philosophy and philosophers. It was in investigating my mother's suspicions that I stumbled upon a number of black feminist anti-theories. An anti-theory is a position that puts into question 'the exclusions of Theory when it assumes its own primacy above other theories or other ways of knowing culture and marginality – for example, through scientific, homogenizing, or totalizing abstractions' (Rimstead, 1995: 200). I began to read writings by black feminists who were also deeply suspicious of broad 'theorizing'. I looked to Barbara Christian and her notorious suspicion of the 'race for theory' (1988: 68–69) and of the impetus to philosophical theorizing as such (2007: 227); to June Jordan who pronounced a deep suspicion of abstraction (1998: 367); to Beverley Guy-Sheftall who criticizes 'white' feminist reliance upon 'Western' epistemology (2003: 29); and even to Audre Lorde who wrote eloquently about the aimlessness of conceptual thinking and the limitations of theorizing when left to its own devices (1984). I began to realize that there were two limitations to abstract theorizing outlined by some black feminists that mirrored my mother's sentiments. They concerned 1) the instituted ignorance that is authorized by privileging theory and theorizing and 2) the agential inertia that the act of theorizing might both require and produce. In the following two subsections I will detail these two proposed shortcomings of 'high' theory and theorizing so as to begin situating my mother's attitude towards professional philosophy. In doing so, I provide the ground for articulating a value that I claim is shared between black feminist anti-theorists and many Africana philosophers.[2]

a. Instituting ignorance

There are many black feminist objections to theory and the ways it fosters ignorance. By far the most notorious charge of this sort can be found in Barbara Christian's writings on literary theory

(1988; 2007). Putting forth a theory that has been taken as an 'anti-theory' position (Rimstead, 1995: 6, 16–17), Christian outright states that the drive toward theorizing in literary theory is 'egocentric' (1988: 67), committed to 'mystifying' language for the sake of itself (1988: 71), and intent on oversimplifying a complex world (1988: 75; 2007: 227). Christian's concern in her article, 'The Race for Theory', is complex. However, to understand her accusation that privileging theorizing and theory carries with it the production of ignorance, one needs to understand Christian's account as offering more than a simple rejection of theory. I will show that Christian calls for a more holistic attitude towards knowledge production. Her concern, it appears to me, is two-pronged. First, Christian identifies what she takes to be limitations in epistemic practices entailed by the act of theorizing. Second, she highlights that if those epistemic practices were to be privileged over all other epistemic practices, then those limitations would become unrecognizable and, hence, aid in instituting ignorance. Certain bodies of knowledge would literally become unknowable given prevailing standards of knowledge production; and those people professing that knowledge would literally be silenced. Christian (1988: 69) writes:

> The race for theory – with its linguistic jargon; its emphasis on quoting its prophets; its tendency toward 'biblical' exegesis; its refusal even to mention specific works of creative writers, far less contemporary ones; its preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations; its gross generalizations about culture – has silenced many of us.

The race for theory that Christian identifies concerns a privileging of theory and theorizing that silences certain voices and subjugates certain kinds of knowledge.

Christian lists many relevant shortcomings of theorizing. However, the most salient limitation she identifies concerns a fundamental orientation that aids theory production. As Christian explains, the orientation that facilitates the creation of theory is the 'tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, to fix it through an idea which is really an ideal' (1988: 75). Attempting to understand a complex world via some set of organizing foci is certainly one way to theorize. For Christian, this orientation creates a 'monolithism' that can become a 'metasystem', which dehumanizes and denies people 'their variousness and complexity' (ibid.). This orientation toward oversimplification is entailed by the epistemic practices inherent in abstract theorizing. An epistemic practice concerns the suppositions, methods, and acts involved in pursuing knowledge within a given domain. Abstract theorizing requires varying degrees of disregard for contextual details as an epistemic practice. Paradoxically, the commitment to abstract theorizing may follow from the belief that in order to make our worlds clear, we must obscure the details of those worlds, thereby simplifying 'multiplicity' (ibid.). This is a position that Christian claims she cannot accept. She writes, 'I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being simple. And perhaps that is why we have not rushed to create abstract theories' (Christian, 1988: 76). Christian will not go as far as to say that she does not theorize, herself. Rather, she judges a particular kind of theorizing unappealing due to its inability to capture the 'multiplicity of experiences' (1988: 76–77). At one point, Christian calls this kind of abstract theorizing, 'philosophizing' (1988: 72).

Outlining possible limitations to philosophizing, i.e., oversimplification, is only part of Christian's overall project. The second part of her analysis concerns, on my reading, a wholesale privileging of such theorizing. Christian writes, 'I have no quarrel with those who wish to philosophize … But I do resent the fact that this particular orientation is so privileged' (1988: 73). It may sound strange to some of us to hear the idea that something like philosophy and philosophizing is privileged. As many of us struggle to maintain the presence of philosophy in our respective

institutions, such a pronouncement must sound odd. And it is true that Christian is speaking from a particular situation within literary studies that does not necessarily mirror the reception of professional philosophy. However, there is still an important lesson in Christian's overall observations that I want to tease out of her remarks, whether her pronouncements concerning the privileging of philosophizing are true or not.[3]

If the epistemic practices involved in abstract theorizing produce inaccuracies via oversimplification and those practices are also privileged like some gold standard of knowledge production, then means of challenging these inaccuracies are effectively cut off and ignorance is produced. Ignorance here is more than not knowing, it is an active unknowing (Tuana 2004: 196) or an inverted epistemology (Mills 1999: 18), where gaining knowledge paradoxically works to obscure other knowledge claims given one's assumptions and epistemic practices. Epistemic practices, which produce both knowledge and inaccuracies, along with the privileging of those same practices can create a picture of the production of ignorance. The dangers inherent in privileging epistemic practices include foreclosing alternative grounds for knowledge production. Knowledge produced according to privileged practices trumps knowledge produced by other means. And if those privileged practices institute inaccuracies, then what is paradoxically produced along with knowledge is, what I will call, instituted ignorance. Instituted ignorance refers to the inaccuracies obscured by a given set of epistemic practices that are difficult to address given the privileging of those epistemic practices. That is to say, overzealous privileging of epistemic practices allows no grounds for knowledge claims generated via alternative, less privileged, epistemic practices. Christian, I claim, is pointing to the ways that such privileging of epistemic practices institutes ignorance. And, by doing so, subjugates knowledge.

It is the privileging of abstract theorizing and the set of epistemic practices that theorizing might entail that prompts Christian's reflections in 'The Race for Theory'. Her worry here is not unfounded. A notable exchange between Barbara Smith (1993) and Deborah Chay (1993a; 1993b) concerning Smith's classic essay, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism' (Smith, 2001), demonstrates an interesting case of the way theorizing can become unassailable, while instituting ignorance. Chay, in perhaps an impressive feat in the application of guidelines for theorizing, attempts to indicate the inadequacies of Smith's articulation of a black feminist criticism. She does this by locating what generally amounts to a failure to 'theorize' in Smith's account (Griffin, 2007: 492). Smith promptly responds with a rejection of the privileging of theory and theorizing in Chay's criticisms and points to the ways that Chay 'doesn't get' her article due to her over reliance on theory (1993: 653). Essentially Chay accuses Smith, and other black feminists relying on Smith's work, of not appropriately theorizing their work and their 'tradition' (1993b: 648–649). The question becomes, how does someone who does not at all subscribe to the privileging of theory and theorizing respond to such charges? Smith demonstrates the difficulty of responding to Chay when she essentially puts forward a response that borders on the logical fallacy of attacking the person. Rather than engage the content of Chay's text, Smith examines Chay's epistemic practices and finds them wanting. She writes, 'Even though you have obviously examined these two articles intensively, your assumptions about what I intended to do and your understanding of what I actually wrote are completely erroneous. You make dozens of points that are based upon inaccurate suppositions' (Smith, 1993: 653). Smith takes Chay to task over not having done the historical legwork necessary to understand the conditions under which her initial essay was published, i.e., for a magazine aimed at reaching a wider audience, also for not attending to temporal considerations (the essay was written in 1977 before the privileging of theory) and, finally, for not being a fair enough critic to consider that those contextual factors matter when attempting to assess Smith's work (1993: 654–656). This failure to be fair, which Smith outright calls

'mean-spiritedness', concerns not necessarily Chay, as a person, but the instituted ignorance Chay's theoretical assessment created. Perhaps Chay's reply to Smith's reading of Chay's epistemic practices is most telling. Though she makes a couple of important concessions to Smith concerning the difference between political organizing and academic work, Chay's reply ends with a staunch defense of the importance of being 'critical' (Chay, 1993a: 656). This response, that somehow Smith was denying Chay's right to be critical, speaks to the farsightedness that can be created by privileging theorizing. She seemed to fail to detect Smith's shift away from examining the content of the texts in question to examining epistemic practices. What was at stake in Smith's reply was not the right to be critical, but rather which epistemic practices were the best for examining Smith's work given the nature of Smith's work specifically. What the Chay/Smith exchange demonstrates is a clash between a proponent of 'high' theorizing and a 'grassroots' intellectual (Smith, 1993: 654–655), who both rely upon differing epistemic practices. Smith and Chay challenge each other on the sense their respective epistemic practices make for in the world.

This exchange illustrates, what I take to be, one of Christian's overall points in 'The Race for Theory'. In highlighting the institution of ignorance that follows from privileging a set of epistemic practices, Christian calls for a holistic account of knowledge production, where one attends not only to what one can know with certain epistemic practices, but also to what one cannot know. It may be, as Christian suggests, that the privileging of abstract theorizing entails a privileging of gross over-generalizations that reduce the contextual complexity of human living. Whether one accepts this position or not, does not alter the importance of Christian's insights. If epistemic practices become significantly privileged, then the grounds to challenge the knowledge produced by such practices radically dissipates and the limits of those practices are obscured. As a result, while knowledge is produced, ignorance is simultaneously instituted.[4] This concern mirrors, almost exactly, my mother's failure to see a connection between philosophy and real life. How responsive is philosophizing/theorizing to complex contextual factors and differences that exist in real life? And if those epistemic practices are not responsive to contextual factors, why pursue a career in philosophy? Herein lies one of the points of my mother's suspicion. She genuinely did not care what philosophers thought they were doing when they did philosophy, but she was definitely concerned about why they felt compelled to do it given the drawbacks, real or perceived, of the practice.

b. Agential inertia

Like Christian's concerns, the second drawback to theory and theorizing also takes as its point of departure a concern with epistemic practices. However, this time the concern with epistemic practices does not highlight the production of ignorance, but, rather, the 'agential inertia' that may result from theorizing. Agential inertia here refers to a resistance to act on the part of a given epistemic agent. Ultimately, the second limitation concerns the presumed inability of theory to motivate actions when theory-production is one's sole of epistemic engagement. Chief in leveling this charge is Audre Lorde. Unlike Christian who speaks as a literary critic, Lorde speaks as a poet. She juxtaposes poetry, which is driven by experience and feelings, on her account, with theoretical enterprises, like philosophy, which are driven by abstract thinking and criticism. She advocates that one of the values of poetry is the ability to render merely theoretical observations relevant to actual living. In fact, poetry and poets, in her estimation, exist prior to the business of philosophy. This is not a historical claim. As I understand her, poetry or poetics makes philosophical theorizing relevant, where relevant means possessing visionary potential to orient action (Lorde, 1984; Lorde, 2009c). It is enough, for the purposes of this paper, to make mention of the fact that Lorde conceives of poetry as having the ability to blend the impetus for philosophical theorizing with real life, which is one of my mother's main concerns.

Though Lorde offers an ingenious defense of the necessity of poetry, what is specifically of inter-est here are the limitations she sees in philosophical theorizing that make it a 'handmaiden' to poetry (1984: 56). It seems that, for Lorde, the limitations of philosophical theorizing concern an implicit acceptance of the view that the meaning of living is solving problems. I will explore Lorde's account that the worldview of conceiving living as a set of problems to be solved, which serves as an orienta-tion for theorizing, is limited. Lorde (1984: 37) writes in 'Poetry is Not a Luxury':

> When we view our living in the European mode, only as problems to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more into touch with our own ancient and original non-european view of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learned more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden and deep sources of our power from whence true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.

Lorde, here, sees a clear connection between a problem/solution worldview and the reliance upon ideas. Taking living only concerning 'problems to be solved' leads one to both believe in and rely upon ideas in a certain way. It would behoove us to try to articulate what a problem/solution con-ception of living might entail. There are at least three value-entailments. The first would concern a value placed on discovering or outlining problems. The second would concern analyzing these problems in order to determine possible solutions. And the third entailment would concern assess-ing solutions to the problems. It is not clear, on this worldview and its three entailments, that one need ever act upon a solution. The idea alone is presumed to have revolutionary force. All that is needed to change the world is to think of a solution. Lorde writes, 'Sometimes we drug ourselves with the dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free' (1984: 38). It is not clear, it would seem, how precisely 'the brain' is supposed to set us free. Nor is it clear how this orientation for living, the creation of ideas in the form of problems and/or solutions, can ever make demands upon our actions by itself. How precisely will discovering, determining, and assess-ing problems and/or solutions make demands upon our actions?

One begins to see a picture of the agential inertia alluded to earlier. The question 'how does theorizing problem/solutions motivate actions?' floats in the background of Lorde's observations concerning ideas and theory. And though this question may seem easily answered by some, it rep-resents only one half of Lorde's observations concerning a problem/solution view of living. The other part of her observation concerns a limitation to analytic thinking. Lorde observes the reality that analytic thinking is prone to error. She explains: '[Step-by-step thinking] was a very mysteri-ous process for me. And it was one I had come to suspect because I had seen so many errors com-mitted in its name, and I had come not to respect it' ('Interview', Lorde 1984: 87). The error-prone nature of this kind of thinking led Lorde to doubt its product. I would claim that this observation is an extension of the limitations she finds in the view of living as a problem/solution process. More precisely, because human thinking can and does make errors, the process of finding problems and solutions is infinitely regressive. The above question of 'how will discovering, determining, and articulating problems/solutions make demands on our actions', if taken as a problem that needs to be solved, will produce answers which are themselves problems to be solved. One can lose oneself in finding problems and offering solutions without ever acting in accordance with a single idea. In fact, the problem/solution model *by itself* may be a means of suspending tangible action indefi-nitely in lieu of the act of theorizing itself. Even the question of how to address the infinite regress inherent in a problem/solution worldview is, itself, another way of suspending action. A limitation for problem/solution worldviews is precisely the reality that once such an approach is adopted it may never be capable of arresting its own development in order to make demands on immediate action. In short, it may be an ineffective epistemic engagement, where an effective epistemic

engagement would produce viable actions. What began as a process with the possibility of producing liberatory vision becomes an ever increasingly esoteric set of philosophical problems that are supposedly 'foundational' in the sense that once they are answered all the questions before them can, then, be answered as well. This kind of epistemic engagement can effectively create agential inertia, a resistance to act, on the part of the theorizer. What is key in Lorde's observation is the possibility that the search for the answer to these questions that will somehow be 'the' answer we have all been waiting for is a limited way of understanding epistemic engagement in the world. Limited here does not mean unnecessary. It just means narrowly construed. Specifically, it is limited in its ability to motivate tangible action in the theorizer herself.

For Lorde, the worldview that accords with a problem/solution orientation is limited and needs poetry to blend it with a worldview that takes 'living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with' (1984: 37). The fusion of seeing living as a 'problem to be solved' and viewing it as a 'situation to be experienced' can happen in poetry, where poetry is the 'revelatory distillation of experience' (ibid.). Poetry, on Lorde's account, 'is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action' (ibid.). Without the grounding of poetry, which springs from our experience, ideas cannot lead to 'tangible action'. The charge that philosophical theorizing 'alone' produces ideas that are not immediately tied to experience is weighty as such ideas cannot orient concrete action, according to Lorde. At the base of her claim that poetry is not a luxury is some understanding of the impetus to produce poetry, i.e., experience and feeling, and the profound usefulness of what it produces for living and orienting our actions. What is implied in Lorde's writing is that the impetus to theorize is not experience and feeling, but a certain worldview and a particular reverence for ideas. Poetry is needed for survival, whereas 'survival for the future is not a theoretical issue', according to Lorde (2009e: 78). And, again, I would claim that it is not the practice of philosophical theorizing, but the impetus to privilege philosophical theorizing that is in question. Lorde does not reject philosophical theorizing or the production of ideas. Rather, such theorizing *alone* cannot constitute one's sole form of epistemic engagement without resulting in agential inertia.

Lorde's claim – that conceiving of the impetus to theorize in accordance with a worldview that sees living as a set of problems to be solved renders it a limited exercise when it is privileged as one's sole form of epistemic engagement (Ginzberg, 1991) – should give a black feminist pause when picking a career that requires a high level of theorizing. When this claim is added to Christian's claims that the privileging of what she takes to be philosophical theorizing also institutes ignorance, the desire to pursue a career of professional philosopher, for a black feminist, sounds downright silly. And yet, in the next section, I will explain how my mother's suspicions and these black feminist observations aided in convincing me about the importance of philosophizing as a black feminist as a result of my adoption of the value of conceptual transparency.

III. The sense philosophers make

My fear is that when theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, eilitist

Barbara Christian (1988: 74)

As a child my mother gave many cues when my behavior was courting some kind of response for affecting other people negatively. For example, I knew when my mother asked the question, 'now, what sense did that make', I needed to give her my full attention. This question indicated

that one of my actions and/or statements was under examination. I knew that when the question, 'what sense did that make', was leveled, my mother had two ideas in mind. First, she wanted me to begin speculating as to what I intended when I performed a specific action or set of actions. And second, she used the question to begin a dialogue aimed at determining what I actually did when I performed the action(s). I always had a chance to defend myself. I had a chance to present what I intended to do, while my mother and I haggled over what I actually did. Sometimes I would have clear intentions, other times I would be acting unthinkingly, still other times I would actively look for the best possible interpretation of my actions to determine my intentions. It became clear to me that the best explanations for my actions laid not in explanations of my intentions, but in the determinations of the intersubjective 'sense' my actions made. That is, I had to work with my mother to 'read' my actions. Through these conversations with my mother of the 'sense' my actions made, I learned to value 'readings' of the world around me in order to determine the 'sense' things made, realizing this sense was never solely up to me and was very much tied to a given context, a given moment, a given set of conditions, etc. and, yet, the 'sense made' was never far removed from me, as I was always already a part of that context, moment, and set of conditions, etc.

The positions of Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde outlined here 'read' the sense 'theorizing and theory' make. Drawing on work by Geneva Smitherman (1986), Henry Louis Gates (1988), and Charles Nero (1991), Carole Bryce Davies (1994: 43) defines 'reading' as the practice of interpreting 'other's behaviors and practices … often directed at dismantling dominant or pretentious discourse'. In aiming to dismantle epistemic practices and engagement involved in theory and theorizing, Lorde and Christian both effectively ask the question of theorizers and philosophers alike, 'now, what sense does that make?' And in asking this question, they both 'read' the behavior and practices of theorizing to dismantle the authority of theory. Christian and Lorde both draw attention not only to the practice of privileging theorizing, but they also call for a dialogue concerning the sense such privileging makes. This mode of analysis separates one's intentions, should they exist, from the intersubjectively determined meaning and effects of one's actions. In 'reading' the privileging of theory and theorizing, Lorde and Christian call attention to the epistemic practices inherent in theorizing, thereby separating what one intends to do from interpretations of what one actually does. In like vein, Barbara Smith 'read' Deborah Chay's analysis of Smith's own work. My mother's skepticism concerning my career choice in philosophy eventually led to discussions where she 'read' my pursuit of a career in philosophy and I 'read' her obvious suspicions toward such a pursuit. What I am gesturing to here is a common understanding, no matter our persisting differences, to the importance of interpreting practices and actions intersubjectively for the sake of understanding the sense actions make, beyond intention. That is to say, Lorde, Christian, Smith, Chay, my mother, and I all hold a value for conceptual transparency, even though we all hold differing stances on the usefulness and importance of theory and theorizing.

I take conceptual transparency to indicate the result of a process by which the cognitive inheritances *implied by* specific acts, practices, and/or suppositions are intersubjectively 'read'. The act of 'reading' another's practices and behavior is often aimed at conceptual transparency. Cognitive inheritances, here, are indicative commitments that are revealed in one's acts, practices, and/or suppositions. To say that cognitive inheritances are composed of 'indicative commitments' is to gesture to the reality that what conceptual transparency tracks is not the commitments and/or intention of a given agent, but rather the commitments and/or intentions indicated by one's actions. A 'cognitive inheritance' is itself a social phenomenon. As Leonard Harris explains, in his essay, 'The Horror of Tradition,' a cognitive inheritance is composed of 'inherited and privileged structures, forms, assumptions and codes that remain unstated' (1997: 97). These inheritances are built within

contexts within which one is situated with relation to a totality of traditions. For example, it is common for a given person to be situated, at times, as an outsider to certain traditions, while simultaneously situated as an insider to other traditions. These relations to/within traditions aid in shaping our cognitive orientations in complex ways. Cognitive inheritances are socially articulated positions within complex social landscapes that mark the way one's actions, practices, and positions are interpreted amidst a range of contextual factors. Building on Harris' metaphorical account, I identify cognitive inheritances as socially influenced and socially arbitrated commitments that are indicated by one's actions, practices, and positions.

It is important to stop at this point and clarify a possible confusion. A cognitive inheritance, as I understand it, is not an internal intention or even a structure of cognition. Rather, on my reading, a cognitive inheritance is a set of possible attitudes that are socially 'readable.' As such, cognitive inheritances do not have a 'truth-value' per se, where truth-value refers to some truth of the matter about a given person's internal cognitive make-up. Rather, cognitive inheritances serve as evidence for social interpretations. When my mother asked me what 'sense my actions made', she pressed me to make clear my cognitive inheritances, where given the context of my actions I needed to provide some story of the social interpretation of my actions (i.e., how my actions will be perceived and the actual effects of my actions). It was in haggling with her on the action I actually performed, where actual is determined intersubjectively, that my cognitive inheritances become known via the commitments my actions indicate.

Cognitive inheritances, then, are 'read' within complex epistemic, social, political, and economic contexts, which influence the 'sense we make'. And because they are intersubjectively determined, they are never static. The 'sense one makes' will depend heavily upon the cognitive inheritances of one's interlocutors. That is, how one's behavior gains uptake to another will be largely influenced by the cognitive inheritances of both agent and observer. No one has a God's eye view. We are all 'read' in ways that, at times, we get a hand in determining and, at other times, we do not. However, valuing 'reading' is tantamount to valuing conceptual transparency. Again, conceptual transparency is the social interpretations of the cognitive inheritances indicated by one's actions, positions, and/or practices. Gaining conceptual transparency concerns constructing accounts of one's actions, practices, and/or positions, that do not mark the 'truth' of the matter, but the 'sense one is making' or the ways one's actions are open to interpretation.

Barbara Christian, in her article 'The Race for Theory', 'reads' theory and theorizing by pointing to conditions where the 'sense theories seek to make' are being outstripped by the 'sense they make', i.e., the production of ignorance by virtue of privileging a narrow set of epistemic practices. Audre Lorde, in her work, 'reads' theorizing by dismantling a worldview that may inform the impetus to theorize and pointing to a possible negative outcome of relying solely upon such an orientation, i.e., agential inertia. And, of course, these black feminists place high value on 'reading' and its resulting conceptual transparency. These black feminists are not the only ones to 'read' theory and philosophizing. Cornel West in his pursuit to reconcile his 'blackness' and his study of philosophy raised two questions, namely 'What does it mean to be a philosopher of African descent in the American empire?' (1995: 356) and 'How does philosophy relate to the Afro-American experience?' (1977–1978: 117). He 'read' philosophy. Williams Jones argued for the legitimacy of 'black philosophy' by making claims on the practice and products of all philosophical activity (1977–1978). That is to say, he focused on the nature of philosophy in order to show the legitimacy of himself as a Black philosopher and his product, Black philosophy. He 'read' philosophy. 'Reading,' as I have used the term, is a routine engagement in Africana philosophy.[5]

Professional philosophers 'read.' It is a staple activity. And it is certainly a routine engagement in black feminist scholarship. When Razia Aziz charges white feminism to learn to account for

difference instead of gesturing to it (Aziz, 1992), she calls for conceptual transparency. When Audre Lorde claims that to truly understand the significance of our own differences, a steady amount of 'scrutiny' is required (1984; 2009a: 204; 2009b: 183; 2009c: 185; 2009d: 209), she calls for conceptual transparency. When Ann DuCille calls for more introspection, which she defines as 'seeing both inside *and* outside one's own assumptions', she calls for conceptual transparency. In all of these cases, these black women are calling for conceptual transparency even as they are engaged in the practice of providing fodder for conceptual transparency concerning their own cognitive inheritances. I see a great deal of my black feminist praxis, learned at my mother's knee and refined through surviving, learning, and 'reading', in the practices of philosophy. I also see a great deal of philosophizing weaving itself throughout the work of many black feminists. These affinities emerge not by privileging philosophy, but by 'reading' a shared cognitive inheritance between a black feminist praxis and US professional philosophy, i.e., a commitment to conceptual transparency. In this way, I see nothing problematic about my black feminist/philosophy praxis, even though I am willing to concede the dangers of privileging theory and theorizing highlighted by Lorde and Christian (i.e., production of ignorance and agential inertia). If one takes 'reading' to be a core aspect of Africana philosophy and philosophy as such, then black feminists, like Lorde and Christian, are engaging in an important part of philosophical praxis. Philosophy, here, is not privileged. The reverse statement is also true, those philosophers who engage in 'reading' the world engage in an important part of black feminist praxis. This meeting ground I am pointing to does not refer to an unproblematic sameness. Rather a position where the differences in the cognitive inheritances that lead one to pursue conceptual transparency within a black feminist praxis and/or philosophical praxis can be seen. This contested meeting ground is the beginning of a black feminist/philosophical praxis. It speaks to my way of taking up Africana philosophy right now.

IV. Epilogue

I/i am compelled by the will to say/unsay, to resort to the entire gamut of personal pronouns to stay near this fleeing and static essence of Not-I. Whether I accept it or not, the natures of I, i you, s/he, We, we, they and wo/man constantly overlap. They all display a necessary ambivalence, for the line dividing I and Not-I, us and them, or him and her is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be.

Trinh Minh-Ha (1986: 27)

I am not the first black professional philosopher, US-based or otherwise, to offer a 'reading' of my engagement with philosophy. So do not mistake me for making the claim that I represent some new kind of philosopher. My project in this essay is also not to 'paint myself thick with authenticity' by affirming some imaginary credentials as a black feminist (Minh-Ha, 1986: 22). I am also not seeking to demonstrate for you a possible difference between you and I. Nor am I attempting to institute yet another 'planned authenticity' in the name of black feminism (Minh-Ha, 1986: 23). I am quite happy with the belief that there are no two black feminists alike. So I dare not speak for them. I know, for example, that sharing the value of pursuing conceptual transparency does not, in any way, lessen the genuine differences between my mother, Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and myself on the value of theorizing. Christian and Lorde may still accuse me of engaging too often in practices that institute ignorance and produce agential inertia; and I have done nothing, here, to address these concerns beyond putting them on display as positions that are quite possibly anti-theory, but never anti-intellectual.

I suppose I should confess this much. To some degree, I see Christian and Lorde's observations as extremely accurate. Privileging abstract theory is a bad idea. A by-product of hierarchically

privileging any set of epistemic practices will most likely be instituted ignorance. It is a bad idea not only because it institutes ignorance, but because it institutes ignorance that is most likely going to affect the most vulnerable members of a given society.[6] Also too, there are many US professional philosophers that take the problem/solution worldview Lorde describes as indicative of philosophical engagement, usually in the form of producing an infinite amount of criticisms and rival theories (Priest, 2006), but not necessarily 'tangible action.' I find it difficult to disregard the often insightful 'readings' offered by Lorde and Christian of theory and theorizing, even as I believe they reinforce the importance of careful, philosophical praxis *and* black feminist engagements, not lessen it. So I will end as I began, but differently. 'Who do I think I am?' My name is Kristie Dotson and *one way* to describe me is as a US black feminist, professional philosopher.

Funding

Notes

1. Here, the term, 'professional philosopher', simply refers to someone who is making a career of philosophy, i.e., as a teacher, researcher, and/or philosophical investigator of some sort. All that is required to be a professional philosopher, then, is to possess a career that is contingent upon one's expertise in philosophy.
2. In listing the two critiques it is important to note that there are many critiques of theory circulating in black feminist thought. Here, I am only identifying two of these critiques.
3. I use 'theorize' and 'philosophize' interchangeably because Christian uses them interchangeably. Her deployment of both terms refers to epistemic practices shared by both theorists and philosophers so I feel no need to make a hard and fast distinction between these two closely aligned groups.
4. It would be wrong to say that all black feminists object to theory on the grounds Christian highlights. bell hooks partly rejects Barbara Christian's stance in, *Talking Back, Talking Black* (1989: 39–40). It bears noting, however, that hooks does agree with Christian's rejection of the tendency to privilege theory. Also, Deborah McDowell is a black feminist who, at one time, judged black feminist scholarship to be 'more practical than theoretical' with theories that 'lacked sophistication' (1980: 154). Though McDowell has retreated from the strong stance taken in her 1980 article (see 1995), early on she does bemoan the emphasis on practical concerns over theoretical concerns in black feminist writings.
5. Charles Mills 'reads' the liberal tradition in his book, *The Racial Contract*. Robert Gooding-Williams 'reads' W.E.B. DuBois' political thought and current African American political theory in his book, *In the Shadow of DuBois*. Ronald Sundstrom 'reads' color dynamics within an increasingly complex US social landscape in his book, *The Browning of America*. No matter their orientations, Africana philosophers 'read' their worlds.
6. The worry over the ability of one's epistemic practices to attend to contextual factors is not uncommon in black feminists' writings. Many examples can be found concerning the inaccuracy of 'high' theory and theorizing when it comes to tracking some black women's social realities, precisely because the epistemic practices that produce 'theory' are not seen as responsive to salient contextual factors within some black women's lives. Michelle Wallace argues that part of some black feminists' 'fear of theory' concerns their social locations as being 'other of the other,' a position 'resistant to theoretical articulation' (1990: 228). Kimberlé Crenshaw will painstakingly show how broad political agendas, informed by generalized theoretical choices concerning strategies for liberation, routinely fail to track the full extent of the oppression and disempowerment facing many women of color (1989; 1991). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham talks about the way the 'metalanguage' of race both highlights and obscures difference across and within US black communities (1992). Wahneema Lubiano gestures to the ways black nationalist ideologies operate to create a hegemonic subject that renders black women, as subjects, deviant (2002). And Carole Bryce

Davies in *Black Women, Writing, and Identity* will explain that she can only go 'a piece of the way' with theories if she expects them to be useful in aiding to articulate black women's lives (1994: 46–48).

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