Symposium
Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: A Commemoration

(Re)turning to “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women”: A Black Feminist Forum on the Culture of Dissemblance
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One of the most remarked upon but least analyzed themes in Black women’s history deals with Black women’s sexual vulnerability and powerlessness as victims of rape and domestic violence,” declares black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine in the opening lines of her 1989 *Signs* article “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” (912). Thirty years after the publication of this article, black feminists are still grappling with the import and impact of Hine’s conception of “the culture of dissemblance,” which she describes as “a cult of secrecy” that twentieth-century black women developed “to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” in the face of institutionalized rape and the constant threat of it (915). “The culture of dissemblance” disrupts the aforementioned historical void and circumvents violent historical documentation by white public institutions, which are predicated at least in part on the denial of black female privacy. With this analytical framework, Hine demonstrates the importance of not only carefully reclaiming black women’s narratives of sexual exploitation and violence, and ethically attending to those intentionally left hidden, but also of developing an array of analytical frameworks that “allow us to understand why Black women behave in certain ways and how they acquired agency” (920). This implicit call to honor black privacy while carefully locating black agency, to apprehend the gendered and sexual specificities of antiblack violence

I would like to thank Darlene Clark Hine for her important and brilliant work and the contributors to this symposium for their labor and commitment to exemplifying the continued relevance of Hine’s work. And a very special thanks goes to L. H. Stallings for various suggestions on the curation of this symposium.

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while shielding black (female) subjects from the inevitable harm of the white (institutional) gaze, embodies a black feminist care ethic that we continue to grapple with in the age of #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #MeToo, and persistent social, political, and economic precarity.

Indeed, even as we acknowledge the specificity of contemporary political projects, this black feminist (re)turn to Hine’s piece clarifies sexual violence and exploitation as the conditions of possibility—or, to riff on Hine’s language, “the rule”—for blackness and black female gender formation (915). Thus, striking a balance between careful attention to privacy and the documentation of harm, which is always already racialized and gendered, remains a methodological and embodied challenge for feminist historians, theorists, and activists, as exemplified by black women’s long and ongoing history of antiviolence activism, from Harriet Jacobs to Recy Taylor, Anita Hill to Tarana Burke. Hine herself encountered myriad historiographical silences surrounding black female sexual vulnerability and resistance, which motivated her turn to black women’s fiction. There, she found that black women novelists used literary forms to chronicle captive women’s efforts to secure sexual preservation (913). She read and reread black women’s fiction to develop her own conclusions about why black women “quit the South” in search of sexual freedom, a fact that troubled institutionally legitimated historiographies positing a causal link between black migration(s) to the North and racialized lack of economic opportunity in the South (914). This led Hine to suggest that, despite the ubiquitous motif of work in black women’s oral histories and autobiographical accounts of migration in the twentieth century, locating suitable employment was in fact only secondary to black women’s individual and collective concerns about and desires for erotic freedom. As she notes, “Black women migrants were doomed to work in the same kinds of domestic service jobs they held in the South,” which leaves one to “wonder why they bothered to move in the first place” (913). Hine, writing against the dominant historical record, as well as against feminist scholarship on sex and sexuality that held no brief for black women (Spillers 1984), positions black female desire as the catalyst for black female migration in particular and black migration in general.

This interdisciplinary black feminist forum heeds Hine’s methodological and thematic impulses to center black female desire as a conduit to collective liberation. It recognizes the extent to which the political energy of the current moment occasions an opportunity to (re)turn to Hine’s work while acknowledging what Hine marks as the structural, which is to say transhistorical, nature of antiblack gender and sexual violence. The articles that comprise this special section of Signs contribute to the now-vibrant fields of black women’s history, feminist theory, queer studies, trans studies, disability studies, and political theory, among others, in heterogeneous ways. They mobilize various
archives, including black feminist historiography, feminist ethnography, trans activism, disability theory, black popular music, and political theory to consider the wide-ranging and profound impact of Darlene Clark Hine’s “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women.”

In “Black Feminine Enigmas, or Notes on the Politics of Black Feminist Theory,” Jennifer Nash roots contemporary black feminist historiographical questions about the archive, such as Saidiya Hartman’s formulation of “critical fabulation” (2008, 11) in Hine’s formative notion of “the culture of dissemblance” and asserts the need to understand black feminist historiographical work as “necessarily speculative.” Nash’s article percolates in the tight space between historical specificity and “the distinctiveness of black temporality” in the process, revealing how “a concept like dissemblance might describe strategies developed by black women during the Great Migration and contemporary black women even as those strategies are mobilized and articulated in distinctive and varied ways” (520). In the end, she persuasively challenges the field of black feminist theory to consider “how publicity, spectacle, and celebrity might offer both particularly profound forms of dissemblance that continue to shield black inner life and radical forms of disruption that refuse to allow anyone to fill the ‘space left empty’ by quieter strategies of self-making” (523).

Terrion Williamson’s “‘Sellin’ Your Own Body’: Contextualizing Racialized Gender Violence and Illicit Sexual Practice” takes the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a site from which to explore “the specific vulnerabilities of black women.” Williamson interrogates the paradox of how black women’s activism spurs contemporary movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #MeToo, while violence against black women often “fails to register as a pressing social justice issue” (525).

V Varun Chaudhry’s “On Trans Dissemblance: Or, Why Trans Studies Needs Black Feminism” draws on ethnographic fieldwork with trans-focused programs and organizations in Philadelphia to contemplate the ways that trans and gender-nonconforming people creatively appeal to institutions for necessary resources. Chaudhry asks what it would mean to map Hine’s concept of a “culture of dissemblance” onto this moment. In the process, he urges a consideration of how “dissemblance yields a sharper understanding of the ways antiblackness (more specifically, the ‘interplay’ of factors that Hine highlights as influencing black women’s lives) always already undergirds any institutional uptake of (trans)gender” (534).

In “Conceptualizing Black Disability and the Culture of Dissemblance,” Sami Schalk takes Hine’s article as “a prime example of work that connects to racialized experiences of disability without naming itself as such” (535–36). Schalk mobilizes interdisciplinary tools to plot fruitful connections between the culture of dissemblance, black women’s experiences of mental disability,
and the late twentieth-century emergence of the National Black Women’s Health Project, demonstrating how “culturally contextualizing black women’s experiences of depression and other mental health concerns within Hine’s concept of the culture of dissemblance” provides a stronger foundation for “understanding, challenging, and changing the intersecting systems of oppression that shape the lives of black women today” (540).

Marlo David’s “On Dirty Computers and Dissemblance” examines black popular aesthetics, specifically Janelle Monáe’s third studio album Dirty Computer, to understand the utility of contemporary black feminist cultural productions that eschew dissemblance in favor of sexual confession. She tracks the ways in which “newer notions of publicity enabled by current communication technologies” enable the queer and pleasurable celebration of black feminine flesh in public (542).

Finally, Rebecca Wanzo’s “Migratory Dissemblance” takes the ongoing refugee crisis as a departure point from which to explore Hine’s “culture of dissemblance” as a political theoretical text concerning gendered migration. She asks: “What happens if Hine’s theoretical framing of African American women’s migration and the idea of the culture of dissemblance are placed at the center of our understandings of the workings of citizenship and power in the United States, or the practices of agency among migrant women?” (548). By way of response, she develops the term “migratory dissemblance” to “illustrate that placing Hine’s work in conversation with the history of and theoretical approaches to immigration illuminates how US state actors learned some of their practices from the treatment of African American women” (551).

Together, these essays elucidate the importance of centering black women’s active decisions as architects of their own pathways to freedom, including Hine’s. They reveal how Hine remapped the Western historiographical archive to hold a real brief for black women and, by extension, the antiblack histories and legacies of subject and political economic formation that continue to structure and shape the modern world. Each essay demonstrates the interdisciplinary reach of Hine’s “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women.” And, collectively, they urge black, feminist, queer, trans, and disability studies and activism to continue their engagement with both canonical and contemporary black feminist work, and to deepen an investment in the political stakes of black feminist desire, interiority, privacy, pleasure, and freedom.

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Black Feminine Enigmas, or Notes on the Politics of Black Feminist Theory

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Darlene Clark Hine’s “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” gave to black feminist theory and related fields the notion that black women developed a “culture of dissemblance,” a “cult of secrecy” during the Great Migration, one that was produced in response to sexual terror (1989, 915). Hine accounts for the power of sexual violence both to produce “major social protest and migratory movements in Afro-American history” and to shape black women’s emotional lives (913). The strategic secrecy black women cultivated “protect[ed] the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” and allowed black women to “remain an enigma” (915). For Hine, secrecy, privacy, and self-imposed invisibility were survival strategies, tactics for claiming sexual safety and the sanctity of an inner life that resisted captivity. Dissemblance can be described by Rita Dove’s famous phrase, “If you can’t be free, be a mystery” (1991, 64). Yet Hine suggests that dissemblance also created the conditions that allowed “stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions” about black women to flourish (1989, 915). As black women claimed the privacy of their inner worlds, dominant society filled “the space left empty” with projections and pernicious fictions about black women (915). This, Hine suggests, is the risk of black women’s quest for privacy. The insatiable dominant desire to know—and to capture—the black feminine produces racist projections and fantasies, a proliferation of what Patricia Hill Collins (1991) would term “controlling images.”

In this meditation on Hine’s field(s)-defining article, I pose two provocations: First, contemporary black feminist historiographical questions about the archive—its attendant violence and strategies for reconceptualizing archives—have deep roots in Hine’s work on dissemblance, an analytic that