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Attuned Within, Attuned Without: Hazel Carby and the Lessons of Leadership

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I have always been someone who is most comfortable in her head. Whether daydreaming, fantasizing or developing an idea, time spent creatively in my own mind has always come easily. In these strange times, as we all live through stay at home orders and social distancing, that aspect of this global pandemic has not been difficult—time at home, around fewer people, with less obligation to be on the move, is more time to think.

One of the more difficult aspects of academia for me has been its more competitive, performative, public face. My own books and scholarship I generated from the inside out, firmly centered in myself. On the public academic stage I find myself turned outward, focused on what others may think, speaking in order to address their concerns and needs. To the observer it appears as confidence, but the inward feeling is that it is based on air. While in the privacy of my own mind my thoughts are grounding, in the public space of academia all of that internal grounding shifts outward, and it becomes a thin screen on which I record, and then respond to, the cues of the others I interact with across multiple academic worlds—white, black, and other scholars of color across the fields of English literary studies, African diaspora studies, and American studies.

This may seem a strange way to begin a reflection on Hazel Carby's meaningfulness in my personal and professional life. Everything I have said so far is colored, so to speak, by my being a Jamaican immigrant and a woman of color, with the emphasis here on woman. What has always stood out for me about Hazel, as I came to know her, first as an advisee and then as a colleague, is the complexity of her modeling of female academic leadership. And the model she provided has been about tuning into when and where our voices, whether turned inward or outward, meet and mobilize one another in numerous ways. For me, those ways have included not only a political mode of cultural scholarship, but also, probably to Hazel's surprise, both the work of university administration and the clinical practice of psychoanalysis.

On July 1, 2017, I began my tenure as Dean of the Humanities at Rutgers, New Brunswick after serving as Chair of the Department of English. Academic leadership requires a strange blending and enactment of one's attributes and personality features, especially if one happens to be an introvert who can orient themselves publicly with a performance of confidence. One aspect of academic leadership requires what I will call performativity—which I use here to encapsulate the ability to speak and inspire and motivate others, resting on the outward expression of an internal sense of

integrity that allows one to earn and hold people's trust. An aspect of leadership that is articulated less often is the centering it takes to have an idea about a structure, or the organization of a group of people within a structure, and then, with the help of others, to implement that new idea as an actual *way of being* for large groups of people in an academic setting. Scholars in organizational studies describe this much more eloquently than I can: what it takes not only to hold the belief that one's ideas about an organization have merit, but also, to feel that they deserve, first, to be voiced; second, to be pushed; and then third, to be implemented—not in an academic publication but in the specific organizational space of an academic setting in which one is surrounded by other very intelligent people.

It was in this space that I discovered the gendered dimensions of my own introspective tendencies. As a woman, and as a woman of color, having the confidence to lead from the inside out is a surprising challenge. It is neither simply having internal confidence in one's ideas—living from one's head—nor is it simply having the ability to read an external situation to provide what is needed—living “for others,” turned outward, externally focused. Rather, it requires a blending of the two that involves having the confidence to assert one's ideas regarding a process and how something should be organized, based on an internal belief that those ideas deserve a place in the world and should be voiced, which in turn rests on an internal judgment call that has to be held, at first, without much strong external validation. As women, we are not encouraged to wield ourselves in the world, to have *impact*—that is, to come out from our heads, stand in the light, and then assert that our ideas about how we and others should organize or re-organize ourselves in order to make the social world better, have merit. It is a cliché that the model of leadership in patriarchy has women leading from the background while men step forward publicly to inspire and implement. Hazel modeled for me a different lesson: finding the balance between listening to oneself and projecting one's thoughts outward, so they can have an impact on the social world.

In 1993-1994, while I was a graduate student at Yale in American Studies, I had the honor of witnessing Hazel's role in initiating a curricular revolution. Together with Gerald Jaynes, Hazel crafted an ingenious proposal: to develop a graduate program in African American Studies in cooperation with a number of other departments and programs across the University. This program—the Combined PhD in African American Studies—became a department in July 2000, offering a Joint Doctoral Degree in African American Studies with another field or discipline. The program represented an intellectual intervention of the strongest sort. It was Hazel's sense that African American Studies was an epistemological and methodological undertaking that

critically engaged the entire apparatus of knowledge production, from a perspective informed by the history of race in the United States.

In my role now as a Dean, I have an acute appreciation for how difficult it must have been to turn an intellectual intervention into an organizational reality. As academics we believe we can spot when new epistemologies are emerging or in the making, but it is an entirely different undertaking to actualize an interdisciplinary, scholarly paradigm shift within an institution as old as Yale, and across different, established, disciplinary fields of knowledge. Change in the university setting, in our deeply embedded institutions of knowledge with their protocols of review, scholarly debate, expert vetting, etcetera, moves very slowly. It would have been a Sisyphean task to persuade both the university administration and the graduate faculty of various departments of the intellectual benefits of first offering a joint Ph.D. program and then a department in African American Studies at Yale.

Hazel was a student and colleague of the British Caribbean cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall. Her administrative and pedagogic leadership was guided by the insight, shared and developed by Hall in the British educational and cultural context, that African diasporic peoples inhabit modernity from a position askance to traditional bodies of knowledge. In engaging with such traditional fields as English, Art History, Sociology, Political Science, History, Philosophy and Psychology, we bring a different set of questions to the table that require the development of new, interdisciplinary research methodologies. In her required course for first-year graduate students, “Theorizing Racial Formations,” Hazel trained myself and a generation of my peers in how to think both flexibly and rigorously about our place, and the specific interventions we wished to make in our research, from the perspective of a field that came to be called African Diaspora Studies.

Rather than simply contesting others’ representations of blackness, for both Stuart Hall and Hazel Carby what was singular in twentieth century black cultural production was the ways in which black artists were seeking to claim the field of representation for themselves in new ways. Once I started studying with her, Hazel introduced me, a Jamaican immigrant, not just to the content, but also, to the social and political imperative of black, diasporic cultural production, to the reasons why artists and scholars felt motivated to make themselves visible, heard, seen, in the multiple and overlapping public spheres of the late twentieth century across Europe and the Americas.

Introducing me to such essays as Hall's 1990 "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hazel stimulated my full-blown awareness that a transatlantic conversation about blackness included the Caribbean.¹ Caribbean intellectuals were a third, crucial interlocutor in a dialogue that was emerging between black British and African American academics during the 1990s. They brought to that conversation a focus on the legacy of colonialism as a founding historical context for later racialized formations of black transnationalism, globality, and a diasporic geography of blackness. What Hazel enacted for me intellectually, then, was the introduction to black cultural production as an epistemological ground, a ground where institutional, transnational and diasporic, and gendered forces functioned as the condition for my own work. Personally, this meant that I, too, had an imperative, as a student of history, to understand more fully myself and my colleagues' place as Caribbean intellectuals in the United States.

Here is where the gendered dimensions of Hazel's impact came into focus. I headed into my dissertation focused on radical male political figures, such as C. L. R. James and Marcus Garvey, with idealizations characteristic of a young scholar.² The masculinity of these figures was invisible to me. Hazel pushed me to confront my own gendered formation in all of its features. This entailed placing side by side my orientation toward creating male heroes, with the denial of the specificity of my own modes of embodied critique as a Caribbean woman. As a Jamaican woman, my own "politics of location" as a female intellectual were also invisible to me. As I studied and wrote on these male leaders, I gained confidence in the belief that my own thinking, along with its public dimension in my academic writing and scholarship, was a place from which I too could stand, and speak, in my own distinct, Caribbean, female voice.

It was from Hazel that I learned that, as a female intellectual, one's scholarly commitments to historical materialism did not foreclose an analysis of black gendered relations in both Caribbean and American contexts. I could ask where and when black women entered the politics of black representation. I could choose not to shy away from the violence—psychological, physical and sexual—that can structure heterosexual relations between black men and women. Through Hazel's intellectual leadership, I came, unconsciously, to develop the idea of a relational blackness in which questions of intimacy and coupling could take center stage alongside race and class.³

I say "unconsciously" because for many of the early years of my academic career, this influence operated in a more traditional academic format. I came out of graduate school with a greater appreciation for the gendered perspective I brought to bear on certain questions in my fields of study, and an intellectual courage to assert that

perspective rather than keeping it in the background—even to claim the label of a black feminist Caribbeanist scholar. However, while this burgeoning ability to speak from the inside out, as a woman, found room and space to grow in the spheres of my scholarship, something still felt thin when that interiority made its way out into expression in public academic worlds. Mid-career I developed an unusual desire to seek training in psychoanalysis. Looking back now it was clearly an effort to continue to understand my own black female interiority better, so I could feel even further grounded in, and aware of, the place from which I was speaking.

I am sure the historical materialist and outspoken feminist in Hazel was completely baffled by where I was going when I, first, asked for her recommendation to the psychoanalytic institute where I trained, and, second, informed her that I had become a dean on top of turning to psychoanalysis. Neither deans nor psychoanalysts are seen as inhabiting roles centrally preoccupied with the politics of gender and race. Nevertheless, in supporting both decisions she also unknowingly endorsed my burgeoning belief that the intertwining of gender and sexuality in how we think about black subjectivity, pushes the study of “black identity” fully into the relational context of the dyad rather than of the individual subject. In both psychoanalytic clinical practice and as an aspect of my work as a dean, my blackness is neither strictly constituted by my psychic struggles and experiences as an individual, nor by my membership in a larger, collective, racialized group. Rather, it emerges also from an attunement to the self’s formation in the more intimate field of interaction with another: my self and the other literally as two subjects in dyadic relation.

As a field, contemporary psychoanalysis continues to be shaped by Freud’s insights regarding the complexity of our internal landscapes, while also moving significantly beyond them. There is, for example, much more substance to our clinical understanding that one of the most finely tuned activities one is engaged in during a session is a deep listening to the other. Psychoanalytic listening entails a profound awareness of how one’s own subject position impacts what one listens to and how one hears it. To be aware of my “identity,” of who I am in the room, is less in the first instance about self-assertion than it is about self-attunement and self-knowledge. And this is not the kind of self-attunement that allows one to feel simply a sense of knowledge or pride about oneself. Rather, one needs to be as aware of what is limiting one’s ability to hear and interact with another, in a rigorous form of self-scrutiny.

This is, perhaps, and without being fully aware of it, one aspect of what led me into psychoanalytic training; but that is not all. Another aspect of the work rests on the fact

that there is another person sitting in the room with you, a person who has asked you to speak to what you are observing in their identity, their psyche, and their interpersonal relations. The activity of listening to yourself that you are engaged in, then, cannot remain purely solipsistic. One cannot immerse and embed oneself solely in one's own mind and spend a lot of time there, the way I certainly have been able to do as an introspective scholar. The dyadic interpersonal context has you aching to listen and speak where self and other try to meet, attuned within while remaining attuned without. And it is not performativity that helps one retain this balance. There is not enough psychic space or energy left for all of those extroverted, outward-focused, self-orientations and self-presentations that performativity requires. Rather, this balance rests on a unique form of attunement to what one feels one is hearing from the outside, from the other, as it echoes on the inside, in interaction with the self—and then a unique kind of confidence to reflect it back, to express what one thinks one is hearing on the inside back out to the person one is sitting and being with in the analytic session.

Without fully knowing it when I started, this was the internal capacity I was building by choosing to do psychoanalytic training. It has required an even deeper acknowledgement of the gendering of such prosaic things as “trusting one's instincts,” or “going out on a limb,” as the popular sayings go. And for all that it might sound bizarre to those who do not think of deans as good listeners, it is this internal capacity of tuning in that has become more visible to me in my public role as a dean as well.

I am describing something that feels like stepping out on a ledge. In order to lead, you have to be willing to stand out there on the ledge on your own for a bit, without any certainty that others will come to join you and stand out there on that ledge with you. At least in the analytic session, you can trust that even if the other person in the room disagrees with your insight, there is a relationship around you both, mirrored in the consulting room itself, a setting that holds you both in an investment to “hear each other out.” No such assurances are there for you in those moments when, as a female academic leader, you step out on a ledge to name, identify, and re-imagine, something profound about the ways in which we have come to organize ourselves institutionally.

Rather, for a minute you are out there on your own in that breathless pause of a moment I always hear as an undertone in the lead phrase from Paula Gidding's famous book title, *When and Where I Enter*.⁴ Heard often as female self-assertion, I hear “when and where I enter” also as a question, not unlike Frantz Fanon's at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks* when he exclaims: “O my body, make of me always a man who

questions!”⁵ I have always read his statement as not just a question about the world and the other, but also, as a constant question of the self, an aspect of Fanon’s own self-psychoanalytic exploration throughout the entire text. What Fanon does not go on to say, is that the answer that comes back about the self can be frightening.

Giddings borrowed the title of her book, which is also, as her subtitle states, about *The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, from the statement of another black female intellectual Hazel introduced me to in *Reconstructing Womanhood*.⁶ It was Anna Julia Cooper, one of the black female leaders of the group of nineteenth-century novelists Hazel discusses in that work, who stated: “Only the black woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole . . . race enters with me.’”⁷ I want to emphasize some of the less quoted elements in Cooper’s statement, such as the “quiet, undisputed dignity” of a form of womanhood, a gendered performance in all the complex senses of that phrase, without “violence and without suing or special patronage.” In the setting of the university, it was Hazel who first helped me identify within, and wrestle with, the imperatives, motivations, and implications of such a form of speech.

If one is to be engaged with the world, to follow the imperative as black female thinkers to impact our world, one also has to struggle to make visible all of the internal obstacles to listening and seeing oneself fully. Whether as a black, female, Caribbean intellectual, as an analyst attuned to the reverberations of others, or as an academic leader, one has to trust that one can make a sound in the world as a woman and someone will answer back. Hazel Carby, over twenty years ago, listened and heard the questions I did not yet know I was asking, and continued to answer me back even before I knew fully what I was interested in saying. She has both modeled and charged women academics such as myself with the challenge to own and develop the qualities within that push us to assert our right to change the world. The lessons of her leadership, perhaps oddly, recall this old philosophical thought experiment: “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” When a woman speaks, a sound falls into the world from the forest of her mind, echoing. In such an act, it is almost more important for her to hear the sound of that echo herself, first, as it reverberates out into the world—before it bounces back in the reassuring confirmation from others that she has perhaps been heard.

Footnotes

1. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-37. [↵](#)
2. Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). [↵](#)
3. Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). [↵](#)
4. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984). [↵](#)
5. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld Press, 1967), 232. [↵](#)
6. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). [↵](#)
7. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, eds., *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 63. [↵](#)