

**Lynette Goddard. *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance*.  
Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.**

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1        *Staging Black Feminisms* reflects a direct influence of the theoretical framework established by lesbian feminist Barbara Smith. Twenty years after the publication of her controversial 1978 essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Smith reflected that she "was influenced by the bold new ideas of 1970s lesbian feminism" (*Truth That Never Hurts*, 3) when she expressed her displeasure with the cultural illiteracy of white scholars, heterosexual blind spots and general homophobic impediments in African American literary scholarship. The recognition of a Black women's literary tradition was yet emerging and Smith insisted that the establishment of a Black feminist framework was primary for an adequate critique of Black women's art. Smith challenged her contemporaries to develop a criticism that "would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use" (11). While much advancement has been made towards that end in American literature studies, Lynette Goddard shifts our attention to similar flaws in an arena of Black British women's art.

2        Acknowledging her debt to Smith and other feminists, such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, Goddard seeks to re-frame the analytical discourse surrounding Black British women's text-based plays and non-textual, live theatrical performances. Citing her dissatisfaction with the current range of theatrical representations of Black female subjectivity in this cultural arena as her main impetus, Goddard articulates a Black queer critique aimed "[. . .] towards identifying a politics of progressive Black feminist performance for the early twenty-first century" (2). She does so in an African-Caribbean focused analysis, in which she re-evaluates texts from the 1980s to the present (and introduces some obscure voices as well) in order "to determine the extent of their feminist intervention" (4) in relation to Black feminist theory.

3        Goddard works from the premise that traditional criticism in which "[B]lack women's very presence in the British theatre industry is seen to constitute some sort of feminist intervention" is essentialist and flawed. She argues that this perception is purely materialist, as its only criterion is the ability to overcome the double marginalization of sexism and institutional racism in a predominately white and male-controlled system. Goddard insists, as Smith before her, that even as an emancipatory representation of Black subjectivity may be in structural opposition to the status quo, it is not inherently oppositional to heteropatriarchal and Euro-centric cultural values. The quantitative approach does not take into account the content

of the work. Hence, Goddard sets out to establish a more complex standard by which to interpret critique contemporary Black women's texts and performances. Goddard seeks a "progressive" feminist aesthetic, though it should ring familiar to the student of post-Black Arts literary theory:

[...]I would suggest that black feminist work must actively engage in a consciousness-raising critique of the interlocking systems of class, gender, race and sexual oppression, which allows for a distinction to be made between black women's and black feminist plays. (40)

So the aims of the book are threefold: to add to the criticism of Black women's performance art, re-define the feminist standard of said criticism, and to identify those texts/performances which contain actual feminist content.

4 The slim volume is sectioned into four parts. The first section (chapters 1-2) provides a nuanced historicization of Black theater and Black women's theater (and why they are not the same) in Britain. Part one also includes an overview of the arguments set forth throughout the book. Section two (chs. 3-5) provides an in-depth analysis and evaluation of the text-based or narrative plays by Winsome Pollock, Jacqueline Rudet, Jackie Kay, and Valerie Manson-John. The third section (chs. 6-7) reviews other non-text-based shows, including dance, live art and performance poetry. It includes the work of Black Mime Theatre Women's Troop, Patience Agabi, and Dorothea Smartt, among others. Part four concludes with the eighth chapter in which Goddard explores "black feminist futures" through notions of "multicultural feminism" and "millennial black women's theatre."

5 Goddard's feminist rubric is contained in the book's subtitle: identity, politics, and performance. As the quote above states, Goddard divides Black women's art from Black feminist productions that promote socio-political change. While she finds that many texts show "feminist impulse" or "feminist potential" in their portrayals of Black womanhood, many fall short of the much-needed neo-millennial discourse of Black female sexualities and relationships. In each case, the analysis is governed by a desire for an aesthetics that counters hegemonic depictions of black female racial and sexual politics, and de-centers white culture. Through these filters, the content of each play/performance is examined for its relevance to contemporary Black British contexts and its distance from essentialist or stereotypical characterizations. For example, she presents a balanced critique of Winsome Pollock's continued production of high profile anti-racist and anti-sexist plays. Pollock famously "exemplifies feminist disruptions of realist form" (77) but because of the constant use of archetypal, heterosexual characters, Goddard finds that the plays fall short of a "valuable feminist effect."

6        Also, representations of contemporary Black identity are examined for the recognition of mixed race, bi-cultural, migrant experiences, and diverse sexualities. That is to say, the contemporary critical performance practice imagines Black female subjectivity in a variety of contexts, and as queer, bisexual, or same-gender-loving as well as heterosexual. Plays authored by lesbian-identified writer Jackie Kay are submitted as “some of the firmest examples of a distinct black British feminist drama” (105) in that they deal explicitly with stereotypes of black and mixed-raced lesbian identities. Kay is studied alongside playwright Valerie Mason-John’s representations of lesbian sexual experiences that “destabilize simplistic understandings of black women” (109). In her analysis of live performances, Goddard necessarily moves beyond narrative content to present a nuanced dissection of the practitioners’ dramatic choices, including stage direction, props, and vocal inflection. Aspects of performance are also evaluated for feminist techniques relevant to African Diaspora oral traditions, belief systems, and interactive practices.

7        Goddard’s articulation of “progressive” feminist practice does not actually add anything new or different to Smith’s formulation of the role of Black feminist critique. Indeed, it is the flawless practice of it. By calling into question the assumption that all Black women’s plays/performances are inherently oppositional, Goddard raises the bar for interpretation and analyses of these works. The success of *Staging Black Feminisms* is the light it shines on the under-represented multiplicity of neo-millennial Black identities in Britain. This text performs a queering of Black women’s art in its emphasis on hybrid cultures, queer voices, and representations of unfixed or contradictory sex roles, thus contributing to African Diaspora Studies, gender & sexuality disciplines, and performance/media studies.

### **Works Cited**

Smith, Barbara. *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998.