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We Will Be Seen

Tressie McMillan Cottom On Confronting Racism, Sexism, And Classism

BY MARK LEVITON | FEBRUARY 2020



Tressie McMillan Cottom

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In her latest book of essays, THICK, sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom describes how black women are routinely treated as inferior, no matter how competent, educated, smart, or charming they might be. “I was,” she writes, “like many young women, expected to be small so that boys could expand and white girls could shine. . . . I was, like many black children, too much for white teachers and white classrooms and white study groups and white Girl Scout troops and so on. Thick where I should have been thin, more when I should have been less.”

Born in Harlem and raised in North Carolina, Cottom attended North Carolina Central University, a public HBCU (historically black college or university), and received her PhD in sociology from Emory University in 2015. She turned her dissertation on for-profit higher education into the acclaimed book Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy. THICK was a 2019 National Book Award finalist for nonfiction.

Cottom is currently associate professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond and a faculty associate at Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. She has written about inequality, race, education, economics, new technology, and popular culture for *Dissent*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, and many academic journals (tressiemc.com). She’s also been featured on *NPR* and *The Daily Show*. In April 2019 she testified at a Senate Education Committee hearing and was praised by Senator Elizabeth Warren for her work exposing the way for-profit colleges prey on veterans, minorities, and the poor.

Cottom maintains a lively Twitter account ([@tressiemcphd](#)), and she and fellow author Roxane Gay host a podcast called [Hear to Slay](#), covering black feminism, celebrity, love, art, and more.

I met Cottom in April 2019 at the Black Iris Gallery, an artist-run media lab and one of her favorite hangouts in Richmond. As we spoke, she moved back and forth between precise academic diction and a Southern dialect full of colloquial expressions, some of which provoked laughter from us both. When we were done, she offered me a lift, driving me past the Monument Avenue Historic District, with its massive statues of “heroes” of the Confederacy, and dropping me off at her favorite taco place, saying that her sense of Southern hospitality “dictates I make sure you get something good to eat before you leave town.”

Leviton: You feel black women are in a special position right now to bring their intellectual, spiritual, and emotional intelligence to the world. Why are their voices so needed in this historical moment?

Cottom: At the risk of being pretentious — because people in every era probably have the feeling of living in a crucial time — I do think this is a special moment. As a professor, I think a lot about how we will teach this era in the future, how we will describe it, what the “official record” will be, and what the counternarratives will be. We are going to be wrestling for some time with how the hell the Trump era happened. In ten years someone will be the world’s leading expert on Trumpism, with a chair at some university.

It became clear to me a few years ago that the history of this period was already being written, and that black women were very much a part of that. For the first time, we haven’t had some of the artificial barriers and gatekeepers that restrict our access. The Internet and digital publications have opened up a world to us. White people this time can’t say they didn’t know about us. We’re not talking about the early twentieth century here, where you had to travel on a train or read obscure publications to know what a badass black woman like Ida B. Wells was doing. This time they won’t be able to say we didn’t try to write our versions of events.

When I first had the ear of mainstream media outlets, I wanted to point out not only that black women are here and ready, but that black women can contribute to the discussion in many areas, not just those considered “black stories.” I was saying that mainstream media could become more thoughtful, understand modern life better, and have a more nuanced analysis by listening to a diversity of voices.

I wasn’t always so outspoken. There’s a strong culturally conservative thread in the upbringing of black girls, in Southern communities especially. We are taught to be nice rather than assertive. I was born pigeon-toed and bowlegged, and to correct it surgically would have meant a lot of pain and expense, wearing braces for years, and my mother couldn’t bring herself to put me through that. My entire life I’ve had her voice in my head telling me to “fix my feet.” I’m in my forties, and still that voice is just as strong as it was when I was a child. It was both my physical reality and a metaphor. I was to put on my best version of myself: people are watching. It was my mother’s version of “You have to work twice as hard to get half as far.” She taught me that you can do your best and still fail, which is kind of the social theory of black people: there’s always something bigger than the individual that’s shaping your life. We know we can show up to work every day and do everything right and still be fired. We know we can follow all the rules and still be arrested. We know we can follow all the financial advice and still go broke. The “fix your feet” mantra from my mother was an acknowledgment that there was a world she couldn’t completely prepare me for. Today I don’t walk around like I’m deformed. I have fixed my feet, and they have fixed me.

Leviton: You say a lot of black women have a drive to become “super competent.” What do you mean?

Cottom: First there is the amount of competence required of anybody in a complex society. We are all, to an extent, increasingly expected to perform a certain type of competence to access the tools of “mobility”: things like education and health care and civic institutions like voting or the legal system. Even just the day-to-day reality of negotiating with gatekeepers for your well-being requires a certain type of competence, a certain way of presentation, a certain way of engaging the social norms in the dominant society. Any minority group in a majority society must display a very high standard of competence to overcome the

negative stereotypes and perceptions about them. And women tend to have to perform a certain type of femininity *and* adapt certain tools of masculinity to be employed — certainly to be promotable.

For black women all of those expectations come loaded with stereotypes about our *incompetence*. Yet both among ourselves and in the dominant society — namely, white Americans and whiteness as a construct — we are expected from an early age to become competent not just for our safety and well-being but also for the safety and well-being of others. Black women are expected to navigate the educational system on behalf of their children *and* on behalf of the children in their community. They are expected to be the gatekeepers and the shepherds of the community's civic participation. All this conversation about "Will black women voters save us in the next presidential election?" is one way black women are expected to be hypercompetent for the well-being of everyone.

Leviton: Janine Jackson of Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting says that the lack of black female representation in mainstream media isn't because black women don't go into journalism; it's because, when they do, they are restricted to stories about race and eventually get fed up with being prevented from doing the full range of work that white reporters get to do.

Cottom: Right. Why don't we see more black journalists weighing in on economics, for instance, and not just on how so-and-so policy will affect black people? When the story of Russian interference in the 2016 election was exploding, the major news outlets had a sudden need for experts on Russia, and they dug up white Cold War scholars who were retired or working on other things. Now, right off the top of my head, I can name Jelani Cobb and Terrell J. Starr, two black men who have deep expertise in Cold War and post-Cold War U.S.-Russia relations. But they're less likely to get a phone call, because their being black isn't part of the story.

Leviton: Since we've already brought up Trump, let's talk about whether his election is a reaction to eight years of our first black president.

Cottom: When Barack Obama was running for president in 2007, I thought anyone who believed he could be elected was crazy. I'd been raised with the same sort of skepticism that many black people experience. I'm a child of the tail end of the civil-rights movement of the sixties and the Black Power movement of the seventies. My mother was a Black Panther. Growing up, I watched *The Cosby Show* and was taught that there were economic and academic opportunities out there for me — but also that I shouldn't get comfortable. It was always a "two steps forward, one step back" kind of relationship with the United States for black people.

So I thought Obama couldn't possibly get elected. I remember seeing him give the keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, when he was running for the Senate, and thinking, Holy crap! Too bad he's never going to get anywhere. [Laughs.] But when he was running for president, I did go to one of his early house parties, a traditional Democratic-machine fund-raiser. Up until then, my political involvement had been very local, trying to register people to vote and going to events organized by the NAACP.

This event was held in a wealthy enclave of Charlotte, North Carolina, called Myers Park: wide streets, stately homes, good schools — all, I knew, the result of years of racist covenant restrictions and redlining [*the practice of not providing mortgages, homeowner's insurance, and other services in majority-black neighborhoods* — Ed.]. The event was almost entirely white people, the most enthusiastic white people I'd seen in my whole life! I was stunned. They were so excited about Obama. And the party was organized so well, with takeaways and placards and ways to donate online right there, sitting on the couch. I remember going home and telling my mother and friends, "Maybe we've got it wrong. If that's who's for him, maybe he can actually be elected." At the time, there was some anxiety that black voters were not lining up behind Obama.

A few months later I went to a rally in Columbia, South Carolina, that drew nearly thirty thousand people, and they rolled out Oprah friggin' Winfrey! She was doing her best "sister talk," speaking our language, and as I watched that crowd, I could see the needle move. I became cautiously optimistic. I couldn't see it at the time, but that was where Trump started. When Oprah Winfrey can rally people around someone named Barack Hussein Obama, that's going to cause a reaction.

By 2009, as Obama assumed office, the Tea Party was spreading nationwide. And Trump tapped into that energy seven years later. So that's where we are now — and I don't think we've swung to the extreme yet. I think Trump is at best a midway stop on that movement toward white anxiety and rage. That anger hasn't been assuaged. The fear is still there. The zeal is still there. When Trump said he could shoot somebody down on Fifth Avenue and not lose a vote, I think that was one of the most honest things he's ever said.



Some people resent like hell my expertise in my field of study. Sometimes they even resent the expertise I have representing myself, telling my own personal history.

Leviton: It wasn't like Obama was radical in any way. He got tremendous pushback on even modestly progressive goals. He was often timid, as if he believed black people in general would take the heat for something he did.

Cottom: I certainly thought at the time that he was too hesitant, too concerned with compromise and playing nice. Now I think it's a little more complicated. I think it has more to do with Barack Obama as a person. The man had much more faith in the rationality of the other side than he should have had. He was not like me, part of the generation who'd been given that cautious, pragmatic approach. He had a more exuberant sort of hope. He figured if he came to the table with Republican policies, like their health-care proposal — the individual mandate, after all, was a pet idea of conservatives — they'd get on board. He didn't fight for something "outrageous" like single-payer. He thought he could be pragmatic and careful enough to win over Republicans. And then the Affordable Care Act got not one Republican vote in the House or the Senate.

I think Obama, during the campaign and during his administration, always kept an eye on his legacy. I think he felt the weight of being the first black president very strongly, and he didn't want it to go down the tubes with single-payer, even if that would have been the right thing to do.

Leviton: In 2009 Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., who is black, was arrested at his Cambridge residence because police thought he was breaking into his own house. [*Gates's front door had gotten stuck.* — *Ed.*] Obama said the police had "acted stupidly." The negative reaction was immediate, and Obama later said he regretted his comments, and he invited Gates and the arresting officer to the White House for a "beer summit."

Cottom: The original arrest was outrageous, and Obama backpedaled. I think his presidency was deeply committed to compromise, and there's a problem with trying to compromise with a side that's not acting in good faith: it's more like surrendering. He couldn't see that kind of reaction coming. He was naive, which is personally galling to some black people who can see the danger every day. Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the Obama administration the "Good Negro Government" period.

I understand that idea — that if you can only perform well enough, be competent enough, you will transcend the enmity aimed at you. But "No-Drama Obama" was never going to be smart enough, calm enough, cool enough; he was never going to get beyond that racist stereotype that black men are hotheads. That's what psychologists call "projection."

The way racism often works is to simply transmute the definitions of words: if you somehow manage to meet the standard, we'll just revise it so you don't. People who don't look like white people are getting advanced degrees and showing up as doctors, lawyers, Wall Street traders, members of the House of Representatives, so now the problem is expertise itself. We will reject their calm recitation of facts.

This is how Trump and his enablers try to destroy social norms and trust in institutions: call any inconvenient truths "fake news"; call Congressional oversight "witch hunts"; call immigrants fleeing oppression "animals" and public servants who tell the truth "rats." It's not that the institutions did something wrong. In fact, they became more democratic, more inclusive — and that's too much.

Some people resent like hell my expertise in my field of study. Sometimes they even resent the expertise I have representing myself, telling my own personal history. This goes to the heart of what I said about Obama: How can you believe in the goodwill

of people who won't even see you?

Leviton: During the 2016 presidential campaign, you went to a Trump rally. What did you learn?

Cottom: I am weirdly interested in what you might call “Americana,” and these Trump rallies felt like that, a kind of folklore or living history. The rallies, I thought, were for many people a projection of some idealized version of America, and I’m fascinated by that. Also the reporting was sometimes treating the rallies as a carnival or state fair, and I love state fairs. I go every year.

I was really curious to see if the media depiction of a rally matched what was happening on the ground. That was the social-scientist part of me, the writer part of me: you’ve got to touch the details. I doubted that the crowds were having such an enthusiastic response to him. On TV he looked like a fool, but clearly the crowds were not responding to him as if he were a fool.

I went with white people, and the rally was taking place in a location where I could feel relatively safe: here at the convention center in downtown Richmond. I certainly would not have attended one of his rallies in many other places in the South. All of the people at the rally wanted to think of themselves as good people. Everyone wanted to be nice to me. I think they wanted to prove the rally was about politics, not racism. So I got tons of people talking to me, coming to check in with me. *[Laughs.]*

The people selling t-shirts and buttons were all doing sales pitches, just like they were at a carnival. The items said, “Kill Hillary,” but they acted like they were selling ice cream. It was bizarre. I couldn’t help but think of the history of lynching, how the murders were treated as social events where white families brought babies and children; where gruesome celebratory photographs were taken; where the community cohered.

It’s important to do such things in public. It says something that the police are there to defend you if anything goes wrong. It’s a way to show that you have the power of the state behind you.

But away from the people selling t-shirts, there was something else going on. I could see that media depictions were missing a big part of the story, and that Trump was on track to win. His audience was not a bunch of ignorant “poor white trash,” the way the media tended to portray them — and I want to say that, as a country, we are just about as good at suppressing the votes of poor white people as we are at suppressing the votes of other groups. What I saw was a solidly middle-class crowd, skewing to upper-class. I watched the cars coming in and out, how people were dressed. Some of the kids still had their private-school uniforms on. It didn’t look like a sea of poor people to me. And it wasn’t as uniformly white as had been reported. There were plenty of people holding up signs reading, CHINESE AMERICANS FOR TRUMP, plenty of black people tapping their feet and patting their knees at the parts they liked. And *tons* of women. I said to myself, “We’re getting this wrong. This is the traditional Republican electorate. If that’s who will show up for this carnival, with its aggressive racist and sexist language, we are in trouble.”

That audience thought they deserved what they imagined Obama supporters had gotten in spades during the past eight years: that euphoric collectivism. I won’t lie; there was something religious about going to an Obama event. I’m quite resistant to those types of things. I’m a terrible church person. When everyone around me gets excited, I get nervous. I’m bad at euphoria! But I’ve been in the room with Obama numerous times, and — woo, buddy! That’s the closest I’ve ever come to being converted! *[Laughs.]* I think Trump supporters were deeply jealous of that. They wanted that kind of experience — and Trump gave it to them.

The difference is Obama was joyful and exuberant, while Trump was angry and sexually aggressive — also the type of thing that can get the blood pumping.

One thing I learned at that Richmond rally was that Trump isn’t a very good speaker at all. The crowd did most of the work. When he wasn’t hitting the right notes, you could tell they were bored, and they yelled the lines they wanted to hear repeated. Someone would yell, “Lock the bitch up!” and Trump would pick up their cues. On TV he looked incoherent, but that was just him waiting for the audience to tell him what they wanted to hear. We know he’s obsessed with TV ratings; this was like ratings in real time. And he’s excellent at reading the crowd.

Trump is absolutely reelectable. The structure of party politics favors the incumbent. Unless he burns down the White House — and I'm not sure his people would care much if he did — the system is set up to reelect. This is a guy who sets the fire and then wants credit for calling the fire department, and his party allows it, because they want to win. During the campaign he kept saying "Americans" want to win, which means white people want to win, and I think as long as he structures everything around that yearning, he does all right. We pooh-pooh that attitude to our detriment.

As I said, we haven't fully explored the amount of rage that white males feel in this country. As long as he gives them an emotional conduit for that rage, it will drive his voter turnout. Of course, there's been a successful twenty-year, at least, campaign to repress and control voting, including out-and-out voter suppression. The voters of Florida passed a ballot measure in 2018 reinstating voting rights for 1.5 million convicted felons, and the Republican-controlled legislature immediately introduced what is essentially a new Jim Crow law to roll back those voting rights. Unless the Democrats turn out in sufficient numbers in those states where voter suppression is strongest, and where white rage is strongest, why wouldn't Trump be reelected?

Leviton: You write about how your mother helped people in the neighborhood deal with problems — government bureaucracy, store owners, and so forth — because she knew how to "talk white."

Cottom: That's what we call "code-switching." She knew how to show up as a "respectable black person," with the Queen's English and her best Diana Ross outfit and her hair bobbed. It's part of what it means to be black in America. James Baldwin said, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." I think people misunderstand what he meant by "rage." It's much more intimate than uncontrolled anger, which is what black people are often accused of. It's a constant, low-level static in your ear that you adjust to. I think that's what all the small indignities of dealing with racism, sexism, and classism does to you. It's not that you lash out every day — in fact, you would exhaust yourself doing so — but that the anger is a part of your daily life.

With code-switching it's almost worse when it works, because it reveals to you: "Oh, this is exactly what's happening. If I repress my natural voice, I can succeed in the dominant culture. And all I have to do is kill myself. Well, that's nifty!" Academia is no different. One of the first times I published anything, an editor told me I was too easy to read to be academic, too deep to be popular, and too black to be literary. By my third year in grad school I was publishing hundreds of essays, weighing in on education, technology, politics, labor. I was becoming one of those Professional Smart People. When I write, I am "fixing my feet." But I've decided I will not code-switch on NPR or *The Daily Show* or when testifying before Congress. And I won't do it with my students.



Two students face off with a pro-Confederate demonstrator after a Confederate monument was torn down on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in August 2018.

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Leviton: Is the term “microaggression” a good descriptor for the commonplace indignities people of color endure?

Cottom: “Microaggression” is sort of like “intersectionality,” “gender as performance,” and other academic terms that have broken through to common usage: it can get stripped of its meaning. Every psychologist I know hates it when you call someone a sociopath, because most people don’t use the word in its official definition! [*Laughs.*] White people will use the word *microaggression* to describe any little thing that annoys them. That’s not what it was intended to mean. Being aggrieved is not the same as suffering a microaggression.

Still, the word does describe an important concept: those small, interpersonal acts of aggression that can even read as polite — and, in fact, often do. That’s why we add “micro”: because, outside the context of the power relationship involved, a reasonable person could say, “Oh, that wasn’t so bad.”

Leviton: Like when you go to the store and the clerk says, “May I help you find anything?” That has a different contextual meaning when it’s said to a black woman as opposed to a white man.

Cottom: Absolutely. That’s one of my favorites, because depending on how it’s said, it can be either an actual offer of help or an example of social control, and the only people who can hear the difference are those being scrutinized and socially controlled. I can be in the store with my white friends, and they won’t hear it at all. When a clerk says, “May I help you?” in that way that’s

nice *and* nasty, as my aunt would say, the question really means: *Tell me why you are here. Justify your presence, so I know whether to treat you as a customer or a vagrant.* It's the equivalent of "Show me your papers."

Leviton: How does this work in the academic environment?

Cottom: The academic analog might be "I have a question — well, it's more of a comment than a question." [Laughs.]

In academia we accumulate all these credentials and institutional affiliations: what school you went to, who your thesis adviser is, where you've published. That's all fundamentally: *Show your papers to prove you belong here.* And, as I was saying earlier, black scholars can never have enough of those credentials. Black women, especially, do not have enough authority, according to the gatekeepers, to speak on much of anything.

For some — no, I'm going to go with *many*: for many of my colleagues there's no such thing as me being their professional equal, much less their superior. I don't even try to convince anybody. I'm affiliated with Harvard, and in my daily life I just forget about all that. But in an academic setting I see everyone waiting for me to show my credentials, my degrees, my affiliations, and I just don't do it. People actually get angry at me because I don't puff myself up the way it's expected, but I know it won't matter if I tell them I just got back from Harvard or testifying to Congress. [Laughs.]

The majority of academics are white liberals; that's the professional culture. If you are black, they are doing you an extreme favor by acknowledging how exceptional you are, which is something that I refute outright. I won't allow you to make me exceptional, because it's one of the first steps in creating social distance between me and the people I care about. It's an invitation for me to participate in "othering" black people. I refuse that, even as I win at the academics' game. In fact, part of the fun is to win at their game and then refuse their approval. [Laughs.]

For white liberals it's also about how exceptional *they* are for recognizing my achievements. It's ultimately a reflection on themselves: *I'm a good person. I know a smart black woman. Look how amazing it is that I treat her with such equality.* But they will accept that I'm exceptional only as long as I'm not *as* exceptional as they are. I like how the political scientist Corey Robin frames it. He says people of color are only ever considered *marginally* acceptable: *You're good — for a black thinker.* I sometimes feel regarded that way: I'm good — for a black woman sociologist.

Leviton: In modern America it seems we are all living in a box where almost everything is determined by institutional racism, patriarchy, and economic inequality. How do we get out of the box?

Cottom: The crass class warrior in me believes that few things move our belief systems as well as religion and money. And since I don't deal with religion, I tend to focus on the money part. I don't think we can ever get out of that box unless we redistribute wealth. White supremacy is defending inherited privilege and resources and the ability to pass them on. Until you disrupt that, I don't know that we can change the economic base of culture and community. We can point it out, though.

Leviton: Are you talking about reparations for African Americans?

Cottom: You know, nobody needs reparations more than white people. It will end up freeing white people more than it will benefit any individual black person. Because our American culture is so capitalistic and so driven by material ownership and property, we focus on the economic part of reparations, but true reparations always have an element of societal responsibility and forgiveness. We don't focus on those things, because they involve emotions and mental and spiritual well-being, which our society greatly devalues, because they are difficult to monetize. Reparations are not just about black people getting stuff, although that is an important and critical piece of it and one that is right and proper. Reparations are also about naming the harm that's been done and about extending categorical forgiveness to the wrongdoers. Reparations must give white people a way out of the ugliest and nastiest part of what white racism does to them. White people in America — and, I would argue, across all modern societies — trade parts of their humanity for the privilege of being white. And they are not going to be able to become their fullest, best selves until they have enacted the part of reparations we don't like to talk about very much: the admittance of guilt and the collective forgiveness.

And so, while black people would get the economic goods that we are due after generations of systemic oppression and wealth extraction from black communities and black lives, white people would get, for the first time, the freedom to become fully human and humane. Frankly I think that's the better part of the deal.

Reparations are necessary because the wealth generated by slavery still forms the basis of economic inequality. As one of my mentors, William Darity, told me, there's a case for economic reparations for slavery, but we don't have to go that far back. We can just make the case for what happened to black people thirty years ago! There are people alive right now who went to segregated schools; who weren't able to buy homes through the Federal Housing Administration; who did not have access to the full benefits of their military service; who were not able to obtain property insurance because of redlining. They are living victims of what is essentially American apartheid. You don't want to go back 150 years and figure out which people are the legitimate descendants of slaves? OK, how about just start with my mama? She went to segregated schools her entire life. I can give you her address.

We are more comfortable in our culture talking about the distant past. We love black history; it's black people we don't like.

Leviton: Of course, the counternarrative — which is believed by more than just white supremacists — is that if you have failed to achieve anything in the U.S., it's your own fault, because we live in a meritocracy.

Cottom: We can present study after study to refute that — but you can't beat an ideology with evidence. The ideology *controls the rules of evidence*, not the other way around. America does not want to confront the institutional racism that keeps employment, housing, health care, education, and most everything else unequal.

Leviton: I want to ask about your life here in Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy. What's it like having your office so close to monuments celebrating Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and other Confederate "heroes"?

Cottom: Richmond is an old-money city. The Civil War is still being fought here. It's a lovely place in daily life, perfectly pleasant, but it's never going to become the kind of "new South" city that, say, Atlanta is, because you can't do that while keeping the Civil War alive.

Which South is going to win out? So much of the energy is about the demographic realignment of economic centers like Atlanta, Raleigh-Durham, and Charlotte. Even places in Alabama and Mississippi are part of these new economic patterns. Reniqua Allen has written about black millennials moving south from big urban centers in the North, especially to North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. They're looking for cheaper housing and upward mobility. As the title of her 2017 *New York Times* op-ed puts it, "Racism Is Everywhere, So Why Not Move South?"

I think Richmond, being close to Washington, D.C., is feeling the pull of modernity — but can it give up those monuments in the middle of town? Can Richmond become part of the new South without a strong black political class? I mean, people are still doing Civil War battle reenactments on random Saturdays here *in town*, not just way out in the country somewhere.

Leviton: Should the Confederate monuments in Richmond be removed?

Cottom: The statues should be removed because they are historically inaccurate and celebrate the losing side. I think those are basic, straightforward reasons. Also the public should not be paying for their care and maintenance when black people are part of the tax base. We shouldn't have to pay for monuments to our own subjugation.

But to take away the statues and keep that wealth corridor that's built up around Monument Avenue would be a very complicated "win" to me. The Monument Avenue Historic District has delivered an insane accumulation of wealth for the people who own real estate there, and the city has subsidized public investment on that corridor. To remove the statues but leave that representation of the vast economic inequality of Richmond untouched? That's like the Arthur Ashe statue that was placed on Monument Avenue in 1996. [*Ashe was an American tennis great and the only black man ever to win singles titles at Wimbledon, the US Open, and the Australian Open. — Ed.*] It's the "all lives matter" approach to monuments. It ignores how disproportionate representation and power works. It's just ridiculous.

We don't need any monuments to whiteness on Monument Avenue when some of the homes on Monument Avenue are worth almost ten times the average home value in Richmond, a majority-black city. You don't put up an Arthur Ashe statue and call it equality.

There are those who say removing the Confederate monuments will somehow "erase history." They need a monument to remember what side of history they're on? Racism is rational insofar as it has a logic; it can be observed; its effects can be predicted. But it's not reasonable. This really has nothing to do with keeping their heritage alive. If that was the case, there'd be room for compromise. No, it's about controlling the very air of a place. Monuments take up space; everyone has to drive or walk by them. It matters less *why* the statues are there than that they *are* there. They own the objective reality of the place.

“ We are more comfortable in our culture talking about the distant past. We love black history; it's black people we don't like.

Leviton: The Confederate monuments started to go up during Reconstruction, when freedmen were being elected to Congress, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were passed, and whites saw they were in danger of having to deal with real equality in the eyes of the law. It's why white supremacists are still chanting, "You will not replace us."

Cottom: I'll give them this: I think Republicans are more honest about human nature than the other side is. They see how ethnicity is used to unify and organize groups. They embrace it as a political strategy. [The late Republican political operative] Lee Atwater used to say, "Perception is reality." Attach the word *crime* to black people, and you never have to say anything explicitly racist — just keep talking about "crime."

When you can marshal the resources of the state to defend whatever you want and I can't, there's no neutral or fair. If you can call the police to come protect a statue, but I can't call the police to prevent me from being profiled in a store, that tells you the whole story. White people keep calling 911 because black people are waiting for a friend in Starbucks, or mowing the grass, or sleeping in a common area at Yale, or exiting their Airbnb rental. It would be dangerous for black people to call the police on white people for the same behaviors. But can our white allies call the police when they are uncomfortable around white racists they encounter? Sure. That'd be an interesting form of protest. I'd like that a lot.

The idea that you'd use police violence to make yourself comfortable — you're not unsafe, just uncomfortable — is a major part of the power structure. And watch the cellphone footage when the police show up in those situations and *don't do anything*. The white callers can't believe the police don't work for them, and they get angry at the cops.

You know what most nonwhites do when they're uncomfortable? They leave. They deal with it. They cuss. They have a drink.

Leviton: You've written about situations where African commentators who live in the U.S. were criticized for not being "authentic" enough to talk about African American life. Who gets to speak on behalf of black people?

Cottom: It's precisely because I'm now seen as an expert on black people that I always point out there are different kinds of black people. This gets forgotten, because when you've only got thirty minutes out of a twenty-four-hour news cycle to talk about so-called black issues, you're going to focus on the most extreme needs within the group, not the nuance. So it leads people to think that all black people are in the economic underclass, or that all black people are Democrats, or that they all go to church.

I'm regular black-black, like out of a black-history book. My family moved from the South to the North, and then we moved back. We had the history of slavery, and the presence of Native Americans and random white people in the family tree. Up until the sixties, most men in my family went into the military. We went to black colleges, prayed in the black church. My family is mundane as hell.

I know my experience is not universal to black people, but I do think it's universal enough to how we are perceived in this country. I wish other black people were comfortable saying the same thing. I think we're at a point where we have to take seriously the heterogeneity of our community, not just on issues like class and ethnic origin but on sexuality and sexual orientation. We've got to get comfortable with recognizing that the thing uniting black people isn't just white racism.

I don't want to be the voice of black people, or black women, or black feminists. I can't imagine if I had the weight of that on me all the time.

I was trying to find a speaker's agent about two years ago, and I contacted some agencies. Understand, I wasn't just cold-calling. I had people weighing in on my behalf, you know? I had referrals! And I must have been told three different times, "Oh, we've already got one of you." And I'd look up the person they'd mentioned and find that literally the only thing we had in common was our color. Though sometimes it wasn't about color: "Oh, we've already got a woman who talks about schools." And I'd find out the other speaker the agency represented came from the for-profit-college industry — exactly the *opposite* of what I advocate.

Leviton: Many women have to deal with domestic violence in their homes, and black women often hesitate to involve the police or social services. What special problems do black women have with domestic violence?

Cottom: When you call the police into your home to mediate the violence happening there, you are bringing the violence of the state into your personal life. Black women know that intimately, whether they articulate it as a political theory or not. I find that black women specifically, and minority women in general in this country, broadly understand that the police are not there to save us.

Domestic-violence protocols have the assumption of whiteness built into them. For example, a police officer or health-care worker has to see a bruise in order to classify your abuse as domestic violence, which overlooks the fact that black women may not bruise in a way that a white nurse can see. Unless you are accustomed to looking at bruises on dark skin, you won't see them. The damage to our bodies can quite literally be invisible to the systems that are supposedly designed to save us from that violence.

Then there are examples of deeply ingrained beliefs among health-care professionals that black people do not feel pain the same way that white people feel it. Many, many studies [of racial bias] bear this out. And there's the compounded violence of a legal system that is designed for efficiency as opposed to meting out justice for victims. A judicial system that does not understand how black families may be structured does not appreciate the vulnerability of black women to economic, mental, and physical abuse. A social and economic system that privileges whiteness can only understand black women as subjects who *deserve* the violence and abuse that happens to us. So why would you call the police to solve a problem that was created by the same system that created the police?

Leviton: There are activists fighting to change these systems. Are you optimistic that Black Lives Matter (BLM), for example, is going to have a lasting effect?

Cottom: I practice the black-feminist tradition of pragmatism. That means I am cautiously optimistic about the ability of human beings to engage in collective action that improves lives. Black Lives Matter has tapped into and helped shape a political identity for a whole generation of young black people, and I think that is a good thing, because when we start to believe the lie of progress and don't develop a political identity rooted in the material reality of black people, we suffer. And so BLM was a natural, timely correction to a historical gap in the tradition of black social movements.

I am always hopeful when black people learn how to organize and raise hell, because that's likely how we are going to free ourselves — and a whole bunch of white people along the way, because there's no way to do one without the other.



MARK LEVITON is supposed to be retired, but it didn't take. He's now in his fifth decade of writing professionally, and his 1960s-themed radio program, *Pet Sounds*, can be heard Mondays on KVMR-FM in Nevada City, California.