

**“THIS BATTLEFIELD
CALLED LIFE”:
BLACK FEMINIST DREAMS**

*I say, come, sister, brother to the battlefield
Come into the rain forests
Come into the hood
Come into the barrio
Come into the schools
Come into the abortion clinics
Come into the prisons
Come and caress our spines*

*I say come, wrap your feet around justice
I say come, wrap your tongues around truth
I say come, wrap your hands with deeds and prayer
You brown ones
You yellow ones
You black ones
You gay ones
You white ones
You lesbian ones*

*Comecomecomecomecome to this battlefield
Called life, called life, called life. . . .*

*I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die. . . .*

Sonia Sanchez, “For Sweet Honey in the Rock”

I want the same thing that I did thirty years ago when I joined the Civil Rights movement and twenty years ago when I joined the women's movement, came out, and felt more alive than I ever dreamed possible: freedom.

Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts*

What is the position of women in black radical visions of freedom? Prone . . . to disappear, that is. The dream of African redemption comes to us largely as a male dream of armies liberating the motherland from their imperialist adversaries. Women do have a place in a postredemption Africa, but rarely do they deviate from their traditional roles as nurturers and caretakers. The position of women has been debated in socialist and communist circles, but even there it is usually left as a question. And black women specifically? They have never been a primary subject of the American Left, always falling somewhere in the cracks between the Negro Question and the Woman Question. As we've seen, key interventions by the likes of Ida B. Wells or Claudia Jones attempted to disrupt color- and class-struggle-as-usual, but few leftists paid attention. Nearly half a century ago, black playwright and critic Lorraine Hansberry took the Communists to task for failing to recognize that the Woman Question stood alongside class, race, colonialism, and the struggle for peace as "the greatest social question existent." Third World-identified revolutionaries had much to say about class, culture, and internationalism, but very little to say about women. When women appeared in the radical imagination of the 1960s and 1970s, it was often as the iconic gun-slinging, baby-toting, Afro-coifed Amazon warrior. Even the radical architects of reparations completely collapsed black women within an undifferentiated mass called the black community.

Here lay the crux of the problem: The relative invisibility of black women in these radical freedom dreams is less a matter of deliberate exclusion than *conception*, or the way in which the interests and experiences of black people are treated. The black

community is too often conceived as an undifferentiated group with common interests. The men and even many of the women who lead these movements see the yoke of race and class oppression and accordingly create strategies to liberate the race, or black working people in particular. This ostensibly gender-neutral conception of the black community (nothing is really gender neutral), presumes that freedom for black people as a whole will result in freedom for black women. Oppressions of sex and gender went unacknowledged or were considered the secondary residue of racial capitalism that would eventually wither away. A long list of black women challenged these ideas—running the gamut from Sojourner Truth, who challenged white feminists and male abolitionists to acknowledge the oppression and potential of black women, to turn-of-the-century intellectual Anna Julia Cooper, whose writings offered a withering analysis of how race and gender worked to oppress white women and all communities of color. Indeed, these women flipped the script on the black freedom movement, arguing that freedom for black women would result in freedom for black people as a whole—better yet, all people. But it was not until the formation of an autonomous radical black feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s that we find the most thorough, sustained interrogation of sex and gender as part of a general challenge to conceptions of black liberation.

Radical black feminists have never confined their vision to just the emancipation of black women or women in general, or all black people for that matter. Rather, they are the theorists and proponents of a radical humanism committed to liberating humanity and reconstructing social relations across the board. When bell hooks says “Feminism is for everybody,” she is echoing what has always been a basic assumption of black feminists. We are not talking about identity politics but a constantly developing, often contested, revolutionary conversation about how all of us might envision and remake the world. Of course, one might argue that we should be talking about feminism writ large, and that identifying something called “black feminism” is itself essentialist, if not divisive. But I am using *black* in order to be his-

torically precise, because the ideas and visions I discuss in this chapter grew primarily out of the black freedom movement and black women's experience, not interracial sisterhood solidarity. Radical black feminists not only struggled against race, class, and gender oppression, but also critically analyzed the racial ideologies underlying patriarchy and challenged mainstream feminist conceptions of woman as a universal category.

It would also be a mistake to read radical black feminism as a negative response to black male sexism within the movement. Instead, as Paula Giddings, Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, Deborah Gray White, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Elsa Barkely Brown, Patricia Hill-Collins, and countless historians of the movement attest, black feminism's core vision grows out of a very long history of black women attempting to solve the general problems of the race but doing so by analyzing and speaking from both "public" and "private" realms. To be more precise, their work exposes the false wall erected between public and private, especially given the importance of black women's labor in the maintenance of white households as well as the critical role of sexual violence and lynching in upholding race and gender hierarchies here and abroad.

In the end, perhaps we *are* talking about feminism writ large; or better yet, freedom writ large, for these women profoundly deepened the black radical imagination, producing a vision of liberation expansive enough for all.

Smashers of Myths . . . Destroyers of Illusion

Black women don't usually appear in histories of "second wave" radical feminism, except as frustrated critics of white women. But a few were there at the very beginning. Florynce "Flo" Kennedy and Pauli Murray, both attorneys with a long history of civil rights and feminist activism, were founding members of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Murray, in fact, served on President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women. Flo Kennedy earned a reputation as independent and outspoken;

among other things, she formed the Feminist Party in support of black Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm’s presidential bid in 1972 and went on to become a founding member of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973. Both Murray and Kennedy felt that NOW and other mainstream feminist organizations ignored black women and tended to see the experiences of middle-class white women as representative of the experiences of all women. Kennedy was drawn to the radical feminist movement, which began to take off around 1968–69. She participated in demonstrations with New York Radical Women partly because they engaged in civil disobedience and advocated a revolution in gender relations, not just reforms that would give women more access to the power structure.

Yet even the radical feminist vision of revolution paid little attention to race or the unique position of women of color. New York Radical Women’s “Principles,” distributed in 1968, made no mention of differences between women by race or class and presumed the existence of a universal women’s culture. On the other hand, one line in the “Principles” could potentially have opened the door for an analysis of how race, gender, and class worked together: “We define the best interests of women as the best interests of the poorest, most insulted, most despised, most abused woman on earth.” And who might that woman be? Most likely a black woman or a woman of color. It is an observation central to black feminist thought, going back at least to Anna Julia Cooper, whose book *A Voice from the South* (1893) made the case that the condition of black women could be a barometer for the condition of all women as well as for that of the black community. Cooper wrote, “Not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman’s lesson taught and woman’s cause won—not the white woman’s nor the black woman’s, not the red woman’s but the cause of every man and every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.”

Shortly after its founding in 1968, New York Radical Women began to splinter into other organizations. One group calling it-

self Redstockings was launched in 1969 and produced its own “Manifesto” promoting the idea that women constituted an oppressed class by virtue of their exploitation as unpaid and underpaid labor, child bearers, and sex objects. Although the “Manifesto” acknowledged differences between women, it treated these differences as impediments to overcome rather than as demonstrations of unequal power relationships. It repeats New York Radical Women’s injunction that women’s best interests are that “of the poorest, most brutally exploited woman,” but also vows to “repudiate all economic, racial, educational or status privileges that divide us from other women. We are determined to recognize and eliminate any prejudices we may hold against other women.”

Thus radical feminist groups such as Redstockings, WITCH (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), and The Feminists made antiracism an important part of their agendas, even if their analyses of race and the position of women of color was lacking. Socialist feminist groups during the same period, most notably the Women’s Liberation Union (WLU), paid more attention to racism, arguing that capitalism, racism, and patriarchy worked together to oppress women. WLU activists organized working-class women and directed their attention to basic needs of the poor, such as health care, child care, and labor organizing. And a few white feminists made significant sacrifices for the black freedom movement: Sylvia Baraldini, Marilyn Buck, and Susan Rosenberg, for example, were imprisoned for their role in assisting Assata Shakur escape from Clinton Correctional Facility in New Jersey. However, radical, socialist, and liberal feminist organizations did not attract substantial numbers of black women.

Historians explain the absence of black women in the radical feminist movement by citing black women’s distrust of white women and their commitment to autonomous black organizations. Black women also resented the way some white feminists drew analogies between white women’s plight and that of the black community. The argument that the sexism experienced by

middle-class white women was analogous to the racism experienced by black people struck many black women as absurd, particularly in light of the police and mob violence meted out to African Americans at the time. Moreover, the analogy rendered black women invisible. In 1967, a group of women within SDS issued a statement, “To Women on the Left,” warning women to “not make the same mistake the blacks did at first of allowing others (whites in their case, men in ours) to define our issues, methods, goals.” So blacks versus whites equaled women versus men; and in both cases black women’s interests were still being defined for them. Furthermore, when white women appealed to sisterhood, women of color not only cited the history of racism within the women’s rights movement but made the point that the labor of black domestics often made it possible for middle-class white women to organize. White women and women of color have often related to each other as employers and employees rather than as “sisters.”

However, it would be a mistake to accept the too common claim that black women activists rejected feminism out of hand. They simply did not separate the fight for women’s rights from issues affecting the entire black community, nor did they believe that men were necessarily the enemy. But they did confront and criticize sexism within the black freedom movement to which they were committed. Margaret Wright, an activist in the Los Angeles-based group Women Against Repression, was frequently told by male leaders in the Black Power movement that black women oppressed black men, that black women were domineering, that successful black women stripped black men of their manhood. “Black women aren’t oppressing them,” she announced in a 1970 interview. “We’re helping them get their liberation. It’s the white man who’s oppressing, not us. All we ever did was scrub floors so they could get their little selves together!” The very idea that black women kept black men down made her even more angry when she thought about the role most black women had to play in the civil rights and black liberation movements. “We run errands, lick stamps, mail letters and do the door-to-

door. But when it comes to the speaker's platform, it's all men up there blowing their souls, you dig." Indeed, black women who spoke publicly and led protests instead of running mimeograph machines were sometimes accused of doing "men's work" or undermining black manhood. Some women, like Gloria Richardson—leader of the Cambridge Non-Violent Action Movement who organized armed self-defense groups in her hometown of Cambridge, Maryland—were called "castrators" by their fellow male activists. Black women in the movement did not accept sexism without a fight, but an aggressive patriarchal culture became increasingly visible during the mid- to late 1960s.

In some respects, assertions that black women's activism "emasculated" black men were even more virulent in the mid- to late 1960s than in previous generations, prompted in part by the publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's widely circulated report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). Moynihan attributed the alleged "disorganization" and "pathology" of black families to the rise of a matriarchal culture originating on the slave plantation. The report blamed the persistence of black matriarchy, most evident in homes led by single mothers, for sexual promiscuity, crime, and poverty because it contributed to the demoralization of black men. The best way to eliminate this "crushing burden on the Negro male" is to remove young black men to "an utterly masculine world . . . away from women." (Moynihan conveniently suggested that a tour of duty in Vietnam might do the trick.) Although the report drew fire from many black activists, some black men agreed with the fundamental premise that assertive, strong black women undermined black men's authority.

The Moynihan report only fueled existing patriarchal impulses within male-led movements of the day. Black nationalists—like virtually all nationalists—tended to embrace patriarchal values, and some promoted the idea that women should contribute to the revolution by making babies and supporting their menfolk on the front lines. Undoubtedly, not all black nationalist men were hope-

lessly sexist. On the contrary, some openly challenged sexist statements, rejected talk of polygamy and mothering for the nation, and fought for real gender equality. Let us not forget that Robert L. Allen's *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, which contained a blistering critique of sexism in black nationalist movements, was published in 1969. Besides, we need to understand the problem of patriarchy and male domination as a problem for the entire New Left movement in the 1960s. White New Left male leaders were often unwilling to share leadership, adopted many of the same patriarchal attitudes as their black nationalist comrades, and frequently scoffed at the idea of women's liberation. In a word, the masculinist posturing of both the New Left and Black Power movements, the failure of many white feminist groups to grapple with racism, and the growing presence of a Third World feminist critique set the context for radical black feminism.

Rather than mourn, radical black women organized. Between 1966 and 1970, black women formed several autonomous organizations, including the Black Women's Liberation Committee of SNCC and its offspring, the Third World Women's Alliance; the Harlem-based Black Women Enraged; and the Oakland-based Black Women Organizing for Action, among others. Some of the critical discussions and debates about black women's liberation took place inside organizations one might not consider “feminist,” such as the Black Panther Party and the National Welfare Rights Organization, both founded in 1966, as well the National Domestic Workers Union, formed in 1968. Representatives from local movements around the country came together to launch the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Founded in 1973, the NBFO attracted some four hundred women to its founding convention, making it the largest independent black feminist group at that time.

They organized and they analyzed. In 1970, a brilliant young writer and English professor at New Jersey's Livingston College named Toni Cade (later Toni Cade Bambara) edited a landmark collection of essays called *The Black Woman*. It was a kind of

manifesto for black feminism, a critique of both the women's movement and male-led black politics, and a complex analysis of how gender, race, and class worked together to oppress everyone. Contributors ranged widely, from singer, composer, and activist Abbey Lincoln to a young novelist and editor by the name of Toni Morrison. The book critiqued the culture's degradation of black women and exposed how traditional ideas of masculinity not only undermined gender relations within black communities but also served as a fetter to the liberation of men and women. In other words, a politics wedded to the idea that men needed to rule women would not result in liberation for anyone. Frances Beal, a founding member of SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee and the Third World Women's Alliance, made the point eloquently in her contribution, "Double Jeopardy." She reminded readers that the liberation of black women was not mere identity politics but a struggle to eliminate all manifestations of oppression. Echoing earlier generations of black feminists, she insisted that "the exploitation of black people and women works to everyone's disadvantage. . . . The liberation of these two groups is a stepping-stone to the liberation of all oppressed people in this country and around the world." She did not call for the liberation of black women only, but for the liberation of humanity in its totality—a liberation that did not subordinate women's issues. "Unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot really be called a revolution." To achieve such a revolution meant fighting racism, capitalism, and imperialism and "changing the traditional routines that we have established as a result of living in a totally corrupting society. It means changing how you relate to your wife, your husband, your parents, and your coworkers."

Black feminist writings, in both *The Black Woman* and elsewhere (i.e., Angela Davis's pioneering 1971 essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves") extended the discussion of revolution from public institutions and the workplace to the home, the family, even the body. The exploitation of women's labor within families, sexual assault, and birth

control were among the more highly debated topics. For example, whereas many “second wave” feminists understood motherhood as inherently oppressive because it doomed (white middle-class) women to a lonely life as suburban housewives, black women were forced by economic circumstance into low-wage labor and never had the luxury of spending a lot of time with their families. Most black working women wanted more choices, more time, and more resources rather than an outright rejection of motherhood itself. Besides, black women had had a very different experience with birth control. While white women demanded greater access to contraceptives and abortion as a road to sexual freedom, black women were fighting forced sterilization and family planning policies that sought to limit black births. After World War I, the birth control movement, led by none other than the militant women’s rights activist Margaret Sanger, formed an alliance with the eugenicist movement. Together they advocated limiting fertility among the “unfit,” which included poor black people. Sanger viewed birth control as “the very pivot of civilization” and “the most constructive and necessary of the means to racial health.” Sanger, along with Dr. Clarence Gamble (the mastermind behind the massive sterilization of women in Puerto Rico in the 1950s), launched the notorious Negro Project in 1938 to promote birth control among Southern African Americans. Birth control centers were established in black communities all over the South during the 1930s; the number of black women sterilized involuntarily rose exponentially and continued to rise through the 1970s. As Dorothy Roberts writes in *Killing the Black Body*, “It was a common belief in the South that Black women were routinely sterilized without their informed consent and for no valid medical reason. Teaching hospitals performed unnecessary hysterectomies on poor Black women as practice for their medical residents. This sort of abuse was so widespread in the South that these operations came to be known as ‘Mississippi appendectomies.’”

Given the historical links between the early birth control movement and eugenics, Fran Beal was not off track when she

described family planning policies under racism as a potential road to “outright surgical genocide.” Indeed, black feminists criticized the National Abortion Rights League’s support for abortion on demand and immediate access to voluntary sterilization. The Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, an organization made up primarily of women of color, wanted guidelines that would prevent the practice of obtaining consent for sterilization during labor or immediately after childbirth, or for an abortion under the threat of losing welfare benefits. They argued that abortion or sterilization on demand did not acknowledge the class and race biases in reproductive policy, the life circumstances that compelled poor women to abort, or the long history of forced sterilization imposed on women of color.

Battling forced sterilization and racist reproductive policies was not the same as rejecting birth control. In fact, black feminists found themselves fighting on another front, this time against black male leaders who proclaimed birth control “genocide.” Some black nationalist organizations denounced contraception as a white plot to eliminate the black community, going so far as to shut down local birth control clinics. At one point, members of the Nation of Islam invaded birth control clinics and published articles in *Muhammad Speaks* accompanied by depictions of bottles of birth control pills marked with skull and crossbones, or graves of unborn black infants. A radical group of black welfare mothers from Mount Vernon, New York, led by Pat Robinson, responded to these kinds of attacks, issuing a powerful statement in 1968 accusing nationalists of ignoring the condition of poor black people. A radical social worker and former volunteer worker for Planned Parenthood, Robinson had had firsthand experience with the issue of birth control and poor black women. Their statement rejected claims that contraception was a form of genocide, arguing instead that “birth control is freedom to fight genocide of black women and children.” Unless wealth was more evenly distributed, they observed, poor women having more babies for the “race” only exacerbated their poverty. They closed with a prophetic critique of class differences within the movement: “But we don’t think you are going to understand us be-

cause you are a bunch of little middle class people and we are poor black women. The middle class never understands the poor because they always need to use them as you want to use poor black women’s children to gain power for yourself. You’ll run the black community with your kind of black power—You on top!” Indeed, for Pat Robinson and her comrades, notably Patricia Haden and Donna Middleton, a revolutionary black movement without an understanding of class struggle was worthless, and a class movement that did not consider gender and sexuality was equally worthless. In 1973 they, along with many anonymous black people, published a remarkable little book titled *Lessons from the Damned*, which attempted to provide a thorough analysis of the forces arrayed against the black poor. In a section titled “The Revolt of Poor Black Women,” they spoke eloquently of how their own families contributed to the exploitation of black women and youth. Not everything can be blamed on the Man: “Inside families and inside us we have found the seeds of fascism that the traditional left does not want to see. Fascism was no big, frightening issue for us. It was our daily life. The fascism of our parents, and our brothers and sisters, forced them to beat the hell out of us, put us out, deny us food and clothing. Finally, they cooperated with the white system’s fascism and had us put away in institutions.” Just as Grace Lee Boggs and Jimmy Boggs had long insisted that no revolution could succeed until oppressed people took responsibility for their behavior and struggled to transform themselves, Robinson, Haden, and Middleton called on black women and men in the movement to dig deep “into our class and racial experience” to understand why women and youth feel the need “to subordinate themselves to men and adults.” “We must learn,” they write, “why we have loved our chains and not wanted to throw them off. Only we, the politically conscious oppressed, can find out how we were molded, brainwashed, and literally produced like any manufactured product to plastically cooperate in our own oppression. This is *our* historical responsibility.”

Haden, Middleton, and Robinson were unequivocal in their support for revolution, but they insisted that revolution must take place on three levels: overthrowing capitalism, eliminating male

supremacy, and transforming the self. Like many of their male comrades in the black freedom movement, they praised those Third World revolutionaries who were “putting out the United States Army and capitalist investors as they did in China and Cuba.” At the same time, they were suspicious of all forms of black cultural nationalism, which they dismissed as just another “hustle.” Revolution, they argued, was supposed to usher a brand new beginning; it was driven by the power of a freed imagination, not the dead weight of the past. As they wrote in “A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women” (circa 1969): “All revolutionaries, regardless of sex, are the smashers of myths and the destroyers of illusion. They have always died and lived again to build new myths. They dare to dream of a utopia, a new kind of synthesis and equilibrium.”

Not all black feminists shared the same commitment to radical critique. In fact, the left wing of the NBFO abandoned the movement after a year because it failed to address the needs of the poor and spoke exclusively to heterosexual women. Women active in the black lesbian community had worked very hard to build an inclusive movement that addressed the needs of all—irrespective of class or sexual orientation. So in 1974 a group of radical black feminists in Boston broke with the NBFO and formed the Combahee River Collective. (The Combahee was the name of the river in South Carolina where black abolitionist Harriet Tubman led a military campaign during the Civil War—the only such campaign planned by a woman. It resulted in the emancipation of more than 750 slaves.) The women who formed the collective came from different movements in the Boston area, including the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse and the campaign to free Ella Ellison—a black woman inmate who, like Joan Little in North Carolina, was convicted of murder for killing a prison guard in self-defense. Nearly all the women had worked together to bring attention to a series of unsolved murders of black women in Boston.

In 1977, three collective members—Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier—issued “A Black Feminist State-

ment.” Because they found themselves fighting many oppressions at once—racism, sexism, capitalism, and homophobia—they regarded radical black feminism as fundamental to any truly revolutionary ideology. They understood the racial and sexual dimensions of domination, arguing that the history of white men raping black women was “a weapon of political repression.” At the same time, they rejected the idea that all men were oppressors by virtue of biology and broke with lesbian separatists who advocated a politics based on sexuality. In their view, such an analysis “completely denies any but the sexual sources of women’s oppression, negating the facts of class and race.” And while they did not see black men as enemies and called for broad solidarity to fight racism, they did acknowledge patriarchy within black communities as an evil that needed eradication. Black people as a whole, they argued, could not be truly free as long as black women were subordinate to black men.

As socialists, the collective did not believe that a nonracist, non-sexist society could be created under capitalism, but at the same time they believed that socialism was not enough to dismantle the structures of racial, gender, and sexual domination. The core of their vision was manifest in their political practice. Combahee members immediately saw connections between class, race, and gender issues by working in support of “Third World women” workers, challenging health care facilities for inadequate or unequal care, and organizing around welfare or day care issues. Although a broad vision of freedom informed the group’s work, its political positions remained flexible and subject to change. They knew that the very process of struggle, in the context of a democratic organization, would invariably produce new tactics, new strategies, and new analyses. “We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice.” Finally, as black feminist Ann Julia Cooper had suggested some eighty-five years earlier, the collective insisted that

black and Third World women's position at the bottom of the race/class/gender hierarchy put them in a unique position to see the scope of oppression and dream a new society. "We might use our position at the bottom," they asserted, "to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression."

New Knowledge, New Dreams

The Combahee River Collective's "Statement" remains one of the most important documents of the black radical movement in the twentieth century. It isn't just a brilliant text drafted by very smart black women; it is a product of a collective social movement. The black radical imagination, as I have tried to suggest throughout this book, is a collective imagination engaged in an actual movement for liberation. It is fundamentally a product of struggle, of victories and losses, crises and openings, and endless conversations circulating in a shared environment. Julia Sudbury's recent book, *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation*, gives us a brilliant example of how activists produce new knowledge and open new vistas for inquiry. She looks at black, Asian, and Arab women's organizations in England and reveals how, through their work, study, and discussion, they came to see how racism is gendered, sexism is racialized, and class differences are reproduced by capitalism and patriarchy. Through personal narratives, local interventions, and research on the impact of specific policies negatively affecting their respective communities, these activists developed new modes of analyses and formulated new, imaginative, transformative strategies. For example, Black Women for Wages for Housework challenged existing academic and policy-oriented knowledge regarding who made up the working class by arguing that children, women, and black men represented "the most comprehensive working class struggle." They saw recognition and reparations for women's unpaid labor, then, as the pri-

mary site of any global challenge to capitalism and imperialism. “Counting black and Third World people’s contribution to every economy—starting by counting women’s unwaged work—is a way of refusing racism, claiming the wealth back from military budgets, and establishing our entitlement to benefits, wages, services, housing, healthcare, an end to military-industrial pollution—not as charity but as rights and reparations owed many times.” Imagine what such a formulation could mean for the reparations movement.

Sudbury further demonstrates how seemingly local struggles extended into the international arena because many of the women in her study were immigrants with deep ties to their homelands. Working across cultural and ethnic lines introduced various women activists to many different kinds of struggles as well as more expansive solidarities. Groups like Akina Mama wa Afrika have applied their analysis of structural adjustment programs to West African women in prisons in England, while Southall Black Sisters have raised their voices against the confinement of women associated with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism on a global scale. They also published and circulated their ideas in various independent forums that fell outside, and yet profoundly shaped, formal academic institutions and circuits of knowledge. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, these activists founded the Black/Brown Women’s “Liberation Newsletter,” *Outwrite*, *Mukti* (an Asian feminist magazine), *Zami* (a black feminist bimonthly), and “We Are Here” (a short-lived black feminist newsletter). They also established publishing cooperatives and grassroots intellectual centers, such as Black Womentalk and the Afro-Caribbean Educational Project Women’s Centre.

Sudbury offers an important cautionary note about where we seek out the voices of radical black women. In England during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, rastafari women were among the most militant and vocal black activists. This may seem counterintuitive given the common assumptions circulating about the subordination of women in the rastafari culture. However, these

women were at the forefront of a new, more secularized rastafari movement that proved more enabling for women. And there are many reasons why rastafari might be attractive to women who may share the dreams of black radical feminists. Rastas, after all, promoted a vision of community that shunned materialism and artificial drugs and foods and strove for an equal and just society in which people lived in harmony with nature. And the fact that rastafari encouraged female-only spaces enabled black women to hold political discussions among themselves, allowing them to focus their attention on issues that might affect women differently or exclusively. Finally, as Sudbury points out, rastafari women also challenged what had become the dominant radical feminist paradigm, particularly around sexuality. Whereas many radical feminists fought the veiling of women and women's bodies, and encouraged free expression of sexuality, many rastafari women regarded the traditional covering of the head and body as a means to resist the sexual commodification and degradation of African women's bodies. Of course, veiling can be deeply constricting and reinforce women's subordination, but the rastafari women's explanation for embracing the practice also points to our need to have a more sophisticated understanding of how expressions of women's sexuality take place in a racist context. Once again, movements in struggle produce new knowledge and new questions.

Although we tend to associate contemporary black feminist thought with academia, some of the most radical thinkers are products of social movements. Today Angela Davis is a distinguished professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, as well as an international voice for prisoners' rights, an active supporter of social justice in all realms of life, and a leading radical black feminist theorist. Three decades earlier, Davis was the nation's most celebrated political prisoner, having served eighteen months in prison (from 1970 to 1972) for being implicated in a failed prison break from a courthouse in California, for which she was acquitted. A child of the civil rights movement, Davis grew up in a Birmingham, Alabama, neighborhood where black-owned homes were firebombed so frequently that it was nick-

named “Dynamite Hill.” She proved to be a brilliant student, completing a Ph.D. in philosophy while an active member of SNCC and later the Black Panther Party in southern California. She not only encountered sexist attitudes on the part of several male leaders, but also realized that SNCC and other Black Power organizations did not have an adequate critique of capitalism. She found such a critique in Marxism.

In 1968, she joined the CPUSA, a decision that eventually led to her dismissal from a teaching post at the University of California at Los Angeles a year later. (Although Davis won the suit, the Board of Regents eventually drove Davis out by censuring her political activism and monitoring her classes.) Davis never ceased her political work, taking up a wide range of issues from police brutality and prisoners’ rights to women’s liberation and the politics of reproduction. As a result, she produced two seminal volumes of essays that remain key texts in the development of Marxist feminism, *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) and *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1989). Much of this work examines the intersection of race, gender, and class, and the challenges to building a class-conscious, antiracist feminist movement over the past century. She also looks at the intersection of forces oppressing women, including various forms of sexual violence. Furthermore, Davis’s own prison experience and her continued work on behalf of prisoners’ rights has compelled her to embark upon a massive study of the prison-industrial complex on a global scale. Her writings on prisons have long been key texts in the world abolitionist movement. She examines the relationship between the formation of prisons and the demand for labor under capitalism and situates these developments squarely within the history of modern slavery. One of the strongest aspects of her work is her investigation into the way punishment has been racialized historically. The critical question for Davis centers on how black people have been criminalized and how this ideology has determined the denial of basic citizenship rights to black people. Since most leading theorists of prisons focus on issues such as reform, punishment, discipline, and labor under capitalism, discussions of the production of imprisoned bodies often play down or margin-

alize race. Davis not only makes race and gender central to her inquiry, but also looks at the prisons and the making of prisoners transnationally—from the prisons in socialist Cuba and the virtual dungeons of Brazil to the so-called liberal practices of the Netherlands.

The radical black feminist movement, not unlike other feminists, also redefined the source of theory. It expanded the definition of who constitutes a theorist, the voice of authority speaking for black women, to include poets, blues singers, storytellers, painters, mothers, preachers, and teachers. Black women artists are often embraced from all parts of the diaspora—Maryse Condé, Buchi Emecheta, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Jayne Cortez, June Jordan, Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, Adrian Piper, Camille Billops, Howardena Pindell, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Abbey Lincoln, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey—the list can go on for pages. Angela Davis, Michelle Gibbs, and Hazel Carby are just a few black radical feminists who have claimed black women blues singers for feminist thought. Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* demonstrates how black women blues singers created a poetics of sexual freedom and power, a politics of protest veiled beneath songs of love and loss, as well as a politics of class critical of alienated wage labor and poverty. Black blues women sang sad and lonely songs, but they also imagined a world free of low-wage, backbreaking labor and full of pleasurable leisure.

Finally, radical black feminism offers one of the most comprehensive visions of freedom I can think of, one that recognizes the deep interconnectedness of struggles around race, gender, sexuality, culture, class, and spirituality. Among other things, radical black feminists have sought to create a healthier environment for poor and working-class women and to reduce women's dependence on a capitalist and patriarchal health care system. Black radical feminists have also played critical roles in making lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual movements more visible to black communities and in teaching us how sexual iden-

tities get defined (and policed). Their opposition to compulsory heterosexuality also offers emancipatory possibilities for us all. Poets June Jordan and Cheryl Clarke have made eloquent pleas for bisexuality and lesbianism, respectively, as radical challenges to heterosexual domination. For Jordan, sexual freedom is the foundation of all other struggles for freedom:

If you can finally go to the bathroom wherever you find one, if you can finally order a cup of coffee and drink it wherever the coffee is available, but you cannot follow your heart—you cannot respect the response of your own honest body in the world—then how much of what kind of freedom does any one of us possess?

Or conversely, if your heart and your honest body can be controlled by the state, or controlled by community taboo, are you not then, and in that case, no more than a slave ruled by outside force?

Cheryl Clarke makes a bold argument both against homophobia and for women’s autonomy, self-love, and independence from men. She does not argue that all women ought to become lesbian but rather that they reject “coerced heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue. The lesbian-feminist struggles for liberation of all people from patriarchal domination through heterosexism and for the transformation of all sociopolitical structures, systems, and relationships that have been degraded and corrupted under centuries of male domination.” Furthermore, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual movements contribute to the freedom of all by challenging all claims to what is “normal.” Sexuality may be one of the few conceptual spaces we have to construct a politics of desire and to open our imagination to new ways of living and seeing.

Today’s mic-hogging, fast-talking, contentious young (and old) lefties continue to hawk little books and pamphlets on revolution, always with choice words or documents from Marx, Mao, even Malcolm. But I’ve never seen a broadside with “A Black Feminist

Statement” or even the writings of Angela Davis or June Jordan or Barbara Omolade or Flo Kennedy or Audre Lorde or bell hooks or Michelle Wallace, at least not from the groups who call themselves leftist. These women’s collective wisdom has provided the richest insights into American radicalism’s most fundamental questions: How can we build a multiracial movement? Who are the working class and what do they desire? How do we resolve the Negro Question and the Woman Question? What is freedom?

Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the Combahee River Collective, is among the radical voices that have addressed these questions. Since the heyday of the civil rights movement, she has been telling white people that fighting racism is necessary for their own survival and liberation, not some act of philanthropy to help the downtrodden Negroes of the ghetto. She has been telling black activists that fighting homophobia is their issue because the policing of sexuality, no matter to whom it is directed, affects everyone. And she has been sharply critical of lesbian and gay movements for the narrowness of their political agendas. She knows what it will take to win freedom. “As a socialist and an alert Black woman, it is clear to me that it is not possible to achieve justice, especially economic justice, and equality under capitalism because capitalism was never designed for that to be the case. . . . The assaults from the present system necessitate that most activists work for reforms, but those of us who are radicals understand that it is possible to do so at the very same time that we work for fundamental change—a revolution.”

Now there’s the *real* question: Can we all get along long enough to make a revolution? Perhaps, but history tells us that it will mean taking leadership from some very radical women of color, and if that’s the case I’m not holding my breath. What the old-guard male militants really need to do is give up the mic for a moment, listen to the victims of democracy sing their dreams of a new world, and take notes on how to fight for the freedom of all.