THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF BLACK FEMINIST THEORY AND PRAXIS

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As a theoretical construct, feminism presently has more raps than Queen Latifah and a plethora of “additives” to preserve its “freshness.” Yet, prior to contemporary scholars’ efforts to identify variations in women’s lives, feminist theory suffered from what Adrienne Rich (1978) describes as “white solipsism—to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world” (p. 299). Considering the history of racial tensions in the United States, it is not surprising that it was African American women who engendered the initial challenge to petty-bourgeois feminism by refusing to sacrifice their community needs to the demands of racist, elite, White women.

Throughout the nation’s history, African American women have struggled with White women on many political fronts. For example, in 1921, at the National Women’s Party Convention, Alice Paul received Black delegates’ complaints over disfranchisement with indifference. On another occasion, in 1970, White feminists’ reluctance to aggressively organize against the political persecution of Angela Davis continued this legacy of White women rejecting and alienating Black women. These experiences and countless others spurred Black women to shape feminist theory and praxis to include issues unique to them.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) locates four major themes in the construction of Black feminist thought, all of which are generated from a Black woman’s “standpoint” (Collins, 1989). First, Black women empower themselves by creating self-definitions and self-
valuations that enable them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of Black womanhood. Second, Black women confront and dismantle the “overarching” and “interlocking” structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression. Third, Black women intertwine intellectual thought and political activism. Finally, Black women recognize a distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination. Collins sums these four themes up by saying that Black feminism is “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39).

Thus, the historical evolution of Black feminism in the United States not only developed out of Black women’s antagonistic and dialectical engagement with White women but also out of their need to ameliorate conditions for empowerment on their own terms. This historiographical article highlights the development of Black feminism by documenting aspects of this theory as it is demonstrated in the activism of Black women, through episodical turning points in African American women’s history.

THE FIRST WAVE

The history of feminism in the United States is marked by two distinct periods or “waves.” Significantly, both waves are directly related to the struggles initiated by African Americans for freedom and equality. The first wave emerged out of the abolitionist movement and culminated with the Suffragists’ successful passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Shirley Yee (1992) details how “between 1830 and the 1860s, black women abolitionists had developed a collective feminist consciousness that reflected their particular experiences as black women as well as the aspects of sexism they shared with white women” (p. 151). “Free” and enslaved African American women created numerous strategies and tactics to dismantle slavery as a legal institution and resist racially gendered sexual abuse.
During the abolitionist movement (1830-1865), the vast majority of African American women were the legal "property" of others. Deborah Gray White (1985) documents, "Female slave bondage was not better or worse, or more or less severe, than male bondage, but it was different" (p. 89). Enslaved women were constantly confronted with sexual abuse, whereas their free counterparts had limited legal recourse against it. Primarily because of the mythical, stereotypical images surrounding Black womanhood, both free and enslaved African American women were blamed for their own victimization. The core of the myth that shrouded Black womanhood resided in the Jezebel/Mammy dichotomy. Gray White points out, "Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of Black women," whereas the "Mammy helped endorse service of black women in Southern households" (p. 61). Like their enslaved sistren, free women could not escape the harmful consequences of these myths, and as reformers, they organized against racial and sexual oppression simultaneously.

Yee (1992) avers that African American female abolitionists' collective feminist consciousness blossomed because they "campaigned for equal rights within the context of organized black abolitionism" (p. 151). Sojourner Truth, a famous 19th-century reformer, couched her sentiments in evangelical language. Truth’s narrative and recorded speech, "Ar’nt I a Woman," highlight a theological justification to abolish slavery and grant equal rights to men and women. Slave status, she preached, denied Black women motherhood, protection from exploitation, and feminine qualities—"God given rights" (Cambell, 1986). Thus, Truth’s biblically based feminism empowered Black women because she called attention to the intersection of race and gender. Her personal testimony can be interpreted as the impetus to the slogan All the men are not Black, all the women are not White, Black women exist as Black women (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982).

After the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the simmering tensions between feminists and abolitionists exploded over the issue of suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leading White feminist, wrote several letters to Wendell Phillips regarding the Fifteenth Amendment. In one of these, Stanton states, "May I ask just
one question based on the apparent opposition in which you place the negro and the woman? My question is this: Do you believe the African race is composed entirely of males?” (DuBois, 1978, p. 60). Stanton feared the obvious, that Black men would receive legal suffrage without White women; therefore, she acknowledged the existence of Black women as a last-ditch effort to save the franchise for her constituency. Stanton’s ploy was less than sincere. In fact, her willingness to manipulate Black womanhood to meet the needs of White women helped to generate the unsisterly legacy between White and Black women.

With the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, we see a distinct women’s suffrage movement that culminated in the years 1890 through 1920. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (1983) chronicles the organized participation of African American women for the right to vote. She places the activism of Black women in the historical context of Jim Crow. Legal racial segregation and the theater of violence that surrounded public lynchings kept African Americans in “their place.” Under these conditions, Terborg-Penn speculates, “It is a wonder that Afro-American women dared to dream a white man’s dream—the right to enfranchisement—especially at a time when white women attempted to exclude them from that dream” (p. 262). Aileen Kraditor (1965) points out, “Suffragists never hesitated to show that the vote for white women would give supremacy to the entire white race” (p. 114). Paula Giddings (1984) and political activist Angela Y. Davis (1982) both agree that like White men, many White women wanted the power of the vote—exclusively for themselves.

Yet, African American women refused to desert the suffrage cause. They organized in suffrage clubs and voters’ leagues and participated at rallies. Noted Black club women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell rallied with fervency for the vote. In 1910, Barnett wrote, “The Negro has been given separate and inferior schools, because he has no ballot” (Wells-Barnett, 1990, p. 269). They both believed that Black women needed the vote even more than their White counterparts because it would enable them to protect their inalienable rights and improve their schools and conditions as wage laborers.
Terrell and Barnett’s feminism moved beyond Truth’s theological teachings into a Jim Crow milieu. Terrell believed that the advancement of African Americans depended on “uplifting” Black womanhood. Yet too often, Black club women tainted their myriad of uplifting activities with condescending middle-class values and ideas. For example, Terrell encouraged Black middle-class women to assist and morally “elevate” the masses because society “judged” the “womanhood of our people” through them. Barnett, on the other hand, challenged the myth that all White women were chaste, all Black women were without virtue, and all Black men were rapists by unleashing a massive international campaign against lynching. She documented the economic realities of lynching victims, the possibility that a White woman could be attracted to a Black man, and finally the fact that Black women were violated and abused at alarming rates. Barnett advocated self-help activities, but she also fought against Jim Crow facilities with economic boycotts and was not above armed resistance.

After the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, African American women tried to cast their votes. Unfortunately, they were met with hostility, not only at the polls but at the National Women’s Party (NWP) Convention. At the 1921 NWP Convention, a delegation of 60 African American women representing 14 states requested an interview with Alice Paul, leader of the NWP, to take up the question of Black women’s disenfranchisement. The Black women were allowed to present their appeal to Paul but not to the convention delegates. Journalist Freda Kirchwey (1921) reported in The Nation that the African American women sought to have the NWP appoint a special committee to investigate violations in the 1920 election. Kirchwey went on to state, “Miss Paul was indifferent to this appeal and resented the presence of the delegation” (pp. 332-333). Paul and other White leaders “repeatedly explained to inquiring delegates that in Georgia, Florida and Mississippi Colored women are not politically worse off than Colored men” (Kelley, 1921, 827).

In general, African American women activists were often abandoned by White suffragists. Nevertheless, they were still active participants in major civil rights organizations, such as the National
Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and they created new organizations such as the National Association of Wage Earners, founded by Nannie Burroughs, to publicize the plight of Black working women. African American women also continued to support church groups and community improvement organizations of all types.

THE SECOND WAVE

African American women’s collective Black feminist consciousness evolved during the second wave of feminism. Just as the first wave was connected to the abolitionist movement, the second wave of feminism was linked to the modern civil rights movement (which is often dated from the 1954 Magna Carta Supreme Court decision, known as Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965) and the enforcement, during the 1970s, of Title VII and Title XI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Despite the fact that the most celebrated leaders of the modern civil rights movement were men, African American women participated at every stage in the struggle for justice and equality.

In 1955, JoAnn Robinson and the Women’s Political Council organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott that catapulted Martin Luther King, Jr., into the leadership position of the nonviolent movement. Ella Baker, former field secretary for the NAACP and interim director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), organized college students in 1960 into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Under the guidance of Baker, SNCC activists ushered in the nonviolent, direct action phase of the movement in the 1960s. Students initiated sit-ins and freedom rides to expose racial segregation and the violence used by Whites to maintain separate and unequal facilities. As the movement grew in numbers and expanded regionally, it served as a political training ground for many Black and White women who would later participate in the second wave of feminism, the women’s liberation movement.
The women’s liberation movement is historically connected with freedom summer of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1964—Title VII—and the rise of Black Power. Sara Evans (1979) documents that during freedom summer, African American women received their share of beatings and incarcerations, but back at the headquarters—the ‘freedom house’—they still, along with white women, did the housework; in the offices they typed, and when the media sought a public spokesperson they took a back seat. (p. 83)

The most common response by African American women, in dealing with the sexism of their men, was to hold individuals who inflicted pain on them personally accountable. Ella Baker struggled with Baptist ministers in SCLC, whereas Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson and other SNCC women personally asserted themselves and refused to be manipulated under the guise “for the struggle.” Toni Cade Bambara (1970) articulates what many African American women understood: “Racism and chauvinism are anti-people. And a man cannot be politically correct and a chauvinist too” (p. 107). Historical documentation of a collective response by African American women to the chauvinism of the nonviolent, direct-action stage of the movement is scarce. In fact, the most familiar document detailing sex discrimination, “SNCC Position Paper (Women in the Movement),” was written by White women but presented by Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson at the Waveland, Mississippi, staff retreat in November 1964 (Evans, 1979). The position paper evidences 11 examples of sex discrimination that clearly expose gender bias in terms of administrative duties and leadership positions. However, it is important to acknowledge Paula Giddings’s (1984) assertion that the “influence” of African American women “was actually increasing at the time” of the SNCC Position Paper, and “it was White women who were being relegated to minor responsibilities, in part because of indiscriminate sexual behavior” (p. 302).

Many scholars identify this period as a major turning point for both White and Black female activists. It is argued that as gender and race took on particular forms, Black women were forced to choose between pledging membership to a movement against
racism or chauvinism. In reality, this period was far more complicated because political and personal politics meshed into a powder keg.

Romantic and sexual interaction between White women and Black men was infamous during freedom summer, and the majority of White activists who stayed in Mississippi thereafter were women. Often, White women found themselves in a no-win, “sex-test” situation. If a White woman accepted a relationship with a Black man, she could be labeled “loose.” But if she “spurned” a Black man, she could be tagged racist. Sara Evans (1979) suggests that Black women were “deeply resentful of the attraction of white women to black men” and vice versa” (p. 88). But Doug McAdam (1988) is correct to point out that African American women were not simply experiencing “sexual jealousy” but “feared political usurpation” (p. 124). African American women had struggled to guide SNCC in copartnership with men, and these relationships granted White women “unique access” to Black male leaders. Vivian Gordan (1987) warned that Black male leaders should “recognize the extent to which they often extend to White women in political coalitions and show themselves to be insensitive to Black women” (p. 12) The already complicated relationships between Black women and men were exacerbated under these circumstances.

Overall, Black and White women both reported chauvinistic behavior among their Black male comrades, but the roots of their oppression lay in different realms. Black women were haunted by the myths of domineering, emasculating females. Conversely, White women were perceived as the “forbidden fruit” at last, “available” for the taking. And, although Black women clearly had issues with male chauvinism, they could not abandon the civil rights struggle.

As early as 1965, White women began to transfer their participation from SNCC into the predominately White, upper-middle-class Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). But the sexism that White women encountered in SDS was far more humiliating than anything they experienced in SNCC. At the same time that young White women were struggling to find their place in the movement,
professional White women, many of whom were members the President’s Commission on the Status of Women established in 1961, reasoned that the only way to become a part of the system was to create a civil rights lobbying group. They believed that they needed an “NAACP for women,” an organization that would pressure government officials to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was initially perceived as a major piece of protective legislation. Unlike the abolitionist movement and the first wave of feminism, political demonstrations against the federal and state governments in the 1960s were televised internationally. During the Cold War, government officials had a hard time positioning the United States as the home of democracy in light of the struggles initiated by African Americans for political and civil rights. Within this international context, legislative concessions had to be made. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 stipulated that the attorney general had to protect citizens against discrimination in voting, education, and public accommodations. In addition, an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was established to enforce Title VII (effective 2 July 1965) of the act, which prohibited discrimination in employment based on sex. The Title VII sex clause theoretically gave all women a legal basis to transform their issues into a structured agenda for a new liberation movement. Thus, in October 1966, Betty Friedan and two Black women—Aileen Hernandez and Pauli Murray—along with a couple dozen influential professional women formed the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Friedan was elected as the first president of NOW, and the early member’s access to the media created the illusion of a large organization. Jo Freeman (1975) notes that NOW was composed of very “high powered women” who lacked “patience for the slow, unglamorous, and tedious work of putting together a mass organization” (p. 56). It took younger White women, many of whom were refugees of SNCC and SDS, to actually ignite a movement. By 1968, NOW was functioning as a pressure group and had won a major suit against the EEOC to comply with Title VII and prohibit newspaper publishers from printing separate want-ad columns for
men and women. The younger women who named their movement “women’s liberation” flooded the media with topics such as beauty standards, birth control, and abortion rights. One of the first women’s liberation demonstrations occurred at the 1968 Miss America Pageant. White women protested the pageant by throwing bras, “high-heeled shoes, and other instruments of torture into a freedom trash can” (Albert & Albert, pp. 47-48). They blitzed the nation about the oppression they experienced because traditional institutions (family, church, state) objectified them and stifled their liberation. In sum, White women followed the tradition of their foremothers by “developing their feminism” in a movement to rid the country of legal and/or racial injustices and ultimately created organizations endemic to their needs as White, economically elite, professional women.

The majority of African American women did not have the privilege of disavowing participation in a movement against racism. The assassination of Malcolm X (in 1965) and the numerous murders of lesser known African Americans, along with urban rebellions, kept Black women activists overburdened. As African Americans struggled against a vehement White backlash, primarily because of the enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the movement transformed into another stage, Black Power.

Black Power shifted the tide of the movement toward a nationalist trend. During the summer of 1966, at the Meredith March in Mississippi, Willie Ricks induced Stokley Carmichael to plug the slogan “Black Power.” Racial tensions were already evident in SNCC, and with the formation of Black nationalist organizations, and particularly the Black Panther Party, the remaining White women and men found their position in the movement precarious. Also, the Vietnam War gave many White activists a new cause to protest. Finally, with the passage of the Voting Right’s Act of 1966, many mainstream activists believed that the political and civil rights demand for justice had been met.

The Black Power nationalist shift had a profound impact on Black feminists. Cynthia Enloe (1989) has explored women’s relationship’s to nationalist movements internationally. Enloe observes that nationalism, as an ideology, “has a vision that includes women,
for no nation can survive without culture being transmitted and children being born and nurtured” (p. 61). Nevertheless, despite the fact that women too have suffered under colonialism and racism, they are often “treated more as symbols than as active participants” by men in revolutionary movements (p. 42). Enloe goes on to elaborate that women are frequently urged to fulfill the roles of “ego-stroking girlfriend, stoic wife or nurturing mother” (p. 62). These traditional “helpmate” roles are nonthreatening to male nationalists; thus, women who identify themselves as feminist have an “uneasy” relationship with male activists.

The Black Panther Party was the most powerful nationalist organization. Initially, the party’s members were predominately male. Female membership increased with the Free Huey Newton campaign in 1967. Women in the party had multiple roles, and their experiences varied: Assata Shakur’s (1987) Assata and Elaine Brown’s (1992) A Taste of Power, for example, paint different pictures of party membership. However, both discuss the recurring notion that Black Power, as practiced by too many African American men, entitled them to “masculine prerogatives.” Shakur claims that women were the real workers in the community-based breakfast programs, and Brown details slave-like beatings and other sexist power plays between men and women. Kathleen Cleaver (1971) claims, “The egos of the men involved” in the party distorted their “objectivity.” For example, Cleaver’s “suggestions” might not be implemented because “the fact that the suggestion came from a woman gave it lesser value” (pp. 55-56). Some Panther women, such as Judy Hart (1967), internalized the notion that they should develop “a womanhood in which her man and thus his commitment becomes the essence of her life. He moves from the periphery to the center” (p. 14). Others continually struggled individually to expose the counter revolutionary nature of male dominance.

Despite the complex chauvinistic attitude of many Black men, Black women fought with them for empowerment, and the 1968 election of Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman in Congress, was an example of their collective efforts. Nevertheless, the rising sexism in the Black Power movement compelled many African American women to move from individually holding culprits
accountable to collective activism against chauvinism. Many organized into separate women’s organizations and met in “consciousness raising” groups. Clayborne Carson (1981) documents that the only successful SNCC project after 1968 was the Black Women’s Liberation Committee, renamed in 1970 the Third World Women’s Alliance, under Frances Beal.

With Beal as the New York City Coordinator, the alliance of about 200 members expanded beyond SNCC activists, successfully organizing educational programs and study groups. Beal’s (1970) essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” exemplified the focus of the alliance as both a think tank and action group against counterrevolutionary institutions. Beal wrote, “Each individual must develop a high-political consciousness in order to understand how this system enslaves us all and what actions we must take to bring about its total destruction” (p. 100). Beal also urged, “Those who consider themselves to be revolutionaries must begin to deal with other revolutionaries as equals. And so far as I know, revolutionaries are not determined by sex” (p. 100). Beal placed Black male chauvinism in the context of America’s definitions of manhood and femininity. Because of capitalism, a “real man” has material wealth and a “real woman” is “simply a sex role.” And, although she extols Black male leadership in the Black Power struggle, she cautions them to rethink the idea “that Black women have somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to [his] emasculation” (p. 92).

But the alliance went beyond theorizing, as Beal (1970) advocated armed struggle to bring about a socialist society. She warned,

> Unless Black men who are preparing themselves for armed struggle understand that the society which we are trying to create is one in which the oppression of all members of that society is eliminated, then the revolution would have failed in its avowed purpose. (p. 100).

The alliance eventually became a meeting point of confrontation between White and Black women. As a protest organization, the alliance participated in the “Liberation Day” parade, celebrating the Nineteenth Amendment on August 26, 1970. Beal saw this
large media event as a way of exposing the alliance to other women. Alliance members "had signs reading 'Hands Off Angela Davis,'" but Beal claims, "One of the leaders of NOW ran up to us and said angrily, 'Angela Davis has nothing to do with women's liberation'" (Hunter, 1970, 60).³ Beal retorted, "It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you're talking about, but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we're talking about" (Hunter, 1970, 60). Beal reasoned that the "White women's movement" was not homogeneous yet: "Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black woman's struggle" (p. 98).

Another point of departure between Black and White women culminated around the issue of welfare. African American women also organized themselves in 1967 into a National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Although there were local welfare groups throughout the country prior to 1967, George Wiley, an African American antipoverty activist, believed that Black women needed a national organization to end poverty. NWRO members pushed the movement from civil rights to economic entitlement, and linked the welfare issue to women's work.

NWRO members were activists who marched to a different drummer. The vast majority of the women had not participated in the movement prior to their membership in NWRO. Most of them were initially ashamed of being on welfare and lived in fear of being disqualified. Nick and Mary Lynn Kotz (1977) detail how welfare detectives "would go in the dirty clothes hampers ... look in the refrigerator ... wake up kids with flashlights ... look for men, full-grown men" (pp. 220-221). The welfare system had been set up to dehumanize women and their children, but by the late 1960s, these women were courageous enough to join a movement critiquing the federal government. Although the majority of welfare recipients were White women, these Black single mothers with little formal education believed that the government had a responsibility to them and that they had the right to protest to change conditions.

Johnnie Tillmon (1972) organized the first welfare rights group in Watts, Los Angeles, in 1963 and served as the first chairwoman
of the NWRO. Tillmon eloquently details how women on welfare were devalued as "less" than "human beings." Tillmon says, "There are a lot of other lies that male society tells about welfare mothers; that AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) mothers are immoral, that AFDC mothers are lazy, misuse their welfare checks, spend it all on booze and are stupid and incompetent" (p. 16). Tillmon refutes the belief that "AFDC mothers keep on having kids just to get a bigger welfare check.... Having babies for profit is a lie that only men could make up, and only men could believe" (pp. 15-16). She concluded, "If people are willing to believe these lies, it's partly because they're just special versions of the lies that society tells about all women" (p. 16).

The NWRO pressured state agencies and the federal government to reform AFDC. The NWRO leaders informed welfare recipients of their rights regarding evictions and violations by detectives and social workers. They demanded higher welfare benefits and an end to humiliating service. The successes of NWRO propelled Martin Luther King, Jr., to enlist their support for his Poor People's Campaign (1968).

When President Nixon responded to the activism by NWRO members in 1969 with the poorly conceived Family Assistance Plan (FAP), NWRO successfully organized to remove the restrictive eligibility rules for AFDC. Their efforts increased the numbers of single mothers of all races eligible to receive welfare benefits. In fact, Teresa Amott and Julie Matteai (1991) document that the numbers "increased by 50% between 1970 and 1973" (p. 178). However, because welfare was politically unpopular, many middle-class activists did not see this increase as a victory. They preferred to concentrate on white-collar employment when the masses of women were struggling to make ends meet.

It was clear to the members of NWRO that the ability to earn a living above the poverty line was the key to empowerment under capitalism. The NWRO members, however, were not able to fend off the repressive Republican climate under Nixon, and by the end of 1973, membership had been reduced drastically. Nevertheless, NWRO members had expanded what counted as a woman's issue.
It was not just a matter of eliminating sex discrimination in white-collar employment but one of eliminating poverty.

Black feminist activism during the second wave was similar to that of their foremothers in that they continued to negotiate their activism in what was perceived to be two movements (Black Revolution and Women's liberation) by most but one struggle for them. Shirley Chisholm (1971) remarked, “White women must realize that black people in America are not yet free” (p. 19). Chisholm believed that the conditions were different for Black and White women; therefore, the tactics employed to remove chauvinism would differ, but “the goal can be the same” because “all discrimination is eventually the same thing—anti-humanism” (p. 21).

In August 1973, a cadre of African American women founded the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) to address their multiple concerns. Margaret Sloan is quoted in Off Our Backs Women's News Journal (1974) as saying, “We were just thirty little colored sisters calling ourselves a national organization,” but after a single press conference, the NBFO received hundreds of calls and letters from all over the country inquiring about how to join and form local chapters. Some wrote notes such as “Dear NBFO, thank you for being” (p. 2).

In November, 1973, NBFO sponsored its first Conference. At least 250 women were in attendance from all over the country. These women envisioned a multipurpose organization that would address an array of issues, including the following: child care, employment, lesbianism, sexuality, welfare, media image, addiction, incarceration, and the relation of Black women to one another and to the women's movement. Some White women attended and afterward wrote, Off Our Backs (1974) that their presence at the first conference clarified to them that “the coalitions we, as white women, want and need with black women will be hard coming unless we prove we’re not racist” (p. 1). During the first wave of feminism, Black women had negotiated with racist White women, but the second wave required nonracist entry tickets. White women—and all men—were not admitted into the workshops, but all had access to the large assembly.
Unfortunately, after the conference, the NBFO did not have a far-reaching impact for several reasons. First, African American women had to deal with many variables in their lives, and they were not able to generate a powerful political movement around a few issues the way NOW could. Second, the “visual” membership of NOW and “women’s libbers,” combined with their agenda, substantiated many Black women’s belief that anything associated with feminism was advantageous only to White women. Toni Morrison (1971) writes,

It is a source of amusement even now to black women to listen to feminists talk of liberation while somebody’s nice black grandmother shoulders the daily responsibility of child rearing and floor mopping and the liberated one comes home to examine the housekeeping, correct it, and be entertained by the children. If Women’s Lib needs those grandmothers to thrive, it has a serious flaw. (p. 64)

African American women did not have the choice, and choice is the key, to be liberated from the “kitchen.” The economic realities of most African American women dictated that they had to work outside the home. And her underpaid, too often exploited labor power provided the means to liberate White women. Nevertheless, small clusters of Black women continued to put pressure on NOW’s leadership to shape its agenda to include issues important to “women of color” and poor White women.

The most pronounced group of Black women that continued to struggle in a collective fashion around feminist issues were largely lesbians. Their identity as lesbians made them more aware of heterosexuality as an institution and the need to critique patriarchy. African American women mobilized around homophobic issues during this period, when many in the Black community were condemning homosexuality as immoral. Reactionary moral judgments were used to degrade lesbian lifestyles as “dens of iniquity.” In 1977, the Combahee River Collective (1983) issued an important statement as Black feminists and lesbians defining their political commitment to dismantling “interlocking” racial, sexual, and economic oppression. These women, along with other Black lesbian groups, such as the Salsa Soul Sisters, believed that it was essential
to “demonstrate the reality” of their “politics to other Black women.” They envisioned organizing other Black feminists and lesbians by “writing and distributing their work” (p. 280). By the early 1980s, their efforts, combined with those of other writers’ collectives, had fostered a profound public discourse about Black women and feminist theory.

The 1980s was an important decade in which Black women writers and literary critics theorized about gender in historical and contemporary contexts. bell hooks’s (1984) scholarship represented a shift in Black feminism because she charged that “personal experience” could “not take the place of theory.” hooks recognized the significance of feminists such as Sojourner Truth, whose personal testimonies “validated” the need for a movement. Yet, hooks encouraged Black women to develop a theoretical framework to evaluate strategies and to challenge and change structures of domination, thus creating a “liberatory feminist theory and praxis” (p. 30).

The end of the Black Power stage of the movement is important for the resurgence of feminism in the 1990s. Although there were many shortcomings in revolutionary organizations such as the Black Panther Party, they must be credited for pushing the federal government beyond the Voting Right’s Act of 1965 to affirmative action. These revolutionaries theorized that the oppression of African Americans was a result not only of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow but also of institutionalized racism, and their theory led to activism.

hooks and West (1991) indicate that in “the space between the sixties and the nineties, we see a weakening of political solidarity between black men and women” (p. 9). hooks charges us to “create a liberatory theory and analysis” and learn to appreciate and treasure what “Black men and women can give one another” (p. 19). One of the ways to create a “liberatory theory” is to implement Toni Cade Bambara’s advice on how to build nonsexist coalitions among African Americans. “It’s through the fashioning of new relationships that we will obliterate the corrosive system of dominance, manipulation, exploitation” (p. 164). If a Black feminist mindset
were to saturate the Black community, male and female relationships would drastically change for the better.

Black feminism has withstood the test of time and continues to be an impressive political paradigm. African American women’s multilayered activism gives meaning to Black feminist theory. Whether it be Sojourner Truth’s much quoted speech “Ain’t I a Woman?,” Johnnie Tillmon’s leadership of the NWRO, or bell hooks’s prolific feminist scholarship, African American women have aggressively shaped feminist theory and praxis to include issues unique to them. Holding on to Black feminism is a way of protecting a progressive political agenda. Black feminism may conjure up the racist history of White women, but it must also be identified with the glorious tradition of Black female activists’ trenchant commitment to empowering themselves to create a humanistic community.

NOTES

1. The Black woman’s “standpoint” recognizes the multitude of Black women’s experiences; nevertheless, “Black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offer a different view of material reality than that available to other groups” (Collins, 1989, pp. 746-747).

2. Nancy Cott (1984) reports that the National Women’s Party (NWP), as a group, feared that Black women as a group represented “racial” and not “feminist” intent. Alice Paul remarked, “always as a general policy all issues outside of the suffrage amendment” were not addressed (p. 71).

3. Angela Davis was the first Black woman on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List. The guns used by Jonathan Jackson and others to kidnap a judge and jurors during the trial of political prisoner, James McClain, were allegedly registered to Davis. Jackson and the judge were killed, and although Davis was not at the shooting, she was accused as part of the conspiracy.

4. Family Assistance Program (FAP) was introduced on August 9, 1969, under the Nixon administration to overhaul the welfare system, especially AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). FAP would eliminate food stamps, and recipients would receive only $1,600 a year (family of four) in benefits, despite the fact that the Bureau of Labor of Statistics for 1969 stipulated that the poverty line was at $5,500 a year (family of four). Also, recipients would be required to work below the minimum wage or take job training. On October 17, 1972, Congress finally voted against FAP.
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