
Words of
F I R E

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
African-American Feminist Thought

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And finally I want to remember my own mother—the first feminist I ever knew. She encouraged me to live freely, be independent, sit on my own bottom, develop my intellect, treasure friendships with women, and recognize a good man when I saw one.

②

Introduction

THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

... black women both shape the world and are shaped by it. ... [they] create their own black feminist theory. They come to feminist theory and practice out of the oppression they experience as people who are poor and black and women. ... black feminism has evolved historically over centuries, outside traditional white feminine roles, white social institutions, and white feminist cultural theory.

—KESHO YVONNE SCOTT, *The Habit of Surviving*

The struggle for black women's liberation that began to emerge in the mid-1960s is a continuation of both intellectual and activist traditions whose seeds were sown during slavery and flowered during the antislavery fervor of the 1830s. When a small group of free black "feminist-abolitionists" in the North surfaced during the early nineteenth century, among whom were Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances E. W. Harper, the history of African American feminism began.¹ Their involvement in abolitionist and other reform movements as lecturers, writers, and journalists—traditionally male domains—met with resistance and violated the Victorian ethic of "true womanhood," which stressed piety, chastity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter, 151).*

The argument that African American women confront both a "woman question and a race problem" (Cooper, 134) captures the essence of black feminist thought in the nineteenth century and would reverberate among intellectuals, journalists, activists, writers, educators, artists, and community leaders, both male and female, for generations. While feminist perspectives have been a persistent and important component of the African American literary and intellectual traditions for generations, scholars have focused primarily on its racial overtones.² This tendency to ignore long years of

* Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 151.

political struggle aimed at eradicating the multiple oppressions that black women experience resulted in erroneous notions about the relevance of feminism to the black community during the second wave of the women's movement. Rewriting black history using gender as one category of analysis should render obsolete the notion that feminist thinking is alien to African American women or that they have been misguided imitators of white women. An analysis of the feminist activism of black women also suggests the necessity of reconceptualizing women's issues to include poverty, racism, imperialism, lynching, welfare, economic exploitation, sterilization abuse, decent housing, and a host of other concerns that generations of black women foregrounded.

While black feminism is not a monolithic, static ideology, and there is considerable diversity among African American feminists, certain premises are constant: 1) Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources; 2) This "triple jeopardy" has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men; 3) Black women must struggle for black liberation *and* gender equality simultaneously; 4) There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other "isms" which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism; 5) Black women's commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.

Discussions about the evolution of feminist consciousness³ among African American women usually begin with abolitionist Sojourner Truth (less often with abolitionist Maria Stewart), since the catalyst for the emergence of women's rights in the mid-nineteenth century was the movement to eradicate slavery. There is certainly little disagreement among historians about the link between women's rights and abolition: "It was in the abolition movement that women first learned to organize, to hold public meetings, to conduct petition campaigns. For a quarter of a century the two movements, to free the slave and liberate the woman, nourished and strengthened one another" (Flexner, 41).

It was the horrendous circumstances that enslaved African women endured since 1619, not the abolition movement, that inspired their first yearnings for freedom and rebellious spirit. They resisted beatings, involuntary breeding, sexual exploitation by white masters, family separation, debilitating work schedules, bad living conditions, and even bringing into the world children who would be slaves. A few of their life stories called attention to the peculiar plight of black women and their strategies for resistance.⁴ In her antebellum autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861), Harriet Jacobs publicized her sexual

vulnerability and stated unequivocally that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (Yellin, 77). Covert use of contraceptives, the practice of abortion, and desperate attempts to control the fate of their children, including occasionally infanticide, provided some slave women a measure of control over their bodies and their reproductive capacity. The most well-documented case of infanticide concerns Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in Kentucky in 1856, and during her capture in Cincinnati killed her baby daughter rather than have her returned to her master. This saga inspired Toni Morrison's award-winning novel, *Beloved*, which was published in 1987.

Manifestations of black women's race and gender consciousness are also found in the single-sex, self-help organizations which free Northern black women formed in the early 1800s because it was difficult for them to become leaders in organizations with black men, or because they were denied membership in white women's groups. It was also easier for black women to attend to their own political, cultural, and intellectual agendas with the establishment of separate literary, debating, abolitionist, or other reform organizations. Located primarily in the northeast, one of the earliest of these organizations was the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston, founded in 1831. In 1832, free women of color were also responsible for organizing the first female abolitionist group, the Salem Massachusetts Female Antislavery Society, a year before the founding in Philadelphia of the all-male American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS), the most prominent abolitionist organization. The racially mixed Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, also founded in 1833, emerged because the AAS prohibited female membership. Though ignored by historians attempting to document the development of feminism in the mid-nineteenth century, black women's self-help, abolitionist, and other reform activities also contributed to a climate of discontent which foreshadowed the historic women's rights gathering at Seneca Falls in 1848.

In 1832, Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), a free black from Connecticut with abolitionist and feminist impulses, delivered four public lectures in Boston, the first one before the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society. She was probably the first black woman to speak publicly in defense of women's rights, though she is remembered primarily as the first American-born woman of any race to lecture publicly about political matters to racially mixed audiences of women and men. Though she spoke on a variety of issues relevant to the black community—literacy, abolition, economic empowerment, and racial unity—she admonished black women in particular to break free from stifling gender definitions and reach their fullest potential by pursuing formal education and careers, especially teach-

ing, outside the home. She was also adamant that black women assume leadership roles. These were all familiar themes in what we now label a black feminist agenda during the nineteenth century. Passionate in her defense of black womanhood, she queried: "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? . . . Possess the spirit of independence. . . Sue for your rights and privileges" (Richardson, 38).

Discouraged by criticism from black men about her inappropriate female behavior (political activism and lecturing in public), Stewart left the lecture circuit a year later in 1833, but not without defending womanhood in the most glowing terms by alluding to historical and biblical precedents of women leaders and scholars. She also warned against a paradoxical problem which would plague the black community for generations—preaching against prejudice in the white community but being discriminatory in its own backyard.

During the 1830s and 1840s, other American women, like Stewart, began lecturing against slavery and discovered that they had to defend their right to speak in public, which motivated them to demand their own emancipation. In 1840, the mostly white male American delegates to the World's Anti-Slavery Convention arrived in London to find the women delegates among them excluded from participation. While seated in the gallery behind a curtain with the rest of the women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott felt the striking similarity between themselves, as white women, and black slaves, a common theme in early white feminist discourse. During ten frustrating days, they became friends and agreed to hold a women's right convention on their return to America. Eight years later, the Seneca Falls convention, most of whose participants were white female abolitionists, was held in New York; this convention signaled the beginning of the United States women's movement. Frederick Douglass, prominent abolitionist and women's rights advocate, was the lone black in attendance.

While Frederick Douglass believed the antislavery movement was helping to empower women, he understood the need for an independent, organized movement to achieve equal rights for women. On July 14, 1848, his *North Star* carried the announcement of the Seneca Falls Convention. A constant reminder to readers of his commitment to the rights of women was the newspaper's slogan—"Right is of No Sex." At Seneca Falls, when it appeared that Elizabeth Cady Stanton's resolution for woman suffrage was headed for defeat, Douglass at a critical juncture asked for the floor and delivered an eloquent plea on behalf of women's suffrage. The resolution was then put to vote and carried by a small margin.

Serious involvement on the part of black women in the "first-wave" women's rights movement is manifest in the life of Sojourner Truth, the

most revered black feminist-abolitionist. Though she could neither read nor write, we know of the details of her life because she dictated her autobiography to a friend. Truth, whose slave name was Isabella, was born around 1773, having been brought as a child with her parents from Africa and sold as a slave in the state of New York. At age nine, she was sold away from her parents to John Nealy for \$100 and sold twice more before she was twelve years old. Her last master, John Dumont, raped her, and later married her to an older slave, Thomas, by whom she had several children. Although slavery was ended by law in New York in 1817, her master delayed her emancipation; she was finally freed by another master in 1827. For a number of years she worked in New York City as a domestic, the major source of work for black women in the North during this period. Feeling called by God, she left New York in 1843, abandoned her slave name, Isabella, became an itinerant preacher, and attended many antislavery gatherings.

In 1850, she attended the second women's right convention in Salem, Ohio (as did Douglass), and spoke at the third women's rights convention, in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her legendary, but now controversial, "Ain't I a Woman" speech, delivered at the Akron, Ohio, women's rights convention in 1851, is an eloquent statement of black feminist thought because of the implicit links it makes between race and gender in the lives of black women. Truth also reminds her audience that poor black women, whose experiences are radically different from those of white women, must be considered in notions about womanhood.⁵

In 1866, following the Civil War, Douglass and Charles Remond were among the vice presidents chosen for the newly formed Equal Rights Association (ERA) after the American Anti-Slavery Society disbanded. Later in the year at an Albany meeting, Douglass warned the ERA that it was in danger of becoming a women's right association only. At the first annual meeting of the ERA in 1867, Sojourner Truth addressed women's rights again, but worried that the freedom of black men was getting more attention than black women's liberation. Two years later, a major split occurred in the women's movement over woman suffrage. At the proceedings of the ERA meeting in New York in 1869, the famous debate between Frederick Douglass and white feminists occurred during which he argued for the greater urgency of race over gender. He believed it was the Negro's hour, and women's rights could wait since linking woman suffrage to Negro suffrage at this point would seriously reduce the chances of securing the ballot for black men, and for black (males), Douglass reiterated, the ballot was urgent. When asked whether this was true for black women as well, he quickly responded, "Yes, yes, yes . . . but not because she is a woman, but because she is black (Foner, 87)." Frances E. W. Harper, a prominent black feminist-abolitionist, supported Douglass, while Sojourner

68 yrs?
old

Truth supported white suffragists, believing that if black men got the vote they would dominate black women.

Following this meeting, Stanton and Anthony organized the women-only National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) because they believed male leaders had betrayed their interests. In 1869 in Cleveland, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was organized with Lucy Stone as chair. By the fall of 1873, even though the Fifteenth Amendment granted black male suffrage and excluded women from voting, white women were anxious to reconcile their differences with Douglass. Peace was finally restored with black abolitionists at the 1876 convention of NWSA, during which Douglass was told that he was needed in the continuing struggle for women's rights. Though he was still somewhat bitter about the racism which surfaced during the battle over the Fifteenth Amendment, he announced that he was willing to work for women's emancipation and became a familiar figure at women's rights conventions again.

An examination of the extraordinary saga of black women journalists during this period provides another perspective on their feminist vision. Mary Shadd Cary (1823–1893), born in Delaware to abolitionist parents, was the first black female newspaper editor in North America. Her pioneering publishing efforts in the 1850s mark the beginning of black women's leadership roles in the male-dominated field of journalism. She migrated to Canada with her brother after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and a year later solicited the help of Samuel Ringgold Ward, abolitionist and fugitive slave, in the founding of their own abolitionist newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, which would also be a publishing outlet for other black women whom she encouraged to write. Its motto was "Self-Reliance Is the True Road to Independence" which was consistent with her ideas about black female empowerment.

After the death of her husband, she returned to the United States in 1863, started a school for black children in Washington, D.C., and joined the antislavery lecture circuit. She also became the first black woman lawyer in the United States, graduating from Howard Law School in 1870. In 1880, she founded the Colored Women's Progressive Franchise Association in Washington, D.C., one of the earliest women's rights organizations for African American women. Though gaining suffrage for black women was the major objective, the Association's twenty-point agenda included broadening occupations for black women and establishing newspapers that black women would control.

The black women's club movement, which emerged on the national level in the 1890s as did white women's clubs, must be reconceptualized as a manifestation of middle-class black women's race and gender obligations, though scholars locate it primarily within the context of self-help and racial uplift. During the 1870s, middle-class white women, freed from the

drudgery of housework because of advances in technology, the availability of immigrant domestics, and access to education and leisure, organized clubs for themselves for the purpose of self- and community improvement. Sorosis and the New England Women's Club were among the first of these local organizations, but they quickly proliferated throughout the country, and by 1890 the largely white General Federation of Women's Clubs was founded as an umbrella entity. Black women's clubs emerged not only because white women's clubs prohibited their membership, except in New England, but because they had a unique set of issues—defending black womanhood, uplifting the masses, and improving family life, to name a few.

Five years after the General Federation of Women's Clubs was organized, the first national convention of black women's clubs took place in Boston in 1895. The specific catalyst was a letter that Florence Belgarnie, an officer of the Anti-Lynching Committee in London, received from John Jacks, an American newspaper editor. Angry over Belgarnie's antilynching activities, which had been encouraged by Ida Wells Barnett's antilynching crusade in England, Jacks wrote her a letter defending the white South and maligning black women for their immorality. In turn, Belgarnie sent a copy of the letter to Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a black member of the largely white New England Women's Club and founder, in 1893, of the New Era Club for black women. Later she distributed the letter to numerous black women's clubs and called for a national conference in Boston in 1895, which resulted in the formation of the National Federation of Afro-American Women.

When this historic gathering of black clubwomen occurred, a number of items were on the agenda—temperance, higher education, home life, morality, and education for girls and boys—however, it was also clear that black female empowerment for individual and race advancement was the overriding objective:

... we need to talk over not only those things which are of vital importance to us as women, but also the things that are of especial interest to us as *colored* women ... what *we* especially can do in the moral education of the race ... our mental elevation and physical development ... how to make the most of our own ... limited opportunities ... (*Women's Era*, September 1895, 2).

An important goal of the meeting was vindicating the honor of black women and denouncing Jacks. In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was formed as a result of a merger between the Federation and Mary Church Terrell's National League of Colored Women of Washington, D.C.

A pivotal moment in black women's publishing history and the coming of age politically for clubwomen occurred with the founding of *Women's*

Era. In 1890, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin organized the New Era Club in Boston and initiated its journal, which eventually became the official organ of the NACW. The first issue came out March 24, 1894, and twenty-four issues were published through 1897. Since it was founded, edited, and published by suffragist Ruffin, it is not surprising to find in the publication a strong advocacy of woman suffrage, especially for black women.

The front page of the first issue carried a portrait and feature article on the women's rights leader Lucy Stone. The first issue also contained an article on the closing meetings of the New England Woman Suffrage Association, of which Ruffin was a member. There was also strong advocacy for black women entering the public arena in order to solve their unique problems. An awareness of the dilemma that black women faced as a result of the "double jeopardy" of race and gender is apparent throughout *Women's Era*, the most significant outlet for the expression of their political views and aspirations during the Progressive era.

In 1892, clubwoman and educator Anna Julia Cooper published *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, the first book-length feminist analysis of the condition of African Americans. Cooper was born a slave during the Civil War, in Raleigh, North Carolina. At the age of eight, she attended St. Augustine's Normal School and eventually became a teacher there. An early manifestation of her sensitivity to sexism was her protesting female students' exclusion from Greek classes, which were only open to male theology students. She boldly appealed to the principal and was finally granted permission to enroll as the lone female. Her experiences with respect to male privilege at St. Augustine awakened in her a sensitivity to the urgent need for gender equality in the educational arena.

Cooper's collection of essays, many of which were speeches delivered to black organizations, is also a progressive discussion of the oppressed status of black women. Not content with simply describing their plight, she argued that black women needed to speak out for themselves and stop allowing others, including black men, to speak for them. Commenting on black women's unique status, she advanced the argument of "double jeopardy," since black women experienced both gender and race problems.

A strong advocate for black women's liberation, Cooper was especially concerned about the accessibility of higher education for black women. She also felt that elevating the status of black women would uplift the entire black race, a persistent theme in the writings of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell (the first president of NACW), both of whom consistently espoused feminist ideas in their speeches and articles. Cooper was critical of black men who were unsupportive of black female equality, and she frequently spoke at black male gatherings about the importance of women in the struggle for racial uplift. In fact, she believed that women, because of their special qualities and moral values, should be in the fore-

front of the fight for racial equality. Though she was aware of the double burden of race and gender which was particular to black women, she also felt that black women shared many problems with black males, because of racial oppression, that white women did not share with their men. Cooper also analyzed relationships between black men and women and the problematic nature of those relationships—an analysis that links her to contemporary black feminists.

The next generation of clubwomen would continue and expand the work that Ruffin and Cooper initiated. NACW member Nannie Burroughs (1879–1961), who had Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper for teachers and role models at M Street High School in Washington, D.C., worked for the race and for women within a religious context. One of the founders of the Women's Convention, an auxiliary group of the National Baptist Convention and the largest membership organization of black women in the United States, she attended the founding meeting in 1900 in Richmond, Virginia, and spoke when she was only twenty-one on "How the Sisters Are Hindered from Helping." This feminist critique of sexism within the church catapulted her into national prominence.⁶ A strong advocate for woman suffrage, she also criticized the church for failing to assist in the political development of women, and argued in the *Crisis* (August 1915), the official organ for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), that the vote would enable women to fight male dominance. In 1909, she founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C., which stressed industrial education because she wanted to prepare black women for employment in areas that were open to them.

A few years later, in 1914, the outbreak of World War I precipitated a number of advocacy efforts for the many working women who were leaving domestic service in the South for jobs in northern industry. These included the founding of the Women Wage Earners Association in Washington, D.C., by clubwomen such as Mary Church Terrell and Julia F. Coleman, and efforts to unionize black women workers. After the War ended in 1918, black women found themselves in desperate straits economically given their loss of jobs after the men returned home from Europe. Nannie Burroughs's concern for the plight of black working-class women, particularly domestic servants, resulted in her organizing the National Association of Wage Earners, in 1920. Her intense feelings of racial pride were also manifested in her rejection of white standards of beauty, and she accused her sisters of "color phobia" if they used hair straighteners and skin bleachers. After the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1919, she worked with the NACW to mobilize black women voters and in 1924 became president of the National League of Republican Colored Women.

During this same period, the International Council of Women of the

Darker Races (which sometimes met in Washington, D.C., at Nannie Burroughs's school) was spawned by the racial uplift impulses and the international educational projects of the black women's club movement. Organized by several club women in 1924, most notably Margaret Murray Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Woman's Club and President of NACW from 1914–1918, its purpose was to study the history of peoples of color throughout the world and disseminate knowledge about them for the purpose of engendering racial pride. Study groups, which were called Committees of Seven, were also formed to infuse public school curricula with material on blacks (a precursor of Black Studies) and other people of color and field trips were organized to gain firsthand experience of other cultures.

The council also studied the situation of women and children of color internationally. Like Cooper, who mentioned Muslim harems and the Chinese practice of foot binding on the first page of *A Voice from the South*, council members were aware of the differential experiences of women because of their travel to international conferences. Washington taught a course at Tuskegee Institute on the condition and status of women throughout the world. The Pan-African Congress, which stressed the unity of all African peoples, was organized in 1919 in Paris by William E. B. Du Bois, a strong supporter of black women's liberation. Cooper, who spoke on "The Negro Problem in America," was one of only two black women to address this international gathering of people of African descent. The council also cosponsored with the Chicago Women's Club a fund-raising activity to support Pan-Africanist feminist Adelaide Casely-Hayford's efforts to build a school in Sierra Leone. She was married to a prominent Ghanaian lawyer who edited *Gold Coast Leader*, a leading Pan-Africanist publication. This work of the council is reminiscent of more recent attempts by black feminist activists to learn about and establish linkages with women of color internationally and to struggle for the elimination of sexism and racism globally. In 1960, for example, African American women attended the First Conference of African Women and Women of African Descent held in Accra, Ghana, in July 1960.

A frequently overlooked aspect of black women's activism during this period, especially within the context of Pan-Africanism or nationalism, was their battle against gender oppression, though black liberation would be their major priority. In 1925, Elise McDougald, Harlem teacher and journalist, discussed the economic plight of a particular class of African American Women. She also acknowledged that black women's "feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming a subordinate place" (McDougald, "The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation" *Survey Graphic* LIII [October 1924–March 1925]). This granting of greater

urgency to racial concerns was predictable given the pervasiveness of white supremacy.

The feminist–Pan-Africanist views of Amy Jacques Garvey (1896–1973), Marcus Garvey's second wife, are especially important to consider during this period because of their potential impact on thousands of working class urban blacks involved with the most powerful nationalist organization in the United States—the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which her husband founded in Jamaica in 1914 with his first wife, Amy Ashwood.⁷ As a young man, Marcus was outraged by the exploitation of blacks in the Caribbean. A trip to London in 1912 brought him in contact with Africans who inspired him to struggle against colonialism. When he returned to Jamaica, he organized the UNIA for the promotion of racial solidarity and self-determination among African peoples throughout the world. From the beginning, women were crucial in the hierarchy of the organization, and women's issues were discussed, among them the question of whether a woman's intellect was as highly developed as a man's. Scholars of the Garvey movement also agree that a distinguishing characteristic of the UNIA was the opportunity it provided for black women's political development.

As editor from 1924–1927 of the Women's Page of the *Negro World*, the UNIA's weekly newspaper, Amy Jacques Garvey wrote passionately in "Our Women and What They Think" about the evils of imperialism, racism, capitalism, and the interlocking race, class, and gender oppression that black and other women experienced globally, particularly in colonial contexts. She believed the women's movement was one of the most significant struggles in human history, and that the emancipation of women was imperative. She called for women to participate in all spheres of public life despite their important duties as wives and mothers. She also felt that women were central to the success of black liberation struggles both in the United States and abroad, and she urged them to struggle against imperialist domination as well as their own oppression within their communities.

Echoing Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, she espoused a feminist vision of the world in which women would set things right: "You [men] had your day at the helm of the world, and a pretty mess you have made of it... and perhaps women's rule will usher in the era of real brotherhood, when national and racial lines will disappear, leaving mankind in peace and harmony one with another" (Garvey, *Negro World*, 1926, 5). She also had a special warning for black men: "... watch your step! Ethiopia's queens will reign again and her Amazons protect her shores and people. Strengthen your shaking knees and move forward, or we will displace you and lead on to victory and glory" (Lerner, 579). Concerned about the status of women globally, particularly in Asia and Africa, she applauded Egyptian women's removal of the veil and women's political

gains in India, Russia, and China. A "training ground for black feminists of the 1930s," both in the United States and Jamaica (Lewis and Bryan, 82), the UNIA deserves a place in the history of black feminism in the diaspora.

Despite the decline in black fertility rates since the turn of the century, advocating for birth control was another black feminist agenda item during the 1920s and 1930s.⁸ It is important to point out that the covert use among slave women of contraceptives and abortifacients was perhaps the earliest manifestation of black women's exercising reproductive freedom, a major demand of contemporary feminists. Having fewer children was a deliberate choice of some women to enhance their family's standard of living as well as a strategy espoused in the black press for ensuring the community's economic well-being, particularly during the Depression. Black women also had a feminist perspective on excessive childbearing, linking it to burdensome physical and mental problems, and were also concerned about sterilization abuse. On a national level, Margaret Sanger, prominent white birth control crusader, launched a major campaign in 1915 to legalize the dissemination of information about birth control methods and founded the American Birth Control League in 1921.⁹ The Women's Political Association of Harlem, founded in 1918 and concerned about all aspects of black women's leadership, was the first black organization to advocate birth control, though numerous birth control clinics appeared nationwide in the black community from 1925–1945. The Association also supported Sanger's desire to establish a birth control clinic in Harlem. In September 1919 Sanger's *Birth Control Review* published a special issue on "The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, as Seen by Themselves." This issue included the work of black women writers—a feminist play by Mary Burrill, *They That Sit in Darkness*, which dramatizes the tragedy of too many children, and a short story, "The Closing Door," by Angelina Weld Grimké, the niece of the white Grimké sisters who were famous feminist-abolitionists.

The two most important civil rights organizations in the black community—the National Urban League and the NAACP—supported the use of birth control because they believed that smaller families were more viable economically. This issue sparked controversy, however, within certain circles as nationalist concerns about racial extinction and traditional male views about women's primary role as mothers clashed with feminist demands for sexual autonomy among black women. There was a range of attitudes among black leaders on this issue. Marcus Garvey felt that contraceptives were retarding the growth of the race. Sociologist and Pan-Africanist William E. B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the NAACP, argued in "The Damnation of Women" (1925) that women must be free to choose motherhood, and he repeated this progressive stance in "Black Folks and Birth Control" in the June 1932 issue of *Birth Control Review*.

Concern for black working women also fueled black women's activism during the 1940s and the aftermath of World War II. Because of the labor shortage with men at war, thousands of black women left the rural South again and migrated to the North for better jobs in industry. The promise of a better life remained elusive, however, since they were relegated to the most menial, hazardous, low-paying factory jobs. Poor living conditions in crowded urban settings, job discrimination, the absence of child care facilities, and segregated, substandard housing produced a climate ripe for agitation.

One of the most radical voices during this era was Claudia Jones, whose family had migrated to Harlem from Trinidad in 1924. Economic hardship during the Depression caused her to drop out of school and get a factory job. At age eighteen, she joined the Young Communist League along with many other working-class Harlemites during the 1930s. During the 1940s, she became one of the most outspoken black Communists on the issue of women's rights; in a 1947 issue of *Political Affairs*, a Communist Party journal, she argued that black women, "as workers, as Negroes, and as women," were "the most oppressed stratum of the whole population" (Jones, 4). In her passionate analysis of the situation of black women historically, the plight of the contemporary worker, and the struggles of militant "Negro women" for peace, civil rights, and economic justice, she anticipated a sophisticated black feminist discourse which was a generation away. Though she applauded women in organizations such as the National Association of Negro Women and trade unionists, she chastised the latter for being insensitive to the misery and urgent needs of domestic workers who were unprotected by labor legislation. She also made an insightful connection between the sexist treatment of black domestics and the dehumanizing treatment of black women in general. Reminiscent of Cooper and other nineteenth-century black women feminist-abolitionists, she exposed the racism of white women and reminded them that it was in their own self-interest to work for black women's liberation "inasmuch as the super exploitation and oppression of Negro women tends to depress the standards of all women" (Jones, 12). Her prophetic call for the women's movement to embrace an antiracist agenda anticipated similar pleas by black feminists two generations later. "A developing consciousness on the woman question today . . . must not fail to recognize that the Negro question . . . is *prior* to, and not equal to, the woman question; that only to the extent that we fight all chauvinist expressions and actions as regards the Negro people, and [the] right for the full equality of the Negro people, can women as a whole advance their struggle for equal rights" (Jones, 15).

In the 1960s, black feminist struggle came to the forefront in a more sustained manner and among a larger group, mainly as a result of the failure of the Civil Rights and women's rights movements to address

the particular concerns of black women. Heightened consciousness about the confluence of racism and sexism in their lives was one result of their experiences with male chauvinism within the Civil Rights movement. In her autobiography, *The Trumpet Sounds* (1964), Anna Arnold Hedgeman describes her feelings about the male-dominant civil rights leadership and her experiences as the only woman on the planning committee for the 1963 March on Washington. When she discovered the omission of women as speakers on the program, she was appalled and wrote a letter to director A. Philip Randolph in which she alluded to black women's important roles in the Civil Rights movement. She also argued that "since the 'Big Six' [civil rights leaders] [had] not given women the quality of participation which they [had] earned through the years," (Hedgeman, 179), it was even more imperative that black women be allowed to speak. The outcome, according to Hedgeman, was that on the day of the March the wives of the civil rights leaders and a few other black women were asked to sit on the dais, Daisy Bates was asked to say a few words, and Rosa Parks was presented, but didn't speak. Hedgeman's response that historic day was one of disappointment: "We grinned, some of us, as we recognized anew that Negro women are second-class citizens in the same way that white women are in our culture" (Hedgeman, 180).

In 1964, Mary King and Casey Hayden, white Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staffers, discussed the sexist treatment of women in SNCC in a position paper entitled "Women of the Movement," which they delivered at SNCC's Waveland Conference.¹⁰ Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, SNCC executive secretary (1966), died of cancer a year later at age twenty-five, and Kathleen Cleaver, a former SNCC worker and Black Panther, believed Robinson's death was caused in part by overwork and "the constant struggles that she was subjected to because she was a woman" (Cleaver, 55). Similarly, Septima Clark, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) director of education in 1961, criticized the sexism of SCLC in her autobiography *Ready From Within*: "... those men didn't have any faith in women, none whatsoever. They just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contributions to make ... I had a great feeling that Dr. King didn't think much of women either ..." (Crawford, 195-96). She also confronted King about his nondemocratic style of leadership and eventually joined the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1968 because of its women's rights agenda.

The publication in 1970 of Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Shirley Chisholm's autobiography *Unbought and Unbossed*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Audre Lorde's *Cables to Rage* signaled a literary awakening among black women and the beginning of a clearly defined black women's liberation movement that would have priorities different from those of white feminists, and generate considerable debate, even hostility,

within the black community. Cade's antiracist, antisexist, anti-imperialist agenda captures the essence of contemporary black feminism: conduct a comparative study of women's roles in the Third World; debunk myths of the black matriarch and "the evil black bitch"; study black women's history and honor woman warriors such as Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer; do oral histories of ordinary black women (migrant workers, quilters, UNIA grandmothers); study sexuality; establish linkages with other women of color globally (Cade, 11).

The anthology includes SNCC activist Frances Beale's pioneering essay on the "double jeopardy" of black women, which highlights their sexual and economic exploitation, the inappropriateness of white models of womanhood, black male sexism, sterilization abuse of women of color globally, abortion rights, and Sojourner Truth's 1851 women's rights speech. Beale also voices her disapproval of black nationalist demands that women be subordinate to men and their assumption that women's most important contribution to the revolution is having babies: "To assign women the role of housekeeper and mother while men go forth into battle is a highly questionable doctrine to maintain" (Cade, 100).

In 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) would emerge in part as a reminder to the black liberation movement that "there can't be liberation for half the race"¹¹ Activist lawyer Flo Kennedy and Margaret Sloan decided to convene a small gathering of black feminists in May so that they could discuss their experiences within the racist women's movement, and what it meant to be black, female, and feminist. In their statement of purpose, they objected to the women's movement's being seen as white, and their involvement in it as disloyal to the race. Emphasizing black women's need for self-definition, they identified racism from without and sexism from within as destructive to the black community.

The National Black Feminist Organization officially began November 30, 1973, at an Eastern Regional Conference in New York City at the cathedral of St. John the Divine. This was a historic gathering of the first explicitly black feminist organization committed to the eradication of sexism, racism, and heterosexism. Workshops focused on a variety of issues—child care, the church, welfare, women's liberation, lesbianism, prisons, education, addiction, work, female sexuality, and domestic violence. Among those present were Shirley Chisholm, Alice Walker, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Flo Kennedy, and Margaret Sloan, NBFO's first and only president.¹²

A year after the founding meeting, the Boston chapter of NBFO decided to form a more radical organization, according to lesbian feminist writer Barbara Smith, and named itself in 1975 the Combahee River Collective after Harriet Tubman's "military campaign" in South Carolina (1863), which freed nearly 800 slaves. In 1977, after meeting informally for three

years and doing intense consciousness-raising (the major strategy for feminist organizing in the 1970s), a black feminist lesbian manifesto was issued that foregrounded sexuality and asserted that "sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as the politics of class and race" (Hull, Bell Scott, and Smith, 16). Emphasizing the "simultaneity" of racial, gender, heterosexist, and class oppression in the lives of black and other women of color, they affirmed their connection to an activist tradition among black women going back to the nineteenth century as well as to black liberation struggles of the 1960s. Despite the difficulty of sustaining a socialist black feminist organization with lesbian leadership for six years, they worked untiringly on a variety of "revolutionary" issues—reproductive rights, rape, prison reform, sterilization abuse, violence against women, health care, and racism within the white women's movement. They also understood the importance of coalition building and worked with other women of color, white feminists, and progressive men. Equally important was their breaking the silence about homophobia within the black community and providing lesbians and heterosexual women with opportunities to work together.

In 1975, Michele Wallace wrote an article for the *Village Voice* entitled "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," and precipitated an intense controversy within the black community when *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* appeared three years later. Wallace, a founding member of NBFO, critiqued black male sexism and the misogyny of black liberation struggles. Echoing Wallace, the August 27, 1979 issue of *Newsweek* chronicled a new black struggle that underscored intraracial tensions based on gender: "It's the newest wrinkle in the black experience in America—a growing distrust, if not antagonism, between black men and women that is tearing marriages apart and fracturing personal relationships." This "wake-up call" came on the heels of Ntozake Shange's award-winning Broadway play "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf" (1976) and Wallace's polemic *Black Macho*, both of whom were demonized because of their negative assessments of black men.

The issue of sexual politics within the African American community became a hotly debated topic in journals such as *The Black Scholar*, *Freedomways*, and *Black Books Bulletin*, and provided the catalyst for the founding of a short-lived bimonthly magazine, *Black Male/Female Relationships* by sociologists Nathan and Julia Hare. *Black Scholar*, however, would provide the most extensive and sober treatment of the debate generated by Wallace's and Shange's controversial feminist writings. The April 1973 issue of *Black Scholar* on "Black Women's Liberation" led the way, followed by the March 1975 issue, "The Black Woman," the 1979 "Black Sexism Debate" issue, and the 1986 "Black Women and Feminism" issue. Robert Staples's essay "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry

Black Feminists," which appeared in the March/April 1979 issue, was a feminist-bashing response to Wallace and Shange, whom he accused of black male bashing; it stimulated a Readers' Forum in the subsequent May/June 1979 issue, in which the battle lines were drawn. Robert Chrisman's editorial for this special issue acknowledged in very strong terms the validity of the accusations, and called for a reconciliation between black men and women: "Black feminists have raised just criticisms of black male sexism. . . . We believe that the effort to clarify the nature of black male/female relationships is an important step in the process of reuniting our people and revitalizing the struggle against oppression. . . . the problems of black male/female relationships are neither new nor solely the creation of the white media."

A decade later, the controversy continued and grew more virulent; its most obvious manifestations were loud and angry litanies, especially among black professional men, about the portrayal of black male characters in the fiction of contemporary black women writers. Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and Steven Spielberg's film adaptation sparked the most vitriolic responses. Shahrzad Ali's self-published *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman* (1990) was one of the most disturbing publications during this decade-and-a-half-old family battle and is one of the most blatantly misogynist and racist texts to appear in print.

Black feminist writing proliferated during this period amid rancorous debate within the black community about the relevance of the contemporary white women's movement to black women. One of the most passionate defenders of feminist ideology to emerge, though she also delivered scathing critiques of white feminism, was bell hooks, whose pioneering monograph, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) delineated the impact of sexism on the lives of black women; analyzed the devaluation of black womanhood, both historically and contemporaneously; and discussed the persistence of racism in the women's movement and the involvement of black women in struggles to achieve gender equality. The chapter on "Sexism and the Black Female Experience" advanced the new thesis that slavery, a reflection of a patriarchal and racist social order not only oppressed black men but also defeminized slave women. Over the next decade and a half, a substantial group of black feminist writers, among whom were Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Gloria Joseph, June Jordan, Ntozake Shange, Gloria Hull, Paula Giddings, and Barbara Christian, would redefine feminism as a broad political movement to end *all* forms of domination. In the words of hooks, ". . . feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing

U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires" (hooks, 1981, 194).

Reminiscent of the 1890s, writing, publishing, and organizing became a major preoccupation of black feminists during the 1980s, and heeding Cooper's words, black women were clearly speaking for themselves. Other groundbreaking texts were Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* (1980); Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981); Filomina Chioma Steady's *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981); Hull, Bell Scott, and Smith's *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982); Paula Gidding's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Sex and Race in America* (1984); Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983); Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983); Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984); Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985); and Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987). Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was founded in 1980 by Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith for the purpose of publishing mainly feminist women of color; its mission (see brochure) was also to provide a "political support network for feminists and lesbians of color as well." The first explicitly black feminist periodical devoted exclusively to the experiences of women of African decent in the United States and throughout the world was founded in 1984 in Atlanta, Georgia, and hosted by Spelman College's Women's Research and Resource Center, the first feminist institute on a historically black college campus. *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* would provide a major outlet for feminist perspectives on a variety of issues including mother-daughter relationships in the black community, health, science and technology, and the situation of women in rural Africa. During its founding conference in 1983, the National Black Women's Health Project, whose newsletter *Vital Signs* provides black feminist perspectives on health, attracted the largest group of black women ever to assemble on Spelman's campus.

Black feminist theory would come of age during the 1990s and move from the margins to the center of mainstream feminist discourse. Patricia Hill Collins's landmark *Black Feminist Thought* identified the fusion of activism and theory as its distinguishing characteristic, and analyzed its four core themes: the interlocking nature of race, class, and gender oppression in black women's personal, domestic, and work lives; the necessity of internalizing positive self-definitions and rejecting the denigrating, stereotypical, and controlling images (mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, whore) of others, both within and without the black community; and the need for active struggle to resist oppression and realize individual and

group empowerment (Collins, 23, 32, 83-84). The Collins text would further establish, along with Toni Cade's *The Black Woman* and bell hooks's-*Ain't I a Woman*, a continuous black feminist intellectual tradition going back to the publication of Cooper's *A Voice from the South* a hundred years earlier.

Despite their commitment to ending sexism, however, some black women continued to be alienated by the term "feminist." Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) provided the alternative term "womanist" as a more culturally appropriate label for black feminists or feminists of color. "Womanist" recalled a black folk expression of mothers admonishing their daughters to refrain from "womanish" behavior. According to Walker, a "womanist" prefers women's culture, is committed to the survival of the entire group, is serious, "loves struggle, loves the folk, and loves herself" (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi-xii). Inspired by Walker, scholars such as Cheryl Gilkes, Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Renita Weems, and Emily Townes, for example, self-identify as "womanist" theologians as a way of differentiating themselves from white feminist theologians.

President George Bush's 1991 nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court and Professor Anita Hill's subsequent allegations of sexual harassment, which resulted in televised hearings for three days in October, sparked perhaps the most profound intraracial tensions around sexual politics that the modern African American community had ever experienced. Despite Hill's allegations that Thomas had sexually harassed her while she worked under him at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), on October 16 the Senate confirmed, 52-48, Clarence Thomas as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, replacing outgoing Thurgood Marshall.

A month later, a cogent statement opposing the racist and sexist treatment of Anita Hill appeared in the November 17, 1991, issue of the *New York Times* (A-53), "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves." Over 1,600 black women reminded the nation of Thomas's persistent failure, despite his own racial history and professional opportunities, to respond to the urgency of civil rights for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the statement called attention to a long history of sexual abuse and stereotyping of black women as "immoral, insatiable, perverse." The failure of Congress to take seriously Hill's sexual harassment charges was perceived as an attack on the collective character of black women (Chrisman and Allen, 292).

More than any other episode in recent memory, including the angry responses to *Black Macho, For Colored Girls*, and *The Color Purple*, the Thomas/Hill saga unmasked problematic gender attitudes within the black community and in some cases outright misogyny. Because Hill had violated

a deeply held cultural taboo—that racial dirty linen shouldn't be aired in public—she came to epitomize black female treachery in breaking the silence about objectionable black male behavior. For over a decade, black women had been labeled traitors among some segments of the community because of their advocacy of feminism, which was associated with white women. Despite the criticism, however, contemporary black feminists, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, mobilized for struggle with the hope that eradicating the twin evils of racism and sexism would become a battle cry within the entire community. In the aftermath of the Thomas/Hill hearings, black women witnessed rancorous public dialogue about their character, which sparked the formation of a new feminist organization, African American Women in Defense of Ourselves.

In January 1994, the largest gathering of black feminist scholars and activists took place at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) during a national conference entitled "Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name, 1894–1994." Ironically, nearly one hundred years after the historic gathering of clubwomen in Boston in 1895, over 2,000 mostly academic black women gathered again. Like black women in the 1890s, they found themselves under attack, much of which was generated by the Thomas/Hill hearings and the propaganda associated with welfare reform and "family values." In addition, two prominent black academic women with liberal politics, Johnnetta Cole and Lani Guinier (both of whom were keynoters at MIT), had been viciously attacked by the Right; as a result, both of them were abandoned as appointees of the Clinton administration. Twenty-five years earlier, Angela Davis (the third keynoter) had been fired from her faculty job at the University of California, Los Angeles, by Governor Ronald Reagan because of her political views and Communist Party membership.

Among other things, the MIT conference demonstrated the persistence of black women intellectuals' commitment to feminist discourse and action, despite the absence of common ground on a number of issues. A resolution was drafted and sent to President Clinton which, first of all, acknowledged the "complexity of social categories such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation."¹³ It called for a blue-ribbon panel on race relations in the United States; underscored the importance of research on black women that would promote the interests of the entire African American community; called for an examination of career advancement issues for women of color in higher education; and requested increased funding for community-based organizations serving poor black families and others in need, such as women in prison and people with AIDS. It also addressed international issues relating to Haiti, South Africa, Cuba, and Somalia. This document articulates the contours of contemporary black feminism and suggests a blueprint for the future.

As we approach the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is apparent that the lives of many women around the world have been unaffected by centuries-old struggles for gender equality. In most places, women are poorer than men, in some places, daughters are still valued less than sons, and a global epidemic of violence against women remains unchecked.

It is also the case that the promise of feminism—that females can live better lives with a wider range of choices and resources—is a reality for some women three decades after the beginning of the "second wave" of the United States women's movement even though poverty, racism, and heterosexual privilege remain deeply entrenched.

More of us, women and men, must heed the challenge set before us by bell hooks in her first book on black feminism: "Only a few black women have rekindled the spirit of feminist struggle that stirred the hearts and minds of our nineteenth century sisters. We, black women who advocate feminist ideology, are pioneers. We are clearing a path for ourselves and our sisters. We hope that as long as they see us reach our goal—no longer victimized, no longer unrecognized, no longer afraid—they will take courage and follow" (*Ain't I a Woman*, 196). The struggle continues.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

1. Blanche Glassman Hersh's *Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) excludes black women abolitionists from her discussion of feminist-abolitionists (her terminology) because of her erroneous assessment of their minimal involvement in the first wave of the women's movement, which she describes as largely white. Jean Yellin and John Van Horne's collection of essays, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1994), corrects Hersh's assumptions by including extensive discussions of women of African descent in their category of antislavery feminist, "that small circle of black and white American women who, in the 1830s and 1840s, initially banded together to remedy the public evils of slavery and racism and who ultimately struggled for equal rights for women as well as slaves" (3). Yellin and Van Horne also complicate the analysis by indicating that this group was diverse and included more traditional women who were not feminist.
2. See Shirley J. Yee's *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) for an excellent analysis of the emergence of black feminism in the early nineteenth century.
3. Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993) documents the twelve-hundred-year struggle of women in the West to free their minds of patriarchal thinking, the roots of which can be found in institutionalized barriers to their intellectual development. Her brief discussion of African American women focuses on evangelists such as Sojourner Truth, whom she singles out as being "virtually alone among black women in the nineteenth century in staunchly combining the defense of her race with a defense of her sex" (106). Lerner also defines feminist consciousness as women's awareness that they belong to a subordinate group which has suffered because of societal constructs. As a result, they need to develop sisterly bonds with other women and work to change their subordinate status (274).
4. See Angela Davis's pioneering essay, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 4–15, which