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Black Women and Feminism

More than a hundred years have passed since the day Sojourner Truth stood before an assembled body of white women and men at an anti-slavery rally in Indiana and bared her breasts to prove that she was indeed a woman. To Sojourner, who had traveled the long road from slavery to freedom, the baring of her breasts was a small matter. She faced her audience without fear, without shame, proud of having been born black and female. Yet the white man who yelled at Sojourner, "I don't believe you really are a woman," unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for black womanhood. In the eyes of the 19th century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal. When Sojourner Truth stood before the second annual convention of the women's rights movement in Akron, Ohio, in 1852, white women who deemed it unfitting that a black woman should speak on a public platform in their presence screamed: "Don't let her speak! Don't let her speak! Don't let her speak!" Sojourner endured their protests and became one of the first feminists to call their attention to the lot of the black slave woman who, compelled by
circumstance to labor alongside black men, was a living embodiment of the truth that women could be the work-equals of men.

It was no mere coincidence that Sojourner Truth was allowed on stage after a white male spoke against the idea of equal rights for women, basing his argument on the notion that woman was too weak to perform her share of manual labor—that she was innately the physical inferior to man. Sojourner quickly responded to his argument, telling her audience:

…Well, children, whar dar is so much racket dar must be something out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de women at de Norf all a talkin 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best places… and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!… I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?

Unlike most white women's rights advocates, Sojourner Truth could refer to her own personal life experience as evidence of woman's ability to function as a parent; to be the work equal of man; to undergo persecution, physical abuse, rape, torture; and to not only survive but emerge triumphant.

Sojourner Truth was not the only black woman to advocate social equality for women. Her eagerness to speak publicly in favor of women's rights despite public disapproval and resistance paved the way for other politically-minded black women to express their views. Sexism and racism have so

informed the perspective of American historiographers that they have tended to overlook and exclude the effort of black women in discussions of the American women's rights movement. White female scholars who support feminist ideology have also ignored the contribution of black women. In contemporary works, like The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism by Barbara Berg, Herstory by June Sochen, Hidden
from History by Sheila Rowbothan, The Women's Movement by Barbara Deckard, to name a few, the role black women played as advocates for women's rights in the 19th century is never mentioned. Eleanor Flexner's Century of Struggle, which was first published in 1959, remains one of the very few book-length historical works on the women's rights movement that documents the participation of black women.

Most women involved in the recent move toward a feminist revolution assume that white women have initiated all feminist resistance to male chauvinism in American society, and further assume that black women are not interested in women's liberation. While it is true that white women have led every movement toward feminist revolution in American society, their dominance is less a sign of black female disinterest in feminist struggle than an indication that the politics of colonization and racial imperialism have made it historically impossible for black women in the United States to lead a women's movement.

Nineteenth century black women were more aware of sexist oppression than any other female group in American society has ever been. Not only were they the female group most victimized by sexist discrimination and sexist oppression, their powerlessness was such that resistance on their part

could rarely take the form of organized collective action. The 19th century women's rights movement could have provided a forum for black women to address their grievances, but white female racism barred them from full participation in the movement. Furthermore, it served as a grave reminder that racism had to be eliminated before black women would be recognized as having an equal voice with white women on the issue of women's rights. Women's organizations and clubs in the 19th century were almost always racially segregated, but that did not mean that black female participants in such groups were any less committed to women's rights than white participants.

Contemporary historiographers tend to over-emphasize the 19th century black female's commitment to eliminating racism so as to make it seem that their involvement with anti-racist work precluded involvement in women's rights activities. An example of this trend can be found in June Sochen's work Herstory, where she discusses white women's organizations in a chapter titled "The Women's Movement" but discusses black women's organizations in a chapter titled "Old Problems: Black Americans," a categorization which implies that black women's organizations emerged as part of the general effort of black people to end racism, not as part of their participation in the women's movement. Sochen writes:

Black women's clubs were organized locally to perform charitable and educational services. Similar in purpose and nature to white women's clubs, the National Association of Colored Women was formed in 1896 and, led by Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), it had more than 100,000 members in 26 states within four years. While one local chapter would be organizing a hospital for blacks, another

would be developing a kindergarten program for the black children of its community.

One of the first black women to graduate from Oberlin College, Mary Church Terrell was an articulate and prominent spokeswoman for black Americans' rights. An extraordinary person, she spent her long life working for the freedom of black people. She was a good speaker and writer for a variety of causes. In addition to heading the NACW, Mrs. Terrell campaigned against lynching, became a charter member of the NAACP, and worked for the suffrage movement as well. She represented black women at many national and international meetings.

From the information provided in these paragraphs, readers might easily conclude that Mary Church Terrell was a passionate spokesperson for black American rights who was not overly concerned with rights for women. This was not so. As president of the National Association of Colored Women, Mary Church Terrell worked arduously to involve black women in the women's rights struggle. She was particularly concerned that they struggle to obtain social equality for their sex in the educational sphere. That Mary Church Terrell, like most black women's rights advocates, was also committed to uplifting her race as a whole in no way diminished the fact that the focus of her attention was on changing the role of women in society. Had Terrell considered herself to be a spokesperson for the
black race as a whole she would not have published "A Colored Woman in a White World," a narrative that discussed the social status of black women and the impact of racism and sexism on their lives.

No white feminist historian would write about the efforts of Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Stanton, Lucretia Mott and others to initiate social reforms that would affect primarily white women as if their efforts were completely divorced from the issue of women's rights. Yet historians who label themselves feminist continually minimize the contribution of black women's rights advocates by implying that their focus was solely on racial reform measures. Because of white racial imperialism, white women could organize groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Young Women's Christian Association, General Federation of Women's Clubs, without explicitly stating in their heading that these organizations were exclusively white. Black women identified themselves racially calling their groups Colored Women's League, National Federation of Afro-American Women, National Association for Colored Women, and because they identified themselves by race scholars assume that their interest in the elevation of blacks as a group overshadowed their involvement with woman's effort to effect social reform. In fact, black female reform organizations were solidly rooted in the women's movement. It was in reaction to the racism of white women and to the fact that the U.S. remained a society with an apartheid social structure that compelled black women to focus on themselves rather than all women.

Black activist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin tried to work with white women's organizations and found that black women could not depend on racist white women to encourage them to fully participate in the women's reform movement; consequently, she demanded that black women organize to address issues for themselves. At the First National

Conference of Colored Women held in Boston in 1895, she told her audience:

The reasons why we should confer are so apparent that it would seem hardly necessary to enumerate them, and yet there is none of them but demand our serious consideration. In the first place we need to feel the cheer and
inspiration of meeting with each other, we need to gain the courage and fresh life that comes from the mingling of congenial souls, of those working for the same ends. Next, 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, the training of our children, openings for our boys and girls how they can be prepared for occupations and occupations may be found or opened for them, what we especially can do in the moral education of the race with which we are identified, our mental elevation and physical development, the home training it is necessary to give our children in order to prepare them to meet the peculiar conditions in which they shall find themselves, how to make the most of our own, to some extent limited opportunities, these are some of our own peculiar questions to be discussed. Besides these are the general questions of the day, which we cannot afford to be indifferent to….

Ruffin did not encourage black women's rights advocates to work solely to improve their own lot, she maintained that black women needed to organize so that they could lead a women's movement that would address the concerns of all women:

Our woman's movement is a woman's movement that is led and directed by women for the good of women and men, for the benefit of all humanity, which is more than any one branch or section of it. We want, we ask the active interest of our men, and, too, we are not drawing the color line; we are women, American women, as intensely interested in all that pertains to us as such as all other American women; we are not alienating or withdrawing, we are only coming to the front, willing to join any others in the same work and cordially inviting and welcoming any others to join us.

Other black women's rights advocates echoed Ruffin's sentiments. Despite the fact that white racial imperialism excluded black women from participating in groups with white women, they remained committed to the belief that women's rights could be attained only if women joined together to present a united front. Addressing the World Congress of Representative Women, black suffragist Fannie Barrier Williams made it known that black women were as committed to
the struggle for women's rights as any other group of women. In her address she voiced the belief that women joined in political solidarity would have a tremendous impact on American culture:

The power of organized womanhood is one of the most interesting studies of modern sociology. Formerly women knew so little of each other mentally, their common interests were so sentimental and gossipy, and their knowledge of all the larger affairs of human society was so meager that organization among them, in the modern sense, was impossible. Now their liberal intelligence, their contact in all the great interest of education, and their increasing influence

for good in all the great reformatory movements of the age has created in them a greater respect for each other, and furnished the elements of organization for large and splendid purposes. The highest ascendancy of woman's development has been reached when they have become mentally strong enough to find bonds of association interwoven with sympathy, loyalty, and mutual trustfulness. To-day union is the watchword of woman's onward march.

Although racial segregation was the norm in women's organizations, reform measures initiated by white and black women's groups were not radically different. They differed only in that black women included in their reform efforts measures that were aimed at solving specific problems they faced. One such problem was the general tendency among white Americans and even some brainwashed blacks to regard all black women as sexually immoral, licentious, and wanton—a negative stereotype that had its origin in American sexist mythology. Consequently, while white women's organizations could concentrate their attentions on general reform measures, black women had to launch a campaign to defend their "virtue." As part of their campaign they wrote articles and speeches upholding black female sexual morality.

White women's organizations could confine their attention to issues such as education, charity, or to the formation of literary societies, while black women were concerned with issues such as poverty, care for the elderly and disabled, or prostitution. Black female clubs and organizations were potentially
more feminist and radical in nature than white women's clubs because of the difference in their circumstance created by racist oppression. White women as a group did not have to

launch an attack on prostitution as did black women. Many young black women leaving the South and migrating north were compelled to work as prostitutes. In some cases, they would come north on what was called a Justice ticket, supplied them by employment agencies or labor agents. In exchange for transportation and the guarantee of a job on arrival, black women signed contracts to work where the agent placed them and agreed to pay a fee equivalent to one or two months' wages. On arriving north they would find their jobs were mainly as maids in houses of prostitution. Unable to survive on the low salary paid them, they would be encouraged to become prostitutes by white "pimps." The National League for the Protection of Colored Women was formed to inform and aid southern black women migrating north. In 1897, black activist Victoria Earle Matthews formed the White Rose Working Girl's Home and a Black Protection and Women's Rights Society in the Women's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn. To further acquaint the public with the plight of white women, Victoria Matthews delivered a lecture on "The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman." Her work was not done in isolation. Numerous black women's organizations were formed to help black women in their struggle for self-improvement.

Of those black women who advocated social equality for women, Anna Julia Cooper was one of the most outstanding. She was one of the first black activists to urge black women to articulate their own experiences and to make the public aware of the way in which racism and sexism together affected their social status. Ann Cooper wrote:

The colored woman of today occupies, one might say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself

transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which makes for our civilization. She is confronted by a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both.

Anna Cooper wanted the U.S. public to recognize the role black women played not just as spokespersons for their race but as advocates of rights for women. To spread her views on women's rights, she published A Voice from the South in 1892, one of the first feminist discussions of the social status of black women and a lengthy discussion of woman's right to higher education. In A Voice from the South, Cooper reiterated her belief that black women should not assume a passive subordinate position in relationship to black men. She also criticized black males for their refusal to support woman's effort to obtain equal rights. Since it was common for black leaders to question whether or not black female involvement in the struggle for women's rights would undermine their involvement in the struggle to eliminate racism, Cooper maintained that social equality of the sexes would mean that black women would be able to serve as leaders in the struggle against racism. She further argued that they had in fact shown themselves to be as committed to the black liberation struggle as black men, if not more so.

Included in A Voice from the South was an essay by Cooper on "The Higher Education of Women" in which she argued that women as a collective group should have the right to acquire higher education. Like many modern-day feminists, Cooper believed in the existence of a distinct "feminine principle" and argued that "a great want of the world in the past has been a feminine force," a force which could have "its

full effect only through the untrammelled development of women."

All I claim is that there is a feminine as well as a masculine side to truth; that these are related not as inferior and superior, not as better and worse, not as weaker and stronger, but as complements—complements in one necessary and symmetric whole. That as the man is more noble in reason, so the woman is more quick in sympathy. That as he is indefatigable in pursuit of abstract truth, so is she in caring for the interests by the way— striving tenderly and lovingly that not one of the least of these "little ones" should perish. That while we not unfrequently see women who reason, we say, with the coolness and precision of a man, and men as considerate of helplessness as a woman, still there is a general consensus of mankind that one trait is essentially masculine and the other is peculiarly feminine. That both are needed to be worked into the training of children, in order that boys may supplement their virility by tenderness and sensibility, and our girls may round out their gentleness by strength and self-reliance. That, as both are alike necessary in giving symmetry to the individual, so a nation or a race will degenerate into mere emotionalism on the one hand, or bullying on the other, if dominated by either exclusively; lastly, and most emphatically, that the feminine factor can have its proper effect only through woman's development and education so that she may fitly and intelligently stamp her force on the forces of her day, and add her modicum to the riches of the world's thought….

Even though Anna Cooper, like other 19th century women's rights advocates, continued to believe that woman could best serve her country by using education to enhance the sex role

assigned her by patriarchy, she was aware that higher education would also enable women to explore worlds outside the traditional realm of home and family. To answer those who argued that higher education interfered with marriage, Cooper replied:

I grant you that intellectual development, with the self-reliance and capacity for earning a livelihood which it gives, renders woman less dependent on the marriage relation for physical support (which, by the way, does not always accompany it). Neither is she compelled to look to sexual love as the one sensation capable of giving tone and relish, movement and vim to the life she lives. Her horizon is extended. Her sympathies are broadened and deepened and multiplied. She is in closer touch with nature….

Nineteenth century black women believed that were they given the right to vote, they could change the educational system so that women would have the right to pursue fully their educational goals. To achieve this end they wholeheartedly supported woman suffrage. Black woman activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was more outspoken on the subject of woman suffrage than any other black woman of her day. In 1888 she addressed the International Council of Women in Washington and spoke on the importance of suffrage to black and white women. At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 she delivered an address titled "Woman's Political Future" expressing her views on suffrage:

I do not believe in unrestricted and universal suffrage for either men or women. I believe in moral and educational tests. I do not believe that the most ignorant and brutal man is better

prepared to add value to the strength and durability of the government than the most cultured, upright, and intelligent woman…. The ballot in the hands of woman means power added to influence. How well she will use that power I can not foretell. Great evils stare us in the face that need to be throttled by the combined power of an upright manhood and an enlightened womanhood; and I know that no nation can gain its full measure of enlightenment and happiness if one-half of it is free and the other half is fettered. China compressed the feet of her women and thereby retarded the steps of her men.

Mary Church Terrell was yet another black female activist who lobbied in support of woman suffrage. In 1912, she addressed the National America Woman's Suffrage Association, of which she was a member on two occasions, speaking in support of woman suffrage. Terrell was also active in the movement to stop the lynching of black people. Her article "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View" was published in the 1904 issue of the North American Review, and it was in this essay that she first appealed to white women to involve themselves in the anti-lynching crusade. Terrell believed that white women acted as the accomplices of white men at lynchings, and she placed a measure of the responsibility for racism and racial oppression on their shoulders:

Lynching is the aftermath of slavery. The white men who shoot negroes to death and flay them alive, and the white women who apply flaming torches to their oil-soaked bodies today, are the sons and daughters of women who had but little, if any, compassion on the race when it was enslaved. The men who lynch negroes to-day are, as a rule, the children

of women who sat by their firesides happy and proud in the possession and affection of their own children, while they looked with unpitying eye and adamantine heart upon the anguish of slave mothers whose children had been sold away, when not overtken by a sadder fate…. It is too much to expect perhaps, that the
children of women who for generations looked upon the hardships and the degradation of their sisters of a darker hue with few if any protests, should have mercy and compassion upon the children of that oppressed race now. But what a tremendous influence for law and order, and what a mighty foe to mob violence Southern white women might be, if they would arise in the purity and power of their womanhood to implore their fathers, husbands and sons no longer to stain their hands with the black man's blood!…

Terrell's appeal to white women to bond with black women on the basis of shared womanhood was a reiteration of the sentiments of many 19th century black women who were convinced that women could be a new political force in the U.S.

Despite racist and sexist oppression, the latter part of the 19th century was an important era in black woman's history. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was gloriously right when she exclaimed, "If the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is discovering woman to herself." The fervor over women's rights generated in the 19th century continued in the 20th century and culminated in the ratifiction of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920 which granted all women the right to vote. In their struggle to win the vote, black women had learned a bitter lesson. They found as they worked for suffrage that many whites saw granting women

the right to vote as yet another way to maintain the oppressive system of white racial imperialism. Southern white suffragists rallied around a platform that argued that woman suffrage in the South would strengthen white supremacy. Even though woman suffrage would also grant black women the right to vote, in the south white women outnumbered them by two to one. In The Emancipation of the American Woman, Andrew Sinclair discusses the racial politics of white women suffragists and concludes:

The undisguised racism of the Southern suffragists such as Kate Gordon and Laura Clay—two of the most powerful officers in the National American Association after Anthony's retirement—worried the suffragists from the North and the West. Although Carrie Catt and Anna Shaw had to be diplomatic to gain some Southern support for suffrage, they lost the crusading spirit of the old
abolitionists…. The vocabulary of the movement changed from the language of human rights to that of expediency. Negro women in the North were excluded from some suffrage parades, for fear of offending the South. As one Negro leader wrote to another about the suffragists, "All of them are mortally afraid of the South and if they could get the Suffrage Amendment through without enfranchising coloured women, they would do it in a moment."

The language of the Northern suffrage leaders, even that of Elizabeth Stanton, increasingly shifted towards the expedient of educated suffrage for women…. The promise of the American Revolution in terms of human equality and liberty was forgotten in an effort to win the vote for a limited number of white, Anglo-Saxon women, in the same way that the

terms of the Constitution had once denied the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

As in the 19th century struggle over the issue of woman suffrage, in the 20th century struggle, race and sex became interlocking issues. Like their predecessors, white women consciously and deliberately supported white racial imperialism, openly disavowing feelings of empathy and political solidarity with black people. In their efforts to secure the ballot, white women's rights advocates willingly betrayed the feminist belief that voting was the natural right of every woman. Their willingness to compromise feminist principles allowed the patriarchal power structure to co-opt the energy of women suffragists and use the votes of women to strengthen the existing anti-woman political structure. The great majority of white women did not use their voting privileges to support women's issues; they voted as their husbands, fathers, or brothers voted. The more militant white suffragists had hoped that women would use the vote to form their own party rather than supporting major parties that denied women social equality with men. Voting privileges for women changed in no fundamental way the lot of women in society, but they did enable women to help support and maintain the existing white racist imperialist patriarchal social order. To a very grave extent women obtaining the right to vote was more a victory for racist principles than a triumph of feminist principles.

Black female suffragists found that the vote had little impact on their social status. The most militant wing of the 1920s women's movement, the National Woman's Party, was both racist and classist. Even though the party pledged to work for full equality for women, it actively worked to

promote solely the interests of white middle and upper class women. In Her story, June Sochen makes this comment on the attitude of white suffragists toward black women:

After the woman's suffrage amendment was passed in 1920, some reformers wondered whether it would benefit black women as well as white women—especially in the South where black men had been virtually disenfranchised by the white power-holders. Over two million newly enfranchised black women lived in the South. When suffragists suggested to Alice Paul that the voting rights of black women would be a continuing vital issue, she replied that the year 1920 was not the time to discuss that question. Rather, she said, the suffragists should enjoy their new political power and make plans for other battles in the future. Yet as the reformers had foreseen, when black women went to the polls in Alabama or Georgia, they found that white election officials had a bag of tricks ready to prevent them from voting. If a black woman could read a complicated text put before her, the white official would find some other obscure reason why she was ineligible to vote. And any woman who persisted was threatened with violence if she did not obediently slink away.

When women suffrage failed to alter in any way the social status of black women, many black female suffragists became disillusioned with women's rights. They had supported woman suffrage only to find their interests betrayed, only to find that "woman suffrage" would be used as a weapon to strengthen white oppression of black people. They found that obtaining rights for women would have little impact on their social status as long as white racial imperialism automatically denied them full citizenship. While white women were rejoicing over obtaining the right to vote, a system of racial

apartheid was being institutionalized throughout the U.S. that would threaten the freedom of black women far more crucially than sexual imperialism. That system of racial apartheid was called Jim Crow. In The Strange Career of Jim Crow, C. Vann Woodward describes this resurgence of racism:

In the postwar era there were new indications that the Southern Way was spreading as the American Way in race relations. The great migration of the Negro into the residential slum areas and the industrial plants of the big northern cities increased tension between races. Northern labor was jealous of its status and resentful of the competition of Negroes, who were excluded from unions. Negroes were pushed out of the more desirable jobs in industries that they had succeeded in invading during the manpower shortage of the war years. They were squeezed out of federal employment more and more. Negro postmen began to disappear from their old routes as they did from the police beats. They began to lose their grip upon crafts such as that of the barbers, which had once been a virtual monopoly in the South.

Racism in regimented form was spread over the whole country in the 'twenties by the new Ku Klux Klan….

There was no apparent tendency toward abatement or relaxation of the Jim Crow code of discrimination and segregation in the 1920's, and none in the 'thirties until well along in the depression years. In fact the Jim Crow laws were elaborated and further expanded in those years. Much social and economic history is reflected in the new laws. When women began to bob their hair and became patrons of the barber shops, Atlanta passed an ordinance in 1926 forbidding

Negro barbers to serve women or children under fourteen years of age. Jim Crow kept step with the march of progress in transportation and industry, as well as with the changes in fashion.

As Jim Crow apartheid threatened to strip black people of the rights and achievements they had acquired during Reconstruction, it was only natural that black female activists ceased to struggle over women's rights issues and concentrated their energies on resisting racism.

Black women activists were not the only group of women to shift their attention away from women's rights issues. Because much of the energy of female activists had focused on the vote, once it was obtained many women saw no further need for a women's movement. Although white women in the Woman's Party continued feminist struggle, black women were rarely active participants. Their energies were focused on resisting mounting racial oppression. While white women's rights
advocates struggled in 1933 to get the Senate to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, black women activists were fighting to prevent the lynching of black women and men by mobs of white racists, to improve the conditions of masses of poverty-stricken black people, and to provide educational opportunities. In the 20s and 30s, black female activists appealed to the masses of black women not to let sexism prevent them from being as involved as black men in the struggle to free black people. Amy Jacques Garvey, active in the black nationalist movement led by her co-worker and husband Marcus Garvey, edited the woman's page in Negro World, the newspaper publication of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In her articles she urged black

women to focus their attention on black nationalism and participate equally in the black liberation struggle.

The exigencies of this present age require that women take their places beside their men. White women are rallying all their forces and united regardless of national boundaries to save their race from destruction, and preserve its ideals for posterity…. White men have begun to realize that as women are the backbone of the home, so can they, by their economic experience and their aptitude for details participate effectively in guiding the destiny of nation and race.

No line of endeavor remains closed for long to the modern woman. She agitates for equal opportunities and gets them; she makes good on the job and gains the respect of men who heretofore opposed her. She prefers to be a bread-winner than a half-starved wife at home. She is not afraid of hard work and by being independent she gets more out of the present-day husband than her grandmother did in the good old days.

The women of the East, both yellow and black, are slowly, but surely imitating the women of the Western world, and as the white women are bolstering up a decaying white civilization, even so women of the darker races are sallying forth to help their men establish a civilization according to their own standards, and to strive for world leadership.

Even though black women leaders urged black women to assume as active a role as black men in the struggle to end racism, underlying their call for action was the assumption that social equality of the sexes was a secondary consideration.

From the beginning of the women's rights movement, its staunch supporters had argued that social equality for women was a necessary step for patriotic nation-building. They stressed that women were not opposing the U.S. political or social order, but simply wanted to actively support the existing system of government. This attitude always threatened the occasional political solidarity that existed between black and white women's rights activists. To white women, full participation in the growth of the U.S. as a nation often included acceptance and support of white racial imperialism, while black women, even those who were most politically conservative, were often obliged to denounce the nation because of its racist policies. Eventually both groups of women allowed racial alliances to supersede feminist struggle. Racial segregation remained the norm in most women's organizations and clubs in the 30s and 40s. From 1940 to 1960, most women's groups did not emphasize women's liberation; women bonded together for social or professional reasons. Barbara Deckard, author of The Women's Movement, contends that there was no organized women's liberation movement from 1940 to 1960 and gave as an explanation these reasons:

One reason was the limited ideology and elite class base of the suffragists. So strongly had they emphasized the vote, and only the vote, that their successors—like the League of Women Voters—could declare in the 1920's that there was no more discrimination against women and that liberal women should merely fight for general reforms for all people. The sole successor to the most militant suffragists—the Women's Party—was narrow in other ways. It continued to fight for equal legal rights but paid little or no attention to women's inferior position in the family, to the exploitation of

women workers, or to the special problems of black women. This lack of interest in the major social, economic, and racial issues alienated radical women, while the hostile social atmosphere prevented them from winning over the moderate women.

By the mid-1920's, the relative stability of capitalism, the disappearance of the small radical farmer, the red-baiting and the internal splits, destroyed the Socialist and Progressive parties and brought a period of conservatism hostile to the women's movement. The radicalism of the
1930's concentrated on unemployment and, in the late 1930's, on the threat of war with fascism to the practical exclusion of all other issues. Again, during the war other issues could not be raised. The postwar 1946-1960 period was a time of U.S. economic expansion and world dominance, of the cold war and super-patriotism ensured by the witch hunting of McCarthyism. All radical and liberal groups suffered repression: and possible women's liberation causes—such as child care—were smothered with the rest.

In the forty years from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s black female leaders no longer advocated women's rights. The struggle for black liberation and the struggle for women's liberation were seen as inimical largely because black civil rights leaders did not want the white American public to see their demands for full citizenship as synonymous with a radical demand for equality of the sexes. They made black liberation synonymous with gaining full participation in the existing patriarchal nation-state and their demands were for the elimination of racism, not capitalism or patriarchy. Just as white women had publicly disavowed any political connection with black people when they believed that such an

alliance was inimical to their interests, black women disassociated themselves from feminist struggle when they were convinced that to appear feminist, i.e. radical, would hurt the cause of black liberation. Black men and women wanted entrance into the mainstream of American life. To gain that entrance they felt it was necessary for them to be conservative.

Black women's organizations, which at one time had concentrated on social services like child care, homes for working women and help for prostitutes, became de-politicized and focused more on social affairs like debutante balls and fundraisers. Black women club members imitated the behavior of middle class white women. Those black women who believed in social equality of the sexes learned to suppress their opinions for fear attention might be shifted from racial issues. They believed they should first support freedom for black people, then later, when that freedom was obtained, work for women's rights. Unfortunately, they did not foresee the strength of black male resistance to the idea that women should have equal status with men.

When the Civil Rights Movement began, black women participated but they did not strive to overshadow black male leaders. When the movement ended, the U.S. public remembered the names of Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Phillip Randolph, and Roy Wilkins but forgot the names of Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates and Fannie Lou Hamer. The 50s leaders of the black civil rights movement, like their 19th century predecessors, made it known that they were eager to establish communities and families using the same pattern as whites. Following the example of white male patriarchs, black men

were obsessively concerned with asserting their masculinity while black women imitated the behavior of white women and were obsessive about femininity. An obvious change took place in black sex-role patterns. Black people no longer passively accepted that racial oppression has always forced the black female to be as independent and hardworking as black men; they were demanding that she be more passive, subordinate, and preferably unemployed.

The 50s socialization of black women to assume a more subordinate role in relation to black men occurred as part of an overall effort in the U.S. to brainwash women so as to reverse the effects of World War II. As a result of the war, white and black women had been compelled to be independent, assertive, and hardworking. White men, like black men, wanted to see all women be less assertive, dependent, and unemployed. Mass media was the weapon used to destroy the new-found independence of women. White and black women alike were subjected to endless propaganda which encouraged them to believe that a woman's place was in the home—that her fulfillment in life depended on finding the right man to marry and producing a family. If women were compelled by circumstance to work, they were told that it was better if they didn't compete with men and confined themselves to jobs like teaching and nursing.

The working woman, be she black or white, found it necessary to prove her femininity. Often she developed two demeanors: though she might be assertive and independent on the job, at home she was passive and pleasing. More than ever before in U.S. history, black women were obsessed with pursuing the ideal of femininity described on television, in

books and magazines. An emerging black middle class meant that groups of black females had more money than ever before to spend buying fashions, cosmetics, or reading magazines like McCall's and Ladies Home Journal. Masses of black women who at one time were proud of their ability to work outside the home and yet be good housewives and mothers became discontented with their lot. They wanted only to be housewives and expressed openly their rage and hostility toward black men—a hostility that emerged because they were convinced black men were not striving hard enough to assume the role of sole economic provider in the home so that they could be housewives. Popular sayings of the time like "a black man ain't shit," "the nigger ain't no good," were expressions of black female contempt for black men.

Clearly black women wanted to be in a position to fully participate in the 50s pursuit of "idealized femininity" and resented black men for not aiding them in this quest. They measured black men against a standard set by white males. Since whites defined "achieving manhood" as the ability of a man to be a sole economic provider in a family, many black females tended to regard the black male as a "failed" man. In retaliation, black men openly asserted that they perceived white women as more feminine than black women. Both black females and males were uncertain about their womanhood and manhood. They were both striving to adapt themselves to standards set by the dominant white society. When black women failed for whatever reason to assume a passive subordinate role in relationship to black men, the men became angry. When black men failed to assume the role of sole economic provider in the home, black women were angry.

The tensions and conflicts that emerged in black male/female relationships were dramatized by the 1959 production of Lorraine Hansberry's award-winning play A Raisin in the Sun. Conflict prevails in the black male Walter Lee's relationship to his mother and wife. In one scene, as Walter tells his wife Ruth how he intends to spend his mother's insurance money, she refuses to listen; he becomes angry and yells:

Walter: That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world… don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something.

Ruth: There are colored men who do things.

Walter: No thanks to the colored woman.

Ruth: Well, being a colored woman, I guess I can't help myself none.

Walter: We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds.

The mother in Raisin in the Sun is the dominant figure in the home and Walter Lee complains endlessly that she thwarts his assertion of his manhood, that she is a tyrant who forcibly bends him to her will. In the course of the play, Walter Lee is portrayed as irresponsible and unworthy of his mother's trust and respect. She does not respect his assertion of manhood because he acts in an immature manner. However, at the end of the play when he acts in a responsible manner, the mother automatically assumes a subordinate position. The message of

the play was twofold. On the one hand, it portrayed the strength and self-sacrificing nature of the single black mother working to ensure the survival of her family, and on the other hand, it stressed the importance of the black male assuming his proper place as patriarch in the home. The mother's way of life is a thing of the past. Walter Lee and Ruth are harbingers of the future. The future black family they portray is the two-parent nuclear set-up wherein man assumes a patriarchal role, the role of decision maker, protector, and upholder of family pride and honor.

Lorraine Hansberry's play was a foretelling of future conflicts between black women and men over the issue of sex-role patterns. This conflict was exaggerated and brought to public attention by the 1965 publication of Danial Moynihan's report The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. In his report Moynihan argued that the black American family was being undermined by female dominance. He claimed that racist discrimination against black men in the work force caused black
families to have a matriarchal structure which he asserted was out of line with the white American norm, the patriarchal family structure, and that this prevented the black race from being accepted into the mainstream of American life. Moynihan's message was similar to that of black women who admonished black men for not assuming the patriarchal role. The difference in the two perspectives was that Moynihan placed a measure of the responsibility for the black male's inability to assume a patriarchal role on black women, whereas black women felt that racism and black male indifference were the forces that caused black men to reject the role of sole economic provider.

By labeling black women matriarchs, Moynihan implied that those black women who worked and headed households were the enemies of black manhood. Even though Moynihan's supposition that the black family was matriarchal was based on data that showed that only one-fourth of all black families in America were female-headed households, he used this figure to make generalizations about black families as a whole. His generalizations about black family structure, though erroneous, had a tremendous impact upon the black male psyche. Like the American white male in the 50s and 60s, black men were concerned that all women were becoming too assertive and domineering.

The notion that modern women were emasculating men had its origin not in the conflict between black women and black men over sex-role patterns but in the overall conflict in American society over the issue of sex roles. Women as castrator was an image first evoked not in reference to black women and certainly not by Daniel Moynihan; it was popularized by certain psychoanalysts who had their heyday in the 50s. They imposed upon the consciousness of the American public the notion that any career woman, any woman who competed with men, was envious of male power and was likely to be a castrating bitch.

Black women came to be depicted as female castrators par excellence, though not because they were inherently more assertive and independent than white women. History shows that
white women were actively competing in the male-dominated power structure long before black women because there was no racial barrier to make entrance into that sphere completely impossible. Black women became the target for many

misogynist attacks on female independence largely because of racist scapegoating. Just as the 19th century white public had portrayed black women as embodying all negative traits that were usually attributed to the female sex as a whole while portraying white women as embodying all positive traits, the 20th century white public continued this practice. They idealized and elevated the status of the white female group by debasing and degrading the black female group. Daniel Moynihan did not attempt to document the fact that the so-called "matriarchal" role black women assumed in the female-headed household was the same as the one white women assumed in the female-headed household. Instead, he continued to perpetuate one of the United States' most popular sexist-racist myths about black womanhood—the myth that black women are inherently more assertive, independent, and domineering than white women.

Sexist ideology was the core of the matriarchy myth. Implicit in the assertion that black women were matriarchs was the assumption that patriarchy should be maintained at all costs and that the subordination of the female was necessary for the healthy achievement of manhood. In effect, Moynihan suggested that the negative effects of racist oppression of black people could be eliminated if black females were more passive, subservient and supportive of patriarchy. Once again, woman's liberation was presented as inimical to black liberation.

The extent to which black men absorbed this ideology was made evident in the 60s black liberation movement. Black male leaders of the movement made the liberation of black people from racist oppression synonymous with their gaining the right to assume the role of patriarch, of sexist oppressor.

By allowing white men to dictate the terms by which they would define black liberation, black men chose to endorse sexist exploitation and oppression of black women. And in so doing they were compromised. They were not liberated from the system but liberated to serve the system. The movement ended and the system had not changed; it was no less racist or sexist.

Like black men, many black women believed black liberation could only be achieved by the formation of a strong black patriarchy. Many of the black women interviewed in Inez Smith Reid's book Together Black Women, published in 1972, openly stated that they felt the role of the female should be a supportive one and that the male ought to be the dominant figure in all black liberation struggles. Typical black female responses were:

I think the woman should be behind the man. The man should be up first before the woman because Black woman has been over Black man through time in this country. Through no fault of their own they acquired better jobs and better status. They weren't equal to the White men and women but they were above Black men. And now that the revolution is taking place socially I think Black women shouldn't be foremost in the life. I think it should be Black men 'cause men represent the symbol of the races.

or:

I think a Black female can be one of the greatest assets in the revolution or in the struggle. I think black women have a history of perseverance and strength. I would not like to see that strength turn into domineering tendencies or bossism but

I do think we can be that silent strength that the Black man needs to fight the battle for his wife or his woman and his family.

A large number of black women, many who were young, college-educated, and middle class, were seduced in the 60s and 70s by the romanticized concept of idealized womanhood first popularized during the Victorian age. They stressed that woman's role was that of a helpmate to her man. And for the first time in the history of black civil rights movements, black women did not struggle equally with black men. Writing of the 60s black movement in Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, Michelle Wallace comments:

Misogyny was an integral part of Black Macho. Its philosophy, which maintained that black men had been more oppressed than black women, that black women had, in fact, contributed to that oppression, that black men were sexually and morally superior and also exempt from most
of the responsibilities human beings had to other human beings, could only be detrimental to black women. But black women were determined to believe—even as their own guts were telling them it was not so—that they were finally on the verge of liberation from the spectre of the omnipotent blonde with the rosebud lips and the cheese-cake legs. They would no longer have to admire another woman on the pedestal. The pedestal would be theirs. They would no longer have to do their own fighting. They would be fought for. The knight in white armor would ride for them. The beautiful fairy princess would be black.

The women of the Black Movement had little sense of the contradictions in their desire to be models of fragile Victorian

womanhood in the midst of revolution. They wanted a house, a picket fence around it, a chicken in the pot, and a man. As they saw it, their only officially designated revolutionary responsibility was to have babies.

Not all black women succumbed to the sexist brainwashing that was so much a part of black liberation rhetoric, but those who did not received no attention. People in the U.S. were fascinated with the image of the black female—strong, fierce, and independent—meekly succumbing to a passive role, in fact longing to be in a passive role.

Although Angela Davis became a female heroine of the 60s movement, she was admired not for her political commitment to the Communist party, not for any of her brilliant analyses of capitalism and racial imperialism, but for her beauty, for her devotion to black men. The American public was not willing to see the "political" Angela Davis; instead they made of her a poster pinup. In general, black people did not approve of her communism and refused to take it seriously. Wallace writes of Angela Davis:

For all her achievements, she was seen as the epitome of the selfless, sacrificing "good woman"—the only kind of black woman the Movement would accept. She did it for her man, they said. A woman in a womans place. The so-called political issues were irrelevant.

Contemporary black women who supported patriarchal dominance placed their submission to the status quo in the context of racial politics and argued that they were willing to accept a subordinate role in relationship to black men for the good of the race. They were indeed a new generation of black

females—a generation that had been brainwashed not by black revolutionaries but by white society, by the media, to believe that woman's place was in the home. They were the first generation of black women to face competition with white women for the attention of black men. Many of them accepted black male sexism solely because they were afraid of being alone, of not having male companions. The fear of being alone, or of being unloved, had caused women of all races to passively accept sexism and sexist oppression. There was nothing unique or new about the black woman's willingness to accept the sexist-defined female role. The 60s black movement simply became a background in which their acceptance of sexism, or patriarchy, could be announced to the white public that was so convinced that black women were more likely to be assertive and domineering than white women.

Contrary to popular opinion, the sexual politics of the 50s socialized black women to conform to sexist-defined role patterns—not the black macho of the 70s. Black mothers of the 50s had taught their daughters that they should not be proud to work, that they should educate themselves in case they did not find that man who would be the most important force in their lives, who would provide for and protect them. With such a legacy it was not surprising that college-educated black women were embracing patriarchy. The 60s black movement simply exposed a support of sexism and patriarchy that already existed in the black community—it did not create it. Writing of the black woman's response to the 60s civil rights struggle, Michelle Wallace comments:

The black woman never really dealt with the primary issues of the Black movement. She stopped straightening her hair.

She stopped using lighteners and brighteners. She forced herself to be submissive and passive. She preached to her children about the glories of the black man. But then, suddenly, the Black movement was over. Now she has begun to straighten her hair again, to follow the latest fashions in Vogue and Mademoiselle, to rouge her cheeks furiously, and to speak, not infrequently, of what a disappointment
the black man has been. She has little contact with other black women, and if she does, it is not of a deep sort. The discussion is generally of clothes, makeup, furniture, and men. Privately she does whatever she can to stay out of that surplus of black women (one million) who will never find mates. And if she doesn't find a man, she might just decide to have a baby anyway.

Now that an organized black civil rights movement no longer exists, black women do not find it necessary to place their willingness to assume a sexist-defined role in the context of black liberation; so it is much more obvious that their support of patriarchy was not engendered solely by their concern for the black race but by the fact that they live in a culture in which the majority of women support and accept patriarchy.

When the movement toward feminism began in the late 60s, black women rarely participated as a group. Since the dominant white patriarchy and black male patriarchy conveyed to black women the message that to cast a vote in favor of social equality of the sexes, i.e. women's liberation, was to cast a vote against black liberation, they were initially suspicious of the white woman's call for a feminist movement. Many black women refused to participate in the movement because they had no desire to fight against sexism. Theirs was not an unusual stance. The great majority of

women in the U.S. did not participate in the women's movement for the same reason. White men were among the first observers of the women's movement to call attention to the absence of black women participants, but they did so solely to mock and ridicule the efforts of white feminists. They smugly questioned the credibility of a women's liberation movement that could not attract women from the most oppressed female groups in American society. They were among the first critics of feminism to raise the question of white female racism. In response, white women liberationists urged black and other non-white women to join their ranks. Those black women who were most vehemently anti-feminist were the most eager to respond. Their stance came to be depicted as the black female position on womens liberation. They expressed their views in essays like Ida Lewis' "Women's Rights, Why the Struggle Still Goes On," Linda
LaRue's "Black Liberation and Womens Lib," "Women's Liberation Has No Soul," first published in Encore magazine, and Renee Fergueson's "Women's Liberation Has a Different Meaning for Blacks." Linda LaRue's comments on women's liberation were often quoted as if they were the definitive black female response to women's liberation:

Let it be stated unequivocally that the American white woman has had a better opportunity to live a free and fulfilling life, both mentally and physically, than any other group in the United States, excluding her white husband. Thus any attempt to analogize black oppression with the plight of American white women has all the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the rope-burned hands of an amateur mountain climber.

In their essays, black female anti-feminists revealed hatred and envy of white women. They expended their energy attacking white women liberationists, not by offering any convincing evidence that would support their claim that black women had no need of women's liberation. Black sociologist Joyce Ladner expressed her views on women's liberation in her study of black women Tomorrow's Tomorrow:

Many black women who have traditionally accepted the white models of femininity are now rejecting them for the same general reasons that we should reject the white middle-class lifestyle. Black women in this society are the only ethnic or radical group which has had the opportunity to be women. By this I simply mean that much of the current focus on being liberated from the constraints and protectiveness of the society which is proposed by women's liberation groups has never applied to Black women, and in that sense, we have always been "free," and able to develop as individuals even under the most harsh circumstances. This freedom, as well as the tremendous hardships from which black women suffered, allowed for the development of a personality that is rarely described in the scholarly journals for its obstinate strength and ability to survive. Neither is its peculiar humanistic character and quiet courage viewed as the epitome of what the American model of femininity should be.

Ladner's assertion that black women were "free" became one of the accepted explanations for black female refusal to participate
in a women's liberation movement. But such an assertion merely reveals that black women who were most quick to dismiss women's liberation had not thought seriously about feminist struggle. For while white women may have seen

feminism as a way to free themselves from the constraints imposed upon them by idealized concepts of femininity, black women could have seen feminism as a way to free themselves from constraints that sexism clearly imposed on their behavior. Only a very naive unenlightened person could confidently state that black women in the U.S. are a liberated female group. The black women who patted themselves on the back for being "already liberated" were really acknowledging their acceptance of sexism and their contentment with patriarchy.

The concentrated focus on black anti-feminist thought was so pervasive that black women who supported feminism and participated in the effort to establish a feminist movement rectived little attention, if any. For every black anti-feminist article written and published, there existed a pro-feminist black female position. Essays like Cellestine Ware's "Black Feminism," Shirley Chisholm's "Women Must Rebel," Mary Ann Weather's "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force," and Pauli Murray's "The Liberation of Black Women" all expressed black female support of feminism.

As a group, black women were not opposed to social equality between the sexes but they were not eager to join with white women to organize a feminist movement. The 1972 Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll showed that more black women supported changes in the status of women in society than white women. Yet their support of feminist issues did not lead them as a collective group to actively participate in the women's liberation movement. Two explanations are usually given to explain their lack of participation. The first is that the 60s black movement

encouraged black women to assume a subservient role and caused them to reject feminism. The second is that black women were, as one white woman liberationist put it, "repelled by the racial and class composition of the women's movement." Taken at face value these reasons seem adequate. Examined in a historical context in which black women have rallied in support of women's
rights despite pressure from black men to assume a subordinate position, and despite the fact that white middle and upper class women have dominated every women's movement in the U.S., they seem inadequate. While they do provide justification for the anti-feminist black female position, they do not explain why black women who support feminist ideology refuse to participate fully in the contemporary women's movement.

Initially, black feminists approached the women's movement white women had organized eager to join the struggle to end sexist oppression. We were disappointed and disillusioned when we discovered that white women in the movement had little knowledge of or concern for the problems of lower class and poor women or the particular problems of non-white women from all classes. Those of us who were active in women's groups found that white feminists lamented the absence of large numbers of non-white participants but were unwilling to change the movement's focus so that it would better address the needs of women from all classes and races. Some white women even argued that groups not represented by a numerical majority could not expect their concerns to be given attention. Such a position reinforced the black female participants' suspicion that white participants wanted the movement to concentrate on the concerns not of women as a

collective group, but on the individual concerns of the small minority who had organized the movement.

Black feminists found that sisterhood for most white women did not mean surrendering allegiance to race, class, and sexual preference, to bond on the basis of the shared political belief that a feminist revolution was necessary so that all people, especially women, could reclaim their rightful citizenship in the world. From our peripheral position in the movement we saw that the potential radicalism of feminist ideology was being undermined by women who, while paying lip service to revolutionary goals, were primarily concerned with gaining entrance into the capitalist patriarchal power structure. Although white feminists denounced the white male, calling him an imperialist, capitalist, sexist, racist pig, they made women's liberation synonymous with women obtaining the
right to fully participate in the very system they identified as oppressive. Their anger was not merely a response to sexist oppression. It was an expression of their jealousy and envy of white men who held positions of power in the system while they were denied access to those positions.

Individual black feminists despaired as we witnessed the appropriation of feminist ideology by elitist, racist white women. We were unable to usurp leadership positions within the movement so that we could spread an authentic message of feminist revolution. We could not even get a hearing at women's groups because they were organized and controlled by white women. Along with politically aware white women, we, black feminists, began to feel that no organized feminist struggle really existed. We dropped out of groups, weary of hearing talk about women as a force that could change the

world when we had not changed ourselves. Some black women formed "black feminist" groups which resembled in almost every way the groups they had left. Others struggled alone. Some of us continued to go to organizations, women's studies classes, or conferences, but were not fully participating.

For ten years now I have been an active feminist. I have been working to destroy the psychology of dominance that permeates Western culture and shapes female/male sex roles and I have advocated reconstruction of U.S. society based on human rather than material values. I have been a student in women's studies classes, a participant in feminist seminars, organizations, and various women's groups. Initially I believed that the women who were active in feminist activities were concerned about sexist oppression and its impact on women as a collective group. But I became disillusioned as I saw various groups of women appropriating feminism to serve their own opportunistic ends. Whether it was women university professors crying sexist oppression (rather than sexist discrimination) to attract attention to their efforts to gain promotion; or women using feminism to mask their sexist attitudes; or women writers superficially exploring feminist themes to advance their own careers, it was evident that eliminating sexist oppression was not the primary concern. While their rallying cry was sexist oppression, they showed little concern
about the status of women as a collective group in our society. They were primarily interested in making feminism a forum for the expression of their own self-centered needs and desires. Not once did they entertain the possibility that their concerns might not represent the concerns of oppressed women.

Even as I witnessed the hypocricy of feminists, I clung to the hope that increased participation of women from different races and classes in feminist activities would lead to a re-evaluation of feminism, radical reconstruction of feminist ideology, and the launching of a new movement that would more adequately address the concerns of both women and men. I was not willing to see white women feminists as "enemies." Yet as I moved from one women's group to another trying to offer a different perspective, I met with hostility and resentment. White women liberationists saw feminism as "their" movement and resisted any efforts by non-white women to critique, challenge, or change its direction.

During this time, I was struck by the fact that the ideology of feminism, with its emphasis on transforming and changing the social structure of the U.S., in no way resembled the actual reality of American feminism. Largely because feminists themselves, as they attempted to take feminism beyond the realm of radical rhetoric into the sphere of American life, revealed that they remained imprisoned in the very structures they hoped to change. Consequently, the sisterhood we talked about has not become a reality. And the women's movement we envisioned would have a transformative effect on U.S. culture has not emerged. Instead, the hierarchical pattern of sex-race relationships already established by white capitalist patriarchy merely assumed a different form under feminism. Women liberationists did not invite a wholistic analysis of woman's status in society that would take into consideration the varied aspects of our experience. In their eagerness to promote the idea of sisterhood, they ignored the complexity of woman's experience. While claiming to liberate women from biological

determinism, they denied women an existence outside that determined by our sexuality. It did not serve the interest of upper and middle class white feminists to discuss race and class.

Consequently, much feminist literature, while providing meaningful information concerning women's experiences, is both racist and sexist in its content. I say this not to condemn or dismiss. Each time I read a feminist book that is racist and sexist, I feel a sadness and an anguish of spirit. For to know that there thrives in the very movement that has claimed to liberate women endless snares that bind us tighter and tighter to old oppressive ways is to witness the failure of yet another potentially radical, transformative movement in our society.

Although the contemporary feminist movement was initially motivated by the sincere desire of women to eliminate sexist oppression, it takes place within the framework of a larger, more powerful cultural system that encourages women and men to place the fulfillment of individual aspirations above their desire for collective change. Given this framework, it is not surprising that feminism has been undermined by the narcissism, greed, and individual opportunism of its leading exponents. A feminist ideology that mouths radical rhetoric about resistance and revolution while actively seeking to establish itself within the capitalist patriarchal system is essentially corrupt. While the contemporary feminist movement has successfully stimulated an awareness of the impact of sexist discrimination on the social status of women in the U.S., it has done little to eliminate sexist oppression. Teaching women how to defend themselves against male rapists is not the same as working to change society so that men will not rape. Establishing houses for battered women does not change the psyches of the men who batter them, nor

does it change the culture that promotes and condones their brutality. Attacking heterosexuality does little to strengthen the self-concept of the masses of women who desire to be with men. Denouncing housework as menial labor does not restore to the woman houseworker the pride and dignity in her labor she is stripped of by patriarchal devaluation. Demanding an end to institutionalized sexism does not ensure an end to sexist oppression.

The rhetoric of feminism with its emphasis on resistance, rebellion, and revolution created an illusion of militancy and radicalism that masked the fact that feminism was in no way a challenge or a threat to capitalist patriarchy. To perpetuate the notion that all men are creatures of privilege with access to a personal fulfillment and a personal liberation denied women, as feminists do, is to lend further credibility to the sexist mystique of male power that proclaims all that is male is inherently superior to that which is female. A feminism so rooted in envy, fear, and idealization of male power cannot expose the de-humanizing effect of sexism on men and women in American society. Today, feminism offers women not liberation but the right to act as surrogate men. It has not provided a blueprint for change that would lead to the elimination of sexist oppression or a transformation of our society. The women's movement has become a kind of ghetto or concentration camp for women who are seeking to attain the kind of power they feel men have. It provides a forum for the expression of their feelings of anger, jealousy, rage, and disappointment with men. It provides an atmosphere where women who have little in common, who may resent or even feel indifferent to one another can bond on the basis of shared negative feelings toward men. Finally, it gives women of all races, who desire to assume the imperialist, sexist, racist

positions of destruction men hold with a platform that allows them to act as if the attainment of their personal aspirations and their lust for power is for the common good of all women.

Right now, women in the U.S. are witnessing the demise of yet another women's rights movement. The future of collective feminist struggle is bleak. The women who appropriated feminism to advance their own opportunistic causes have achieved their desired ends and are no longer interested in feminism as a political ideology. Many women who remain active in women's rights groups and organizations stubbornly refuse to critique the distorted analysis of woman's lot in society popularized by women's liberation. Since these women are not oppressed they can support a feminist movement that is reformist, racist, and classist because they see no urgent need for radical change. Although women in the U.S. have come closer to obtaining social equality with men, the capitalist-patriarchal system is unchanged. It is still imperialist, racist, sexist, and oppressive.

The recent women's movement failed to adequately address the issue of sexist oppression, but that failure does not change the fact that it exists, that we are victimized by it to varying degrees, nor does it free any of us from assuming responsibility for change. Many black women are daily victimized by sexist oppression. More often than not we bear our pain in silence, patiently waiting for a change to come. But neither passive acceptance nor stoic endurance lead to change. Change occurs only when there is action, movement, revolution. The 19th century black female was a woman of action. Her suffering, the harshness of her lot in a racist, sexist world, and her concern for the plight of others

motivated her to join feminist struggle. She did not allow the racism of white women's rights advocates or the sexism of black men to deter her from political involvement. She did not rely on any group to provide her with a blueprint for change. She was a maker of blueprints. In an address given before an audience of women in 1892 Anna Cooper proudly voiced the black woman's perspective on feminism:

Let woman's claim be as broad in the concrete as in the abstract. We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritism, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. If one link of the chain is broken, the chain is broken. A bridge is no stronger than its weakest part, and a cause is not worthier than its weakest element. Least of all can woman's cause afford to decry the weak. We want, then, as toilers for the universal triumph of justice and human rights, to go to our homes from this Congress demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, our sex, or our sect, but a grand highway for humanity. The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that not till the image of God whether in parian or ebony, is sacred and inviolable; not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's cause won— not the white woman's, nor the black woman's, nor the red woman's, but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. Woman's
wrongs are thus indissolubly linked with all undefended woe, and the acquirement of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral

forces of reason, and justice, and love in the government of the nations of earth.

Cooper spoke for herself and thousands of other black women who had been born into slavery, who because they had been severely victimized, felt a compassion and a concern for the plight of all oppressed peoples. Had all women's rights advocates shared their sentiments the feminist movement in the U.S. would be truly radical and transformative.

Feminism is an ideology in the making. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the term "feminism" was first used in the latter part of the 19th century and it was defined as having the "qualities of females." The meaning of the term has been gradually transformed and the 20th century dictionary definition of feminism is a "theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes." To many women this definition is inadequate. In the introduction to The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism Barbara Berg defines feminism as a "broad movement embracing numerous phases of woman's emancipation." She further states:

It is the freedom to decide her own destiny; freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely to actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that woman's essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life.

Her expanded definition of feminism is useful but limited. Many women have found that neither the struggle for "social equality" nor the focus on an "ideology of woman as an autonomous being" are enough to rid society of sexism and male domination. To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will 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. Writers of a feminist pamphlet published anonymously in 1976 urged women to develop political consciousness:

In all these struggles we must be assertive and challenging, combating the deep-seated tendency in Americans to be liberal, that is, to evade struggling over questions of principle for fear of creating tensions or becoming unpopular. Instead we must live by the fundamental dialectical principle: that progress comes only from struggling to resolve contradictions.

It is a contradiction that white females have structured a women's liberation movement that is racist and excludes many non-white women. However, the existence of that contradiction should not lead any woman to ignore feminist issues. Oftentimes I am asked by black women to explain why I would call myself a feminist and by using that term ally myself with a movement that is racist. I say, "The question we must ask again and again is how can racist women call themselves feminists." It is obvious that many women have

appropriated feminism to serve their own ends, especially those white women who have been at the forefront of the movement; but rather than resigning myself to this appropriation I choose to re-appropriate the term "feminism," to focus on the fact that to be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression.

Today masses of black women in the U.S. refuse to acknowledge that they have much to gain by feminist struggle. They fear feminism. They have stood in place so long that they are afraid to move. They fear change. They fear losing what little they have. They are afraid to openly confront white feminists with their racism or black males with their sexism, not to mention confronting white men with their racism and sexism. I have sat in many a kitchen and heard black women express a belief in feminism and eloquently critique the women's movement explaining their refusal to participate. I have witnessed their refusal to express these same views in a
public setting. I know their fear exists because they have seen us trampled upon, raped, abused, slaughtered, ridiculed and mocked. Only a few black women have rekindled the spirit of feminist struggle that stirred the hearts and minds of our 19th 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 they see us reach our goal—no longer victimized, no longer unrecognized, no longer afraid— they will take courage and follow.