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HOW BLACK FEMINISM TAKES PLACE: INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVISM
AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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and Cultural Production in the New Millennium

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This dissertation explores how younger generations of Black feminists interpret, collaborate with, and engage with the ideas and ideals of their so-called “Second Wave” Black feminist fore-sisters. Many of these women, including Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Angela Davis, and Johnnetta Cole, remain enormously influential and continue to organize, write, teach, and produce art and scholarship. The late Audre Lorde, the “black, lesbian, warrior, poet, mother” who integrally claimed and celebrated all of her differences is arguably one of the world’s most revered and cited Black feminist theorists in this the 86th anniversary of her birth. Intergenerational Black feminists—and people of all colors throughout the world—study, celebrate, and teach her words and ideas. Throughout this study, I consider how Lorde’s ideas are a touchstone for intergenerational Black feminist activism and cultural production in the new millennium. My research lies at the intersection of African American feminism, cultural studies, Women of Color feminisms, and Black Queer Studies. I engage with scholarship in the arenas of literary criticism, history, cinema, visual culture, political science, philosophy, sociology, as well as legal scholars of the Critical Race Movement. I also consider my own location within this debate.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother **Joan Sandler**, a first generation, self-invented arts administrator who influenced and helped so many in the Black Arts Movement and beyond, and whose love has meant so much to me, and to the late **Dr. Cheryl Wall**, a leading pioneering scholar of African American women's literature and the former Chair of my Dissertation Committee, who provided me with tremendous encouragement and feedback.

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How Black Feminism Takes Place: Intergenerational Activism and Cultural Production in the New Millennium

by Kathe Sandler

Introduction

Our projects to create online and in-person spaces for Black feminist conversation honor and supplement the rich tapestry of Black feminism that has come before us. We are the new thread connecting patches in a well worn quilt, both tactile and virtual. We believe that our ancestors knew we were coming, and that our elders, communities, students and future comrades have demands on us that require a fully interactive frame. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

--Moya Bailey and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. *Ms.* Winter 2010. (41-42)

My dissertation is the first major study of how intergenerational Black feminists create and sustain spaces that nurture Black feminist theory, activism, and cultural production in the new millennium. Over the past half century African American feminists have illuminated the ways that not only White supremacy but also Black patriarchy, misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia undermine and under develop Black communities. Black feminists have constructed an alternative vision of Black freedom centering African American feminist politics that has gained increased visibility through activism, literature, scholarship, cinema, and social media.

Borrowing from cultural studies scholar George Lipsitz in *How Racism Takes Place*, I explore a distinct and diverse Black feminist spatial imaginary created by artists, intellectuals, and activists who challenge hegemonic gendered racism, homophobia, and sexism through cultural production. Lipsitz contends that distinct transgressive Black spaces are socially produced in opposition to oppressive White spaces which exclude and/or marginalize African Americans. Such Black spaces, he asserts, have the capacity

to nurture oppositional antiracist Black cultural production. I argue that transgressive Black feminist spaces are also socially produced both within and outside of heterosexist and patriarchal Black spaces. Such spaces nurture and sustain Black feminist cultural production, including feminist theory, activism, practice, scholarship, and culture. My dissertation examines several critical spaces where intergenerational Black feminism takes place in the new millennium.

This study explores how younger generations of Black feminists interpret, collaborate with, and engage with the ideas and ideals of their so-called “Second Wave” Black feminist fore-sisters. Many of these women, including Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Angela Davis, and Johnnetta Cole, remain enormously influential and continue to organize, write, teach, and produce art and scholarship. The late Audre Lorde, the “black, lesbian, warrior, poet, mother” who integrally claimed and celebrated all of her differences is arguably one of the world’s most revered and cited Black feminist theorists in this the 86th anniversary of her birth. Intergenerational Black feminists—and people of all colors throughout the world—study, celebrate, and teach her words and ideas. Throughout this study, I consider the ways that Lorde’s ideas are a touchstone for intergenerational Black feminist activism and cultural production in the new millennium.

My research lies at the intersection of African American feminism, cultural studies, Women of Color feminisms, and Black Queer Studies and The Black Lives Matter Movement. I engage with scholarship in the arenas of literary criticism, history, cinema and media studies, visual culture, political science, philosophy, sociology, as well as legal scholars of the Critical Race Movement. In recent years I have increasingly

turned to websites, blogs, and social media including The Feminist Wire, Racialicious, Quirky Black Girls, The Crunk Feminist Collective, Colorlines, and The Model Minority, among others. I interpret my African American feminist inquiries through this expansive and interdisciplinary range of scholarship, media and artistic production. I also consider my own location within this debate.

My Path to Black Feminism

The modern Black Feminist Movement was well underway when I was growing up, yet I hardly knew it. I was eleven years old when the hugely popular book *The Black Woman: An Anthology* edited by Toni Cade (Bambara) was published in 1970. The anthology found a place on the bookshelves and kitchen tables of many households I knew including my own. Indeed, *The Black Woman* is widely considered one of the foundational texts of the Movement. The pocket-sized paperback included essays by a range of Black women activists and writers—Frances Beal, Gwen Patton, and Toni Cade (Bambara) herself that confronted sexism and patriarchy in the Black freedom movement, talked back to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s “Report on the Black Family,” challenged the notion that birth control was genocide, and called for a new understanding of masculinity and femininity.

However, I would soon be influenced by the anti-feminist propaganda that circulated in Black communities that tended to render invisible the participation of Black women in both mainstream women’s liberation movements and in Black women’s organizations. Unbeknownst to me all kinds of Black women were involved with “Women’s Lib” from Pauli Murray, Flo Kennedy, Aileen Hernandez and Shirley Chisholm. In fact, I was surrounded by Black women who performed feminist work

within Black movements and also in predominantly White ones. Historically, and without the intervention of Black feminist studies, it is possible to believe that Black women barely participated in feminism even while our own personal histories fly directly in the face of this notion.

My own personal path to naming myself as a Black feminist was a process with many detours despite my exposure to prominent Black feminists in my familial circle, as well as my consumption of important Black feminist texts and cultural production. As the daughter of leftist artist parents—an African American agnostic mother from Harlem and White Jewish American atheist father from Brooklyn, my slightly older sister Eve and I marched with our parents against the war in Vietnam, frequented antiracist rallies in Harlem, attended freedom schools for school decentralization, and experienced the painful split up of our parents in 1967, one year before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. As the Civil Rights Movement transformed into the more militant Black Power Movement our parents could no longer be together and that proved to be a transformative time for my mother Joan Sandler. The oldest daughter of transplanted North Carolinians, whose lived lives embodied the deferred dreams Langston Hughes described in the title poem Harlem, blossomed professionally, and invented herself as a first-generation arts administrator. She pioneered in developing funding and programs for diverse artists of color and worked internationally in a Pan-Africanist arts and intellectual movement as well.

More than ever, our apartment filled with artists, activists and intellectuals from throughout the country as well as the global Black diaspora. The people who passed through our large apartment on the borderline of Harlem and Washington Heights, often

stayed in my bedroom--I begrudgingly often slept on the couch--and many of them included a Who's Who of the Black left, as well as the arts world. Significantly, I now realize the importance of some these early family fixtures such as my parent's leftist friends from Mexico where I was born such as Harry Haywood, an African American communist who advocated for African American succession from the United States, and the noted sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlet who sculpted my mother and created prints of her image as well. From other shores there was Errol John, the Trinidadian playwright who wrote "Moon on A Rainbow Shawl" and others. However, I was closest to my New York based godmothers who were novelists, Rosa Guy and Louise Meriwether. Both wrote young adult novels about Black girls growing up in Harlem. Maya Angelou and poet Jayne Cortez—now with the ancestors—were part of my mother's social circle and we came to know writers, filmmakers, playwrights, and artists from Nigeria, Uganda, Mali, Britain, Jamaica, and Barbados, and Paris. St.Clair Bourne, the late documentary filmmaker, was also a family friend, who became my mentor in filmmaking a decade after I met him in the early 1970s.

My sister Eve and I were also exposed to a fairly steady stream of women who would call themselves Black feminists. One of them was my mother's girlhood friend Audre Lorde who, along with her children Elizabeth and Jono and her (also) White husband Jonathan, were a strong presence in our childhood. My mother often took me to hear Lorde read as a child and I loved her poetry. Briefly, we were with Audre in Nigeria in 1977 for Festac 77, the World Festival of Black Arts. My mother worked as the North American Coordinator and while there was no pay, she was able to bring her teenaged daughters along on the trip. It was a life changing experience. Audre was of course one of

the invited artists. She would later profile my mother Joan and father Al in her biomythography entitled *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. She would describe my parents by the pseudo-names Jean and Alf. Years later, I would recognize Audre as a major Black lesbian feminist theorist. As a Ph.D. candidate in recent years, I study, teach, and write about her and find myself emerging as an Audre Lorde scholar.

Other Black feminists Eve and I knew included my teenaged babysitter Michele Wallace and her artist mother Faith Ringgold. Though we lived within walking distance of each other in the Harlem/Washington Heights area, it was in Province Town, Massachusetts in the late 1960s where we spent time together with Michele, her sister Barbara and their mother Faith. Our mothers, stunning artistic Black women would party together at the folk, blues and rock music venues that “P-town” offered while Michele and her sister Barbara babysat my sister Eve and me. I had no clue that Michele would become one of the most visible and sadly demonized Black feminists of the late 1970s and 1980s. I did know that when Michele reviewed Ntozake Shange’s play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow Is Enuf (For Colored Girls)* in the Village Voice, that she was one of the few writers who actually discussed the content of the play as well as the public controversies that it engendered.

For Colored Girls as well as Alice Walker’s novel *Meridian* deeply influenced my gender politics by the time I became a freshman at the University of Massachusetts in 1976. We Black students referred to our school as the University of “Massissippi,” for there was a virulent anti-Black racism on that campus that resembled the concurrent racial dramas of 1976 Boston. I became very politically involved in Black student politics from the onset and edited the “Black Affairs” section of the paper. Most of my classes

were in the Department of African American studies in New Africa House where several classes on Black women were being offered.

Amongst Black students on my campus and some of the Black male faculty there were negative rumors about what I now know were some of the early offerings of Black women's studies taught by Black feminists. The classes were said to be filled with White women who dated Black men as well as lesbians who wanted to do "that Women's Stuff." And the Black women professors who taught them supposedly "didn't like Black men." Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, who later became the first woman President of Spelman College, had offered such a course at the New Africa House with the title "Black Women: Race, Sex and Class." While I was profoundly interested in studying about Black women, I decided not to take her class that spring for fear of being lumped together with White women who dated Black men, lesbians of any nationality, or a Black women professor who did not like Black men.

Though I had taken an introduction to African American studies course with Dr. Cole the preceding semester, I was particularly vulnerable to this antifeminist rhetoric as a very White looking Black biracial girl who had been raised by my parents and my extended African American family to be sure to show my Blackness to the world and particularly to other Black people. Taking this class seemed to detract from my larger existential mission, placed me at risk of being excommunicated from other possibly "more authentic" Black people and spoke to my patriarchal and heteronormative leanings. Sadly, I did not take the class. More than twenty years later I filmed Johnnetta Cole in a Black feminist "speak out" for my documentary on Black feminism and realized what I had missed.

After transferring to New York University for my undergraduate years, I completed a short award-winning film *Remembering Thelma* (1982) on the late dancer, teacher and mentor Thelma Hill, who had been one of the most sought instructor dance instructors in the country and a pillar in the development of Black concert dance. I embarked on the long term production of my first major documentary film *A Question of Color* in 1984. The film explores attitudes about skin color, hair texture and facial features in the African American community. In making *A Question of Color* I found that time and again in my research and interviews that both sexism and internalized racism were having a tremendous impact on Black women. And because I am a Black woman who looks like a White woman it was an issue which affected me a great deal. I became one of the twenty-four participants in the film, and my personal testimony served as a thread to telling the story.

I completed *A Question of Color* in 1993 and it opened theatrically at New York City's Film Forum and aired nationally over PBS primetime. The documentary became widely taught in universities and colleges throughout the country and abroad. My then-husband Luke Charles Harris was the film's co-writer and I benefitted tremendously from the tutelage of my Executive Producer—now deceased and so greatly missed--St.Clair Bourne. My sister Eve and Wayne Middleton served as Associate Producers and made major contributions. Whenever I screened *A Question of Color*, I began to speak about the need to confront and interrogate our community's sexism as well as our internalized racism. I increasingly wanted to create a film that could do that.

A series of events, but especially the debacle of Black male “leaders” planning a welcome home parade in Harlem in 1995 for convicted rapist Mike Tyson following his

release from federal prison transformed me. I teamed up with friends to stop the parade by staging a candlelight vigil for Black women who were victims of rape and gendered violence, the first of its kind held in Harlem. The Committee of Rational African Americans Against the Parade (with the acronym CRAP) was a brainchild of a Harlem couple Meg Henson and Jeff Scales, who were my friends of my sister Eve, who was now a visual artist and filmmaker as well. She designed an extraordinary fan, inspired by Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" which we marchers used to fan ourselves as well as onlookers as we marched and chanted the slogans printed on the fan. On one side the fans read "You Lose When You Abuse" and on the other side "Your Sister," or "Your Mother," or "Your Girlfriend," or "Your Friend."

However, in the process of marching 200 strong in our own community, we were jeered at by 800 or so fellow Harlemites who lined the streets between 135th Street and the Apollo Theatre on 125th Street. We were hissed and cussed at, booed, called "sell-outs", and told that we were "against the Black man." Though our vigil was successful—the parade was cancelled, and an important discussion ensued—I realized then how truly bad things were around gender in the Black community. I decided I needed to do something about this in my work.

One year later I was asked by Kimberlé Crenshaw to document a Black feminist retreat in Ossining, New York. The event was organized by Black feminists who had critiqued the Million Man March one year earlier for its exclusion of women. My former husband Luke Charles Harris was among them. He had been the sole Black man at the press conference in 1995 who sat on a podium with Angela Davis, Marcia Gillespie, Paula Giddings and a number of others. The ideas I heard at the retreat from Angela

Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Beth Ritchie, Barbara Ransby, and Cathy Cohen, among others, inspired and further radicalized me. Then and there in 1996, decades after reading *The Black Woman* and familial exposure to iconoclastic Black feminist writers, I finally declared myself a Black feminist. In 1999, I began production on *When and Where We Enter: Stories of Black Feminism*.

Making When and Where We Enter

At the heart of my then new project was a desire to interrupt and intervene in several decades of Black patriarchal anti-feminist rhetoric that routinely operated in contemporary Black politics, culture and thought. I consumed Black feminist texts and was especially influenced by *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall. I reread essays that had previously influenced me such as Barbara Smith's "Some Home Thoughts on the Black Feminist Movement." Though Smith's essay had been written more than a decade earlier, I found that in the 1990s and early 2000s, Black feminists were still being portrayed as (1) "race traitors" acting in concert with White feminists to "bring the Black man down" (2) inauthentic "bourgie" Black women, whose privileged lives were removed from the day to day realities of the majority of African American people and (3) "nothing but man-hating lesbians." Black feminism was touted as a recent endeavor with no historical grounding in Black liberation struggles, a by-product of the modern White feminist movement.³

³ For a good distillation of Black anti-feminist attitudes see Barbara Smith's "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement" (1983). In Guy-Sheftall, ed. 1995. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: The New Press. (254-267)

Notwithstanding my reading and research, I had difficulty pinpointing which story I was telling in the film. I asked Luke Charles Harris and Kimberlé Crenshaw to be the film's co-writers. I was moved by Crenshaw's powerful ideas, benefited from her input on the rough cut to completion of my prior film *A Question of Color* and asked her and my husband Luke to co-write the Black feminism documentary with me. I hoped that the two of them could guide me toward finding the rich and complex documentary story I hoped to tell about Black feminism.

Crenshaw pointed out to me that many Black women were detoured from the path of Black feminism, that Black women who are feminist at times experience a kind of process where they have to "out themselves as Black feminists," that the Black community indeed practiced a gender politics but it was gendered male, and that Black feminism serves to open up a space to center women as well as men. She spoke of the ways that Black women and Black communities were steered away from feminism, and central to those detours was a dominant heterosexist patriarchal politics that marginalized Black women and delegitimized our leadership. She also helped me to see the ways that patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia undermined and harmed Black men and boys as well as Black women and girls.

One of my earliest approaches was to interview prominent Black feminists about their paths to Black feminism. I hoped to make a film that would bring more African Americans, including Black men to an appreciation of African American feminism. I saw that there was a fundamental gap between the so-called "Second Wave" Black feminists whose words and works had set the groundwork for a newer generation to take up and extend the movement. Finding younger Black feminist voices initially was challenging.

Few young Black women named themselves Black feminists. The predominant “endangered Black male narrative” of the 1990s loomed large, and disciplined younger Black women away from feminism, as it had in the 1970s and 1980s. Like me, many Black women who name themselves “Black feminists” are forced to (re) learn, through discovery of Black feminist literature and history, that it is not only important to confront heteropatriarchy, sexism and homophobia in Black communities, but that many significant Black women and a few men have done so in the past and under the name of Black feminism.

I videotaped some more interviews in 2004 and 2005, finally filming interviews with Frances Beal, Aileen Hernandez, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, among others. However, I recognized that I would need to find an entirely new approach to making the film.

Becoming a Black Feminist Scholar

My sister friend and mentor Deborah Willis with whom I had worked over many years encouraged me to apply to graduate school and I became to a successful applicant to Africana Studies at New York University where I formally studied Black feminism and cultural studies and earned a master’s degree in 2009. While there I became increasingly aware of the young feminists at Spelman College, particularly Moya Bailey and “the Nelly Controversy.” The opportunity to formerly study and write about African American feminism helped me to rethink my approach to the film.

Following that, I began a Ph.D. program in Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, where I experienced a further shift in my thinking about Black

feminism. This shift occurred as I became more immersed in my courses, research, and teaching undergraduates. I was increasingly influenced by the younger generation of feminists, especially on the Feminist Wire, and other online sources. I found myself particularly drawn to Black queer theory. I revisited Black lesbian feminists like Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith, E. Frances White, and the Combahee River Collective, and of course Audre Lorde.

I studied Lorde closely in a class with Mary Gossy and devoted several teaching days of my undergraduate classes to Lorde's ideas, poetry and to her presence in cinema, including Dee Rees' feature film *Pariah*. Rees was deeply influenced by Lorde's essays, poems and her biomythography *Zami* in her screenplay and direction of *Pariah*. *Pariah* concerns a shy teenage Black lesbian poet's coming of age and coming out to her family. I found this film especially transformative for students, and useful for teaching Black queer theory from Cheryl Clarke to Samuel Delaney, and even Judith's Butler, whose theory of performativity began to influence my thinking, despite her disturbing Eurocentricism in *Gender Trouble*.

One of the ways that I have been able to think anew about African American feminism is through an exploration of Black queer theory. Dwight McBride, E. Patrick Johnson, Cathy Cohen and Roderick Ferguson (*Black Queer Theory: A Critical Anthology*) among others have infused Black queer theory with Black feminism as part of its ontological genealogy. E. Patrick Johnson's "Quare" Studies, or (Almost) Everything I know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother" is particularly instructive. He calls into question Butler's notion that any move toward identify is, to be duped unfreedom. Johnson argues that queer theory—or what he refers to as the study of White

queers—has often failed to address the material realities of gay and lesbians of color. Invoking a statement from Audre Lorde, he posits the idea that without community there is no liberation and that communal identity—in all its differences—must be nurtured. Johnson argues that theories that call for dissolving community identity is one that gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians of color cannot afford to adopt. In sum, Black feminism continues to travel, be highly influential, contested, and in continual formation.

Whiteness studies and critiques of White privilege led me to Lipsitz' most recent book *How Racism Takes Place*. His race and place analysis illuminated for me the notion of transgressive Black feminist spaces or Black feminist spatial imaginaries—wherein Black feminist freedom is imagined, sought and theorized outside of Black heteropatriarchal spaces. One of our faculty members, who is now my advisor, Brittney Cooper—is a member of the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC.) CRC speaks of creating a space of comradery for hip-hop generation feminists of color, queer and straight, where they can discuss ideas, express their crunk feminist selves, fellowship with one another, debate and challenge one another, and support each other as they struggle together to articulate their feminist goals.

Filmmaker/activist Aishah Shahidah Simmons, who completed the documentary film *No! The Rape Documentary* has a strong internet presence. She maintains two blog sites and is a regular contributor to The Feminist Wire (TFW), a multiethnic feminist blog co-founded by Hortense Spiller and Tamara Lomax. She curated The Audre Lorde Forum at TFW, a massive, month long intergenerational and transnational effort in celebration of the anniversary of the 80th year of Lorde's birth. The Feminist Wire, is a

very intergenerational feminist site where I find Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Heidi Lewis, Tamara Lomax, and Black male activists like Darnell Moore and Kai Green, a transgendered man, whose writings and documentary film work has impacted my thinking about gender binaries. These Black feminist activists appear to be in constant motion as activists, scholars and artists. They also work to amplify the words and deeds of their Black feminist fore-sisters.

Black Feminist Genealogies

Students and scholars of African American feminism, trace modern Black feminist theory to the formation of the 1968 Black Women's Liberation Committee of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC,) co-founded by Frances Beal and the publication of her groundbreaking essay entitled "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." Beal extends from her title an analysis of not only gender and race, but also class in the struggle for Black women's liberation in the context of a patriarchal Black Power Movement. These dualities and multiplicities are also present in the mission statement of the highly influential but short-lived National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO)--active from 1973-75.

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) authors in 1979 "A Black Feminist Statement" --one of the most canonic texts of the Black feminist movement. CRC which began as the Boston chapter of the NBFO, describes themselves as a lesbian socialist feminist collective and articulates the urgency of eradicating homophobia, identifying it too as a deterrent to Black freedom. Authored by Barbara Smith, her twin sister Beverly, and Demitra Frazier, the Statement describes CRC's goal to institutionalize Black

feminism as a distinct body of thought. They also critique the limitations of mainstream White feminists' tendency to organize solely around the centrality of gender as an oppression. CRC advocates for solidarity with progressive Black men, rejects the separatism of their White lesbian feminist colleagues, and affirms that, "We struggle with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men around sexism." In the years to come, these women, along with Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, and Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga, publish one another, form independent presses and edit lesbian and women of color journals.

The 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color* edited by Moraga and Anzaldua marks a shift noted by E. Frances White in *The Dark Continent of My Body: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* in increased relationships between women of color. *This Bridge Called My Back* includes writing by Latinas, African, Asian and Native American women and facilitated a "woman of color" consciousness that decenters White women as the point of comparison. Women of color read each other's work, learn their commonalities, and consider amongst themselves how internal patriarchy, for instance, operates in differential ways in their respective communities.

In 1981, bell hooks, also publishes her first scholarly book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* in which she advances her theory that slavery not only oppressed Black men and women, but that it degenerated Black women. Three Black feminist authors are publicly maligned and viscerally condemned in many African American communities for writing that becomes widely acclaimed in mainstream media that reveals internal patriarchy, sexism, and violence against Black women. These

writers include Ntozake Shange, for her 1975 choreopoem turned Broadway play *For Colored Girls*; Michele Wallace, author of the 1979 study of patriarchy and sexism in the Black Power Movement, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*; and Alice Walker who won a national book award in 1983 for her novel *The Color Purple* which is adapted for the screen in 1986 by Steven Spielberg.

All three writers are said to be converts of racist White feminists who were recruited to attack the image of Black men. Though demonized in nationalist circles and beyond, these works endure artistically decades later. *Black Macho*, *For Colored Girls*, and *The Color Purple* challenge gender constructions and reframe African American community life away from the Endangered Black Male Narrative and instead centers Black women and girls. They project powerful female narratives that reject Black patriarchy. Walker, in particular, through *The Color Purple* also critiques Black heteronormativity and calls for a more fluid notion of gender.

Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, and Barbara Smith as out-lesbians expand the discourse to challenge not only sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy in Black communities as well as racism in White feminist movements, but also explicitly named homophobia and heteropatriarchy in Black nationalist communities, in African American communities at large, and amongst Black women. Clarke's 1983 classic essay, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" reveals how proponents of the Black arts movement, particularly Amiri Baraka, policed the boundaries of Blackness through heteropatriarchy and homophobia, by demonizing Black lesbian and gays. "It is ironic that the Black Power movement could transform the consciousness of an entire generation of Black people... and at the same time fail so miserably at understanding the

sexual politics of the movement.” Furthermore, Clarke critiques Michele Wallace and bell hooks for failing to even mention or acknowledge throughout their fairly comprehensive studies the word or category of “lesbian” in their pioneering Black feminist texts *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and *Ain't I a Woman*, respectively.

A cadre of Black women literary scholars and authors including Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Mary Helen Washington, and Cheryl Wall among others analyze and champion critical texts by Black women writers in the 1970s and 1980s and recover the writings of prior women writers from the nineteenth and twentieth century. Many espouse explicitly feminist sensibilities. Influenced in part by Stuart Hall and postmodernism Michele Wallace, Jacqueline Bobo, Hazel Carby, bell hooks, Mae Henderson, Wahneema Lubiano, and Tricia Rose among others infuse Black feminist cultural studies into their work and scholarship.

Bobo among others engages in a critical discourse about *The Color Purple* novel/film controversy. She authors a distinct theory about Black women’s spectator practices with respect to the film, contending that many Black women audiences support the film nationally, express passionate feelings about it and see it multiple times. She argues that Black women deeply identify with the feminist triumph of Celie over sexual abuse and domestic violence—this despite Black male intellectuals, media figures and “leaders” who tell them to boycott the film for its ostensibly negative portrayal of Black men.

Bobo posits that Hollywood film director Steven Spielberg, a Jewish American man with no personal intimate knowledge of African American people, infuses

stereotypical tropes of Black primitivism, violence and buffoonery into Walker's narrative. Yet Bobo argues that Black women audiences "rewrite" the film, blocking out the stereotypes, a lifelong viewing practice they have developed as African Americans. They reject those aspects of cinema which are racially demeaning and partake in that which they find reaffirming and pleasurable.

Alice Walker herself in 1983 coins the term "womanism" to bring more Black women and women of color to feminism. The term itself becomes contested by some Black feminists, appropriated in part by antifeminist nationalist women, and also claimed by pro-feminist women of color including a host of Black women theologians. Academia emerges as an increasingly important space for Black feminists in the 1980s onward and this remains the case today.

Audre Lorde, the self-described "Black lesbian, feminist, mother, warrior poet" develops cutting edge Black feminist theory in the late 1970s through 1980s, while teaching and working with students, activists, writers and artists across the country and around the world. Lorde advocates for the erotic in women's lives ("Uses of the Erotic"), promotes lesbian parenting and motherhood ("Manchild: A Black Lesbian Feminist Response"); and identifies racism, classism, and White privilege in the academic feminist community ("Transformation of Silence into Action.") She argues that Black "unity" is often a call for patriarchy, heterosexism and homophobia, and that Black heterosexual women should resist being baited into antifeminist and anti-lesbian stances ("Age, Race, Sex, and Class.") Lorde champions radical self-care and self-mothering, and speaks of the necessity of Black women bonding across sexualities ("Eye to Eye.") In sum, Lorde claims and affirms the multiplicity of her identities, arguing that the recognition of

differences among all kinds of women and people is central to building progressive communities. Amongst new millennium feminists, her words enjoy renewed popularity

The outpouring of feminist activism, writing, and scholarship in the 1980s set the stage for Critical Race Studies co-founder Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to extend Black feminism into legal theory. She writes “Demarginalizing the Intersection” in 1989 wherein she coins the term “intersectionality” that captures multiple and overlapping axis of subordination in relation to Black women and women of color. Crenshaw revisits ideas articulated by Frances Beal (1970), the Combahee River Collective (1983), and Deborah King (1988.) Intersectionality captures multiple and overlapping axis of subordination in relation to Black women and women of color. The compounded impact of discrimination on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex can be experienced as double discrimination. Yet, Black women, Crenshaw contends, also differentially experience both race *and* gender oppression, separate and apart from White women and Black men—as Black women.

In 1991, Crenshaw and other Black feminists work in support of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas Senate Judiciary Committee hearings concerning Thomas’ nomination to the Supreme Court. Four years later, a group of Harlem-based feminists and their allies stage a “Take Back the Night March” in 1995 to protest a planned “welcome home” parade for convicted rapist Mike Tyson, the former heavyweight boxing champion, upon his release from prison. That same year the most comprehensive compilation of explicitly Black feminist texts, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, is published. The book is a milestone in Black women’s studies linking 19th century Black women like Maria

Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Frances E. W. Harper of the early nineteenth century to Audre Lorde, Frances Beal, bell hooks, and June Jordan.

Furthermore, in 1995, Angela Davis, Paula Giddings, Marcia Gillespie, and Jewel Jackson McCabe among others mount a press conference in New York City, one week before the Million Man March in Washington, D.C. to critique Minister Louis Farrakhan's call for the gender exclusion of Black women as well as the march's conservative politics (Harris. "My Two Mothers: America and the Million Man March.") The women, particularly Davis, are maligned and denigrated in Black media. Davis, a revered Black woman revolutionary icon, finds herself for the first time in her life, publicly booed in African American crowds. She is also "outed" as a lesbian in the Nation of Islam's *Final Call* newspaper. One year later Black feminists, including Davis, gather in Ossining, New York to discuss building a national Black feminist organization.⁴ While no national network is built, several initiatives emerge.

Antiviolence activist Beth Richie, who is on hand for the Black feminist retreat, offers a Black feminist analysis of incarcerated battered Black women in her 1996 *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*. Dorothy Roberts troubles medical racism in *Killing the Black Body* (1999) and identifies the criminalization of Black mothers.

Finally, in 2000, Barbara Smith⁵ describes Black feminism as having its greatest impact in the academy wherein a flourishing field of scholarship has emerged. She cites graduate and undergraduate courses taught about Black women, as well as conferences,

⁴ I interviewed Davis at the Ossining Retreat in 1996 where I was a participant.

⁵ Barbara Smith, Ed. *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000 (xvi)

research and dissertations in a variety of disciplines exploring Black female experiences. She points to, “hundreds, if not thousands of books” published about Black women in a variety of disciplines. Yet she notes

When we search for Black feminism outside of the academy and ask how successful have we been in building a visible Black feminist movement, the answer is not as clear... I believe our movement will be very much stronger when we develop a variety of ways to bring Black feminism home to the Black communities from which it comes.” (2000, xvi)

Smith’s 2000 statement is a sign, and a challenge that Bailey and Gumbs and many other new millennium Black feminists appear to both challenge and take up in their work.

Reframing Black Feminism in the New Millennium

I contend that we are in an expansive moment and space in Black feminism, when academic spaces have become incubators for newer generations of Black feminism. Black feminists who came of age in the Civil Rights Movement/Black Power era have taught and encouraged a new generation of Black feminists who are taking their ideas beyond the academy. , At an extraordinary tribute in 2013 to one of my advisors, Cheryl Clarke, I was struck by the sheer volume and talent of intergenerational Black and Brown lesbian and queer and straight feminist artists, scholars, poets, activists, who coalesced around her in praise. Amongst them were many intergenerational Black and Brown men who claim feminism. Furthermore, I participated in the Feminist Wire’s Audre Lorde Forum at the invitation of Aishah Shahidah Simmons and was struck by the international and intergenerational social media space in which fifty or more individuals “praised the Lorde.”

I undertake this study to explore some of these expansive spaces where radical, progressive and activist Black feminism lives, struggles, and flourishes. Black queer studies, and Black masculinity studies have expanded the sheer numbers of people drawn to Black feminism engaging more and more Black men, queer and straight. Transgendered men and women are also opening up a range of discussions in Black feminisms. C. Riley Snorton, a transgendered Black man posits in “Transfiguring Masculinities in Black Women’s Studies” that “black feminisms’ legacies of radical inclusivity of gender make possible the formation of what we have come to understand as “black male feminism.” He points to the Combahee River Collective’s solidarity stance with progressive Black men and their aversion to biological determinism. Snorton further argues that that the Black body is already marked as non-normative and that, “transexing black (male) feminism as a body of literature honors the ways that black feminisms have made room for all kinds of masculinities from its inception.”

Within the academy Black feminism has influenced and helped incubate Black queer studies and Black masculinity studies and has influenced feminists of all colors in the United States and throughout the world. At the same time, I will examine the ways that Black feminism has transcended its academic niche, particularly through cultural production and online Black feminist activism, and through new millennium Black feminists like Bailey and Gumbs who proclaimed in 2010, in the words of the late June Jordan, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”

Further, we will consider the ways that patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, and sexism continue to undermine African American communities and reflect upon how

Black feminism more broadly poses an international context for meaningful political, cultural, and theoretical organizing.

Proposed Structure

How Black Feminism Takes Place includes this introduction followed by four chapters. Chapter One: “Black Nationalism, the Quest for Manhood and the Challenge of Black Feminism” explores how a hypermasculine ethos in the Black Power Movements of the 1960s and 1970s marginalized and usurped Black women’s leadership in the struggle. I explore how two “revolutionary nationalist” political organizations negotiated gender relations within their ranks and leadership---the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party. I further uncover a Black feminist intervention in the latter that played a major role in the organization’s policies on gender. Finally, I consider the state of gender affairs in light of our recent struggles.

Chapter Two: “When Black Feminism Takes Place at Spelman College” explores how and why Spelman College, became the site of a major intergenerational Black feminist intervention in hip hop. The 2004 “Nelly Protests” will be remembered in the years to come as a milestone in Black feminist organizing with respect to the hip hop generation. Young women at America’s premiere Black women’s college, also the highest-ranking Black college in the nation, spearheaded a campus-wide intervention against popular rapper Nelly for his highly misogynistic “Tip Drill” video. Their actions would touch off an overdue national debate among the hip hop generation itself concerning portrayals of Black women in music videos and hip-hop lyrics, a dialogue that engaged national media, scholars, educators, activists, record industry executives, and a

documentary filmmaker. The initial protests sparked national and sustained discussion on the negative depictions of Black women in commercial rap video and lyrics, and challenged artists, hip hop consumers, parents, educators, media makers, record labels and sponsors of hip hop to demand alternatives to the predominant representation of Black women as hypersexual objects, video hos, strippers and sexual appliances. This chapter considers how and why Spelman College in 2004 became the site of this major intergenerational Black feminist intervention.

Out of 105 historically black colleges in the United States, Spelman is the only one with a women's studies department. Spelman's Women's Center founded by alumna Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall became the first feminist institute as well as the first curriculum integration project in women's studies at a historically Black college. Furthermore, the presidency of Dr. Johnnetta Cole in 1987, a cultural anthropologist, and the first African American woman to assume leadership of the College, further situated Spelman as a leading Black feminist center. Cole, in collaboration with Guy-Sheftall, envisioned Spelman under her leadership as a "renowned center for scholarship by and about Black women."

A student leader of the Nelly protests, and a student of Dr. Guy-Sheftall's, Moya Bailey would coin the term "misogynoir" to depict the misogyny in African American culture, and she would draw inspiration from an earlier generation of Black feminists. Yet Bailey was also a hip-hop feminist who argued for an interrogation of hip hop's contradictory practices around women. She and other students posted signs around the campus stating, "We Love Hip hop but does hip hop love us?" Bailey goes on to earn a Ph.D. at Emory College, joins the digital hip-hop feminist group-the Crunk Feminist

Collective, forms quirky Black Girls with Alexis Pauline Gumbs and becomes an activist and scholar in digital media, disabilities, and a researcher in queer sexuality, addiction in African American communities, and popular culture. She also coins the term “misogynoir.”

Chapter Three: ‘The *Color Precious* Controversy’: Writing Black Family Secrets onto the Big Screen;” revisits the African American gender wars around Alice Walker’s novel and 1985 film adaptation *The Color Purple* and, nearly a quarter century later, Sapphire’s novel *Push* adapted to the screen as the film *Precious* in 2009. I situate the controversies of the two books and their subsequent film adaptations within a historical collision of Black feminist art and patriarchal cultural nationalism, the “politics of respectability,” and notions of Black representation, including critiques of African American colorism. Finally, I explore diverse intergenerational Black feminist discourse around these debates as a critical site of cultural production.

Chapter Four: “Cinematic Audre Lorde: *Pariah* and the Possibilities for Transformation” explores Black feminist spaces in cinema through Dee Rees 2011 feature film *Pariah*. Rees foregrounds *Pariah* in the writing of Audre Lorde, a self-described Black lesbian mother feminist warrior woman. I argue that *Pariah* through its ode to Lorde and cinematic reflections on key Lordean concepts follows a genealogical path of groundbreaking African American feminist cultural productions in literature, cinema, and the arts which challenge patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia and expand the boundaries of Blackness. I furthermore locate *Pariah* in several Black cinematic movements. In addition, the rich visual aesthetics of *Pariah* reflects a powerful artistic collaboration that I liken to a previous groundbreaking film by Julie Dash, *Daughters of*

the Dust. Simultaneously, the film can be viewed as a corrective to Spike Lee's own seminal but misogynistic and homophobic Black independent cinema classic *She's Gotta Have It*. In sum, I argue that Rees' dramatic film broadens Black gay and lesbian experience and imagery beyond the Black "celluloid closet" and heterosexist imagination, and beyond the homonormative binary constructs of butch and femme.

In this introduction, I detail my personal path to Black feminism and my efforts to make a documentary film about Black feminism. I also discuss my search for a younger generation of Black feminists. Subsequently, I become a student of Black feminism and cultural studies. In 2013, while I was writing my dissertation, three radical Black feminist organizers, all in their late twenties and early thirties, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter. These contemporary freedom fighters found it necessary to address problems inherent in the heteropatriarchy of prior Black liberation movements.

They state on their website

Black liberation movements in this country have created room, space, and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men — leaving women, queer and transgender people, and others either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people. To maximize our movement muscle, and to be intentional about not replicating harmful practices that excluded so many in past movements for liberation, we made a commitment to placing those at the margins closer to the center (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.)

I, too, choose to explore similar reactionary tendencies in the Black Freedom Movements of the late 1960s through mid-1970s. In the following chapter: "Black Nationalism, the Quest for Manhood, and the Challenge of African American Feminism," I consider the ways that African American feminism has developed in direct response to

reactionary sexist tendencies in male-centered Black Power Movements. In addition, I explore the parallel and intersecting histories of Black nationalism and Black feminism.

Chapter One: Black Nationalism, the Quest for Manhood, and the
Challenge of African American Feminism

Introduction: Conflicted Feelings

When we look at the black liberation movement . . . we see many hours spent in angry debates over who should represent the race. Today's official nationalist story identifies the poles of this debate as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, but battle lines were also often drawn around gender lines as black women rebelled against the sexist assertion of black manhood. Many women raised questions about the meaning of manhood and how black people could redefine sex roles away from dominant patriarchal models (E. Frances White, "Dark Continent" 41-42).

My experience studying "Black Nationalism in Contemporary Politics" challenged me to rethink my relationship to Black nationalist politics. I am in accord with Wahneema Lubiano who writes of "both exploring black nationalism's possibilities and criticizing its problems." She frames Black nationalism as an "everyday ideology", and a "cultural narrative that explains many black American's understanding of themselves— a kind of common sense even for black people who don't think of themselves as nationalist (245)." Lubiano contends that black nationalism demystifies white racial domination and historically serves as a bridge to Pan Africanism (237).

Yet like Lubiano, I am distressed and in conflict with specific conservative tendencies in many and most Black nationalisms toward xenophobia, sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia (245-246). Black nationalism can be notoriously backward when it comes to gender, prioritizing the role of men as heads of households and leaders of nations, marginalizing women to the status of male property, standard bearers of a nation's children, and help mates (Ibid; Mitchell 238-239; White, "Africa" 82).

Cynthia Enloe contends that the majority of anticolonial and antiracist movements throughout the world are "patriarchal nationalisms." Women are marginalized in such

movements, because the “nation is a patriarchal construct, based on nationalist movements largely caused by the symbolic creation of “nation” (Taylor 106). Annie McClintock argues that, “All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous” (105).

An exploration of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s tend to confirm Enloe and McClintock’s statements. Feminists then and now identified a hypermasculinist ethos during the era that served to marginalize and usurp Black women’s leadership and participation in the struggle and subordinate Black women to the domestic sphere (Beal; King; Wallace).

This paper explores how and why. As a threshold measure, I provide a brief overview of the overlapping movements of both Black feminism and Black nationalism. I examine how the quest for manhood in the Black Power Movement coupled with the release of Daniel P. Moynihan’s 1965 *Report on the Negro Family* created an oppressive climate for Black women, undermining their autonomy and development in the struggle. In addition, I examine how Black feminists confronted the gendered patriarchy of the Black Power Movement and created vital counter narratives through their activism and writings that have a lasting impact today. Finally, I explore how two “revolutionary nationalist” political organizations negotiated gender relations within their ranks and leadership—the Black Panther Party and the Young Lord’s Party. In the latter, I uncover a Black feminist intervention that played a major role in the organization’s policies on gender. Finally, I consider the state of gender affairs today in light of our recent struggles.

Black Nationalism/Black Feminism—Parallel and Intersecting Histories

Taken together, the ideas of Anna Julia Cooper, Pauli Murray, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Fannie Lou Hammer, and other Black women intellectuals too numerous to mention suggest a powerful answer to the question “What is Black feminism?” Inherent in their words and deeds is a definition of Black feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empower women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community (Roth 72).

Black feminism is an urgent tradition, one with roots in the 19th century leading back to Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Frances E.W. Harper, and Frederick Douglass. Each of these 19th century Black feminists were also abolitionists. They advocated for the emancipation and full citizenship of African Americans, as well as equal rights and suffrage for all including Black and White women.

In recent years there has been a plethora of scholarship about the birth of the modern Black feminist movement.⁶ The writing describes how Black women veterans of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s formed their own national and regional organizations, established committees and manifestos, created consciousness raising groups, and worked in coalition with other women of color and with White women and Black men. They wrote articles, and books, established presses, and began to formulate and teach Black women’s studies, to address the unique

⁶ See: Anderson-Bricker, Kristin. “Triple Jeopardy”: Black Women and the Growth of Feminist Consciousness in SNCC, 1964-1975.” In ed. Springer 2005, 49-69; Breines, Wini. “What’s Love Got to Do With It? White Women, Black Women, and Feminism in the Movement Years.” *Signs*, 27(4): 2002, Summer. 1095-1133; Franklin, V.P. “Hidden in Plain View: African American Women, Radical Feminism, and the Origins of Women’s Studies Programs, 1967-1974.” *The Journal of African American History*. 87, New Perspectives on African American Educational History: 2002, Autumn. 433-445; Roth, Benita. “The Making of the Vanguard Center: Black Feminist Emergence in the 1960s and 1970s.” In Springer, 1999: 70-90; Springer, Kimberly. “Good Times for Florida and Black Feminism.” *Cercles*, 8, 2002, Autumn. www.cercles.com : 122-135.; Ibid. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005; Taylor, Ula V.. “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis.” *Journal of Black Studies*, 29, (2), November 1998: 234-253; White, E. Frances. *Dark Continent of My Body: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

circumstances of Black women's experiences of oppression. Their activities sparked a modern Black feminist movement that has forged a lasting legacy today.

Kimberly Springer writes

Black feminist organizing emerged as a direct result of the Civil Rights and black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s... It should be clear, though, that while black women experienced sexism in these movements; they also held leadership positions denied their white female counterparts. Hence, rather than merely walk behind black men in their quest to reassert patriarchy through a framework of "rights," black women continually waged a struggle for the complete and full participation of both genders on behalf of the black community ("Good Times" 123).

Women like Fran Beal, Margaret Sloan-Hunter, and Barbara Smith formed organizations⁷ to aid and promote the new politics of Black feminism in the Black liberation and woman's liberation movements.

Similarly, black women experienced racism in the women's movement, but they did not merely cede the movement to the interests of white feminists. Black women were active, often founding members of organizations traditionally thought to be entirely composed of white women, such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) and other more radical, local women's liberations groups. As a result, a number of black feminist organizations formed across the U.S. though mainly on the east and west coasts of the country. Some of them included: the Third World Women's Alliance, the National Black Feminist Organization, The Combahee River Collective, the National Alliance of Black Feminists, and Black Women Organized for Action (Ibid 2003 123).

What's more, Black women artists and writers like Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, and Michele Wallace wrote transgressively about Black women's lives and conditions, their feeling thoughts and experiences with gender

⁷ Beal was a co-founder in 1967 of the Black Women's Liberation Committee of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. That organization morphed into a multiracial organization called the Third World Women's Alliance. Sloan-Hunter was a co-founder and the first and only President of the National Black Feminist Organization founded in 1973 that grew chapters in ten cities. Smith was co-founder of the Combahee River Collective in Boston in 1974, a Black lesbian, socialist, feminist organization that issued a well-known "Black Feminist Statement" (Springer 2005).

and race oppression and sometimes about the experience of being a lesbian sister “outsider” (Guy-Sheftall 14-17).

Black feminists entered these historical debates seeking and offering representation in terms of gender and race. We found ourselves revising not only dominant history but also “black” history and “women’s” history. In the process, we created a black feminist subject who had the power to represent herself. (White, “Dark Continent” 51)

* * *

Black nationalism, similarly, has a distinctly long and rich tradition. Dean Robinson and Wilson Moses refer to the period of 1850 – 1925 as the age of “classical” Black nationalism—distinguished from “modern” post-World War II Black nationalism. Robinson defines “classical” Black nationalism as a political ideology that “worked to relocate the black population outside the boundaries of the United States” (8). Conservative and assimilationist in nature, classical Black nationalists like Martin Delaney, Bishop Turner, Edward Blyden, and Marcus Garvey assumed that, “people of African descent benefited from exposure to Western civilization. All valued “manhood,” and figured that the race could achieve manly characteristics in another land” (20).

Moses furthermore describes how

...nationalism is accompanied by a belief in consanguinity, a commitment to the conservation of racial or genetic purity, a myth of commonality and purity of ‘blood.’ The nation is seen as an organic segment of humanity, and like the family, “an organism or ordinance of God,” whose members own a common ancestry and ties of ethnic kinship (4-5).

Under Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) between 1918 and 1927, Black nationalist emigration to Africa achieved mass support, not only in urban centers but also throughout the rural south and internationally. Although short-lived, millions of Black people, 80% of whom lived in the United States, joined the UNIA and

endorsed Garvey (Rolinson 3-4) As Michele Mitchell has pointed out, Garvey was concerned with promoting and creating a “strong healthy nation” and maintaining the purity of the Black “race”, through the policing of the Black female body in particular (220). White men in the South, through rape and other coercions violated and accessed Black women’s bodies with impunity. The UNIA stressed the protection and honor of Black women as one of its calling cards and advocated armed resistance. In some cases the UNIA exercised violence to prohibit such unions, and even sought alliances with the Klu Klux Klan to enforce racial purity (Rolinson 9).

Nikol Alexander-Floyd writes that, “Black nationalist politics in the contemporary era has depended on an idea of racial community that names women and the Black female body as the boundary of the nation... Black nationalism, then, seeks to reclaim the Black woman as a means of countering racism” (144).

Some years later, the Nation of Islam (NOI), by then (and still today) the largest and most conservative modern Black nationalist organization, exercised similar gender politics to the UNIA. NOI’s leader Elijah Muhammad offered the following in a 12 point list of actions in its 1965 Program for Self-Development

Stop allowing the white men to shake hands or speak to your women anytime or anywhere. This practice has ruined us. They wink their eye at your daughter after coming into your home—but you cannot go on the North side and do the same with his women.

No black man feels good—by nature seeing a white man with a Negro woman. We have all colors in our race—red, yellow, brown and jet black—why should we need a white person? ...Africans would not dare allow their women to be the targets that we allow ours to be (103-105).

Elijah Muhammad considered the function of women to be reproductive. “The woman is man’s field to produce his nation,” he wrote. In Muhammad’s view “[u]sing

birth control for a social purpose is a sin” (Robinson 42). However, similar sentiments would be echoed by other nationalist groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ibid 47).

Robinson more broadly defines Black nationalism in the post World War II era to encompass those nationalists who favored separate statehood, as well as self-identified “nationalists” – “who supported the goal of black administration of vital private and public institutions” (2). By the mid-1960s many African Americans became more “radical” and nationalistic in their stance and broke from the integrationist aims of the Civil Rights Movement. Following his assassination, the ideas of an increasingly socialist and Pan-Africanist Malcolm X were subject to a myriad of interpretations by activists, intellectuals, and artists. A more militant Black America had grown increasingly frustrated with the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to transform America (Ibid 65-66).

“Modern” black nationalist groups and activists agreed... that integration as a goal was problematic, partly because the civil rights leadership had not formulated strategies that confronted the dire conditions of black life, especially in urban centers, and also because they linked integration to undesirable cultural assimilation. Even groups that did not identify themselves as principally opposed to cultural assimilation waged a symbolic battle against white cultural hegemony, using poetry, cartoons, songs, and ritual to emphasize black distinctiveness and assertiveness. As [June] Jordon notes, “if only because of various rituals and artifacts which were used to decorate organizations and their activities, and the language which such organizations chose to express their view of the world,” all groups were *culturally* nationalist (Ibid 52).

Black Feminist Confrontations with Cultural Nationalism

As the Civil Rights Movement transformed into the Black Power Movement between 1966 and 1970, a sexist cultural nationalism as exemplified by Ron Karenga’s US organization dominated many organizations. Karenga and his followers called for Black men to step up to the helm of power as leaders and fathers, and as heads of the new

Black nation, and for Black women to step backwards, walk several paces behind Black men (and in some cases crawl), tending to the house, and to the children and their education (Nelson 162; Mathews 235.) According to Karenga

What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive. A man has to be a leader and he has to be a man who bases his leadership on knowledge, wisdom and understanding. There is no virtue in independence... The role of the woman is to inspire her man, educate their children, and participate in social development... We say male supremacy is based on three things: tradition, acceptance and reason. Equality is false; it's the devil's concept. Our concept is complementary. Complementary means you complete or make perfect that which is imperfect (qtd. in Mathews 235).

In response to this new development in the Black movement as well as to the rise of the mainstream women's liberation movement, Frances Beal—who co-founded the Black Woman's Organizing Committee of SNCC which became The Third World Woman's Alliance—wrote a groundbreaking article in 1969⁸ “Double Jeopardy: To Be a Black Woman.” It became the most anthologized essay in the early years of women's liberation publications and is considered a founding document of modern Black feminism.

... It is fallacious reasoning that in order for the black man to be strong, the black woman has to be weak... Those who are exerting their "manhood" by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position. Black women likewise have been abused by the system and we must begin talking about the elimination of all kinds of oppression. If we are talking about building a strong nation, capable of throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression, then we are talking about the total involvement of every man, woman, and child, each with a highly developed political consciousness. We need our whole army out there dealing with the enemy and not half an army.

⁸ Though originally published in Robin Morgan's edited book *Sisterhood is Global*, 1969, Beal's “Double Jeopardy” reached many Black people nationally a full year later, especially Black women, when the essay was reprinted in the now classic 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* edited by Toni Cade. I chose therefore to cite “Double Jeopardy” as it appeared in *The Black Woman*.

Beale references in 1969 the extreme sexism surfacing in so many arenas of the Black movement, including the burgeoning Black Arts Movement led in part by Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, who became “Karenga’s most significant convert and one-time supporter” (Robinson 57). A year later Baraka would write

We do not believe in “equality” of men and women... We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation. How do you inspire the Black man? By being the conscious rising essence of Blackness... By race, by identity, and by action. You inspire Black Man by being Black Woman. By being the nation, as the house, the smallest example of how the nation should be. So you are my “house,” I live in you, and together we have a house, and that must be the microcosm, by example, of the entire Black nation (qtd. in Collins 169).

Beale speaks in “Double Jeopardy” of a new world with new values and critiqued the idea that Black women would need to retreat to the position occupied before the Black struggle. If this were the case, she wrote, “the whole movement and the whole struggle will have retreated in terms of truly freeing the colonized population.” She argues that Black women have very specific problems that must be addressed and must be liberated with the rest of the community (99).

... We cannot wait to start working on those problems until that great day in the future when the revolution somehow miraculously is accomplished.

...A revolutionary has the responsibility of not only toppling those that are now in a position of power, but of creating new institutions that will eliminate all forms of oppression. We must begin to rewrite our understanding of traditional personal relationships between man and woman. (Ibid, 100)

Beale in her writing and her co-founding with Gwen Patton of the Black Women’s Liberation Committee of SNCC in 1968 worked to deter the sexism emerging from the cultural nationalist movement. Yet how and why did patriarchy and sexism become such an attraction for the Black Power movement?

The Moynihan Report and the Quest for Manhood

Michele Wallace and other Black feminists correctly identified the pursuit of “manhood” and the elevation of patriarchy as a crisis in Black liberation politics in the late sixties through mid-1970s (Ibid, Wallace 31-32). More recently Wini Breines notes

The black nationalist movement utilized images of black masculinity as the epitome of freedom. Slavery and racism had destroyed black manhood, they argued, and overcoming racism meant achieving manhood. In much black nationalist rhetoric and writing women were absent or subordinate or producing babies for the revolution. Often, they were unrealistically glorified (1120).

According to Dean Robinson, “...calls for ‘manhood’ were linked to demands for female subordination and patriarchal family structures ...most black nationalist organizations saw a rehabilitated “manhood” as essential to black progress” (115).

Simultaneously in the mid to late 1960s ideas circulated within and outside of the Black community that placed the community’s economic, social and political woes at the feet of Black women. A major culprit in the dissemination of this thinking was Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, published under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor. Also known as “The Moynihan Report” *The Negro Family* concerned the “alleged structural and cultural deficiencies of the black family” and became intensely debated according to Mathews

Moynihan’s report used sociological, historical, anecdotal, and statistical information regarding the status of black families to draw the conclusions that black families were matriarchal, that black men were unable to fulfill the roles required of men in a patriarchal society, and that the resulting pattern of female-heading households was largely responsible for the “tangle of pathology” in which black people found themselves (240).

Michele Wallace explains that, “the primary feature of this abnormality was the “matriarch”—the “strong black woman” who had nearly as much or more education than

the black man and who worked more frequently than the white woman... In other words, Moynihan was suggesting that the existence of anything so subversive as a “strong black woman” precluded the existence of a strong black man or, indeed, any “black” man at all” (Wallace 30-31). E. Frances White notes that

Often African Americans have served as a model of abnormality against which [white] nationalism in the United States is constructed... In addition, black family life has consistently served as a model of abnormality. Black families were matriarchal both when the ideal white family was considered to be male dominated and now, when the white ideal has become a family headed by an equal heterosexual pair (“Africa” 73).

Despite the fact that the Moynihan report built upon the findings of a prior work by E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Wallace argues that the ubiquity of the Moynihan report had insidious consequences upon gender relations between Black men and women. Furthermore, she contends that Moynihan’s report attempted to take the responsibility of racism “off white shoulders, where it belonged and place it on black shoulders.” However, despite denials and protests from a range of Black leaders and activists Moynihan had hit a responsive note, “Just as black men were busiest attacking Moynihan, they were equally busy attacking Black women for being such a matriarch” (109-11).

Furthermore, Deborah King writes

...(black) men quite effectively used the matriarchy issue to manipulate and coerce black women into maintaining exclusive commitments to racial interests and redefining and narrowing black women’s roles and images in ways to fit a more traditional Western view of women... the debates over this issue became an ideological ploy to heighten guilt in black women over their supposed collusion with whites in the oppression of black men. Consequently, these intraracial tensions worked against the public articulations of a feminist consciousness by most black women (301-302).

Conversely, Black feminist activism flourished in pockets of the country, particularly on the east and west coasts. In November 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) convened its first conference in New York City at the cathedral of St. John. Among those present were Shirley Chisholm, Alice Walker, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Flo Kennedy, and Margaret Sloan, NBFO's first and only president (Guy-Sheftall 230.) That initial meeting galvanized many Black feminists including the young Barbara Smith who traveled from Boston to attend and who would two years later co-found the Combahee River Collective, an important socialist lesbian Black feminist group. Michele Wallace, then 21 years old, attended the conference with her mother, the artist Faith Ringgold. Both Smith and Wallace became founding members of NBFO and would in later writings criticize the NBFO for not being "radical" enough (Springer, "Living" 161).

However, the initial response to the organization was overwhelmingly positive. Within one year of its founding NBFO built a membership of two thousand women in ten chapters throughout the United States. Unfortunately, the New York chapter, founded by Sloan-Hunter, was plagued by internal strife which destroyed the organization by 1977. Notwithstanding this, NBFO issued a statement of purpose that highlighted the key Black feminist concerns of the day—self-determination for Black women, freedom from racism and patriarchy and self-definition that precluded the notion of "matriarchy."

Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being both black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist...Because we live in a patriarchy we have allowed a premium to be put on Black male suffering...We have been called "matriarchs" by white racists and black nationalists. We, not white men or black men, must define our own self-image. We will continue to remind the Black Liberation Movement that there can't be liberation for half the race. We must, together, as a people, work to eliminate racism, from without the black community which is trying to destroy us as an

entire people; but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within (qtd in Sheftall, 230).

Furthermore, the statement challenged the notion that Black men were “more oppressed than Black women” -- charging that sexism and patriarchy were disempowering Black women and therefore undermining the community and the Black struggle. According to Deborah Gray White, “More so than any organization in the century, the National Black Feminist Organization launched a frontal assault on sexism and racism” (242).

Gendered Struggles Within Nationalist Organizations

Despite their exaggerated black masculinity and initial insistence that patriarchy was essential to the building of a nation (Rhodes 109), the Black Panther Party (BPP) between 1966 and 1971 wrestled with competing ideologies about gender. Tracey Mathews provides a complex and nuanced discussion of this topic in “No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is.” She emphasizes that despite limitations, the BPP was considerably more progressive on “the woman question” than most other Black nationalist organizations. Mathews cites Assata Shakur who felt the “BPP was the most progressive organization at that time... because so many other organizations were so sexist.”

Yet the Panthers struggled with gender policies and moved from an adaptation of “complementary” gender roles in their early years to denouncing Ron Karenga and cultural nationalists as “male chauvinists... that oppress the black woman.”

[Bobby Seale] presented the BPP as a viable alternative to US and cultural nationalism on the basis of the Panthers’ ostensibly more progressive party line on “the gender question.” The timing of Seale’s statement reflected ongoing, internal Party struggles to reconcile the existence of male chauvinism within its ranks and

redefine its gender ideology. It may have been an attempt to deflect negative attention away from the party's own contradictions on these issues (237-237).

However, Mathew's sensitive discussion about the BPP's evolving policies on gender are somewhat undermined by her statement that

The category of gender was not as fully politicized and theorized during the late 1960s as it is today, thus one must resist the temptation to impose current standards to measure the feminist, nationalist, or revolutionary credentials of the BPP... What constitutes feminism or radicalism in one time period is not necessarily recognized as such in another (233).

Mathews appears with these words to erase the voices and activism of Black feminists of that very period like Frances Beal, Margaret Sloan-Hunter, Flo Kennedy, and Aileen Hernandez who routinely challenged patriarchy and sexism in the freedom struggle. One Black feminist of that era, Denise Oliver, initiated an important intervention within the Young Lord's Party that is discussed below.

* * *

Jennifer Nelson's "'Abortions Under Community Control': Feminism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Representation among New York City's Young Lords" offers a remarkable though somewhat hidden narrative about Black feminist confrontations with nationalist patriarchy. Nelson reveals how the Young Lords Party (YLP), a predominantly Puerto Rican political group successfully integrated feminism into their nationalist perspective. While the article focuses on the genesis of the YLP's progressive reproductive rights position, it also describes how Denise Oliver, with the help of other feminists in the organization including Iris Morales and Gloria Fontanez, prevented the YLP from becoming converts of cultural nationalist Amiri Baraka. Baraka was highly influenced at this time by Karenga and formed a number of organizations in Newark based on Karenga's teachings (Robinson 58).

Surprisingly, Nelson fails to address another important dynamic--the ongoing cultural and political affinities between African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York City during this period. Nor does Nelson identify Oliver, who sparked this feminist intervention, as an African American woman.⁹ Was she unaware of this fact or did Nelson think the inclusion of this information would be distracting to her own larger premises? In fact, Felipe Luciano, a Black Puerto Rican and the YLP Chairman, was a member of the Original Last Poets, an early spoken word Black nationalist ensemble.¹⁰ The Original Last Poets was a group exceedingly influenced by Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement and may explain Luciano's desire to emulate Baraka's cultural nationalism. Furthermore, Luciano wished to move the group away from its ideological alliance to the BPP and the politics of nationalist socialism” (Nelson 161).

Nonetheless, the YLP differed from other radical organizations of color including the Black Panther Party in this respect

First, a few powerful female Lords—notably Denise Oliver and Iris Morales—led the way by forcefully arguing that true liberation of people of color must include an end to sexist oppression. These women became empowered to speak out against machismo through involvement in the women’s liberation movement. A second was timing and political context: The first members of the Young Lords founded the organization in 1969, just as women’s liberation emerged as a popular political discourse among those affiliated with the New Left” (174).

Furthermore, Oliver and Morales were already active in the women's liberation movement and Oliver was also a member of the Black Panther Party. When Luciano asked her to join him at a meeting with Baraka in Newark she immediately reported back to the YLP women that she had witnessed a spectacle of extreme sexism, “Women

⁹ I know Oliver personally.

¹⁰ I grew up in New York City's Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s through mid-1970s, saw the Original Last Poets perform regularly in Harlem, and know Luciano.

crawled into the room on their hands and knees wearing elaborate headdresses decorated with fruit.” She warned the YLP women that if they did not insist on gender equality as a threshold issue, they too would find themselves on their knees. The YLP women struggled to make changes within the Lords and were successful (Ibid 162). Felipe Luciano was also demoted from the YLP's Central Committee shortly afterward. He resigned after 14 months in leadership.¹¹

Over time, the YLP recognized a political symbiosis between feminism and anti-racism: a sense that the two movements were interconnected. The YLP 1970 position paper on women stated that, “Third World women have an integral role to play in the liberation of all oppressed people as well as in the struggle for liberation of women.” Furthermore, Young Lords men came to believe that they needed to support women’s liberation as an inseparable part of the struggle to liberate people of color (Nelson 164).

What can one make of this uniquely feminist victory within a predominantly Puerto Rican nationalist organization? Nelson reminds us that Puerto Rican men were not stigmatized by the burden of the Moynihan Report, nor were Puerto Rican women accused of emasculating Puerto Rican men. However, African American men in the Black Panther Party were compelled to assume a hypermasculine stance in pursuit of "manhood." Thus, YLP men were in a better position to lend a sympathetic ear to women's liberation than were Black Panther men. As a result, machismo within the YLP declined much more swiftly than it did among the Black Panthers (174-175).

Furthermore, there are some unanswered questions about Denise Oliver in relation to the intervention that merit more research. Nelson describes Oliver as having

¹¹ Young Lords Party website maintained by Iris Morales <http://palante.org>

entered the YLP as part of a couple and as a BPP member. I wonder if Oliver as a burgeoning Black feminist became a refugee from the patriarchal politics of the Black Power Movement—including those of the BPP? Did she find a more expansive atmosphere for gender equality in the YLP—one for which she was willing to passionately fight to protect? And because there were powerful feminist allies like Iris Morales and others in the YLP was she therefore empowered in a way that perhaps would not have been possible in a Black nationalist organization to do—that is to steer the group away from the cultural nationalism that was so pervasive in the Black Power Movement?

Nelson makes another revealing point

There has been a presumption among scholars that nationalism and feminism are mutually exclusive, that group's nationalism renders any feminist expression insincere. I believe that this perspective, however, is not a product of careful historical examination. Not only did women in the YLP push the group to embrace feminism alongside nationalism, they did so without contradiction, although not without conflict (159).

This last statement is extremely encouraging and has me wondering as E. Frances White does in her 1990 “Africa on My Mind” article, “Can Feminism and Nationalism Merge?”¹²

In Conclusion

One of my challenges in writing this chapter was to explore the issues of sexism, feminism, and the quest for manhood that took place in Black Liberation Movements. I found it critically important to consider the ways that the Black Power Movement disempowered Black women since aspects of that legacy continue to resurface today.

¹² White, E F. "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism." *Journal of Women's History*. 2 (1990): 73-97. Print.

For instance, Black male feminists like Kevin Powell, Byron Hurt, and Mark Anthony Neal¹³ argue that commercial hip hop has been sexist, patriarchal, and oppressive of Black women and girls. These men work collectively and individually to help change the consciousness of Black men and boys about women. One of their projects has been the circulation of an internet petition “Statement of Black Men Against the Exploitation of Black Women.”¹⁴ Furthermore, bell hooks has instructively connected contemporary misogyny in hip hop to the patriarchy of the Black Power Movement. She writes

Patriarchal hip-hop ushered in a world where black males could declare that they were “keeping it real” when what they were doing was taking the dead patriarchal protest of the black power movement and rearticulating it in forms that, though entertaining, had for the most part no transformative power, no ability to intervene on politics of domination, and turn the real lives of black men around. (149)

Finally, Jan Hoffman has written in her March 19, 2009 New York Times article “Teenage Girls Stand By Their Man” about the responses to the highly publicized Chris Brown/Rihanna domestic violence fiasco. Stunningly, she reports that Black and Latina teenage girls in the Bronx and in other parts of the country have overwhelmingly sided with and expressed support for Brown, whom it seems apparent is an abuser. An infusion of Black and Latina feminism is in order but where do we begin? Ideally, through public education, media, and cultural interventions we can begin to reach our young people.

Tracye Mathews writes that

We would all benefit from a closer, more complex interrogation and public discussion of historical struggles over [oppressive gender-, class-, and sexual-

¹³ Kevin Powell’s views are well documented in his essay “Confessions of a Recovering Misogynist.” *Ms.* April/May 2000. Byron Hurt directed a powerful film about misogyny in hip hop entitled *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* and Mark Anthony Neal helped popularize the term “Black male feminist” through his various writings including *New Black Man*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁴ <https://kathmanduk2.wordpress.com/2008/06/24/statement-of-black-men-against-the-exploitation-of-black-women/>

orientation practices within African American liberation and social movements], from slavery to the present, one that does not gloss over mistakes or internal differences, to aid us in redefining our roles and relationships in ways that can nurture and sustain the community and build a progressive black movement for the twenty-first century (250).

I concur and seek to complete a documentary film *When and Where We Enter: Stories of Black Feminism*. My film will include an analysis of the patriarchy inherent in Black Power era nationalism, and the responses of African American feminists.

In the chapter that follows “When Black Feminism Faces the Music at Spelman College”, an intergenerational Black feminist protest in 2004 ignites national debate about degrading representations of Black women in commercial rap videos and lyrics. “When Black Feminism Faces the Music at Spelman College” considers how and why Spelman became the site of this major Black feminist intervention which inspires a “Take Back the Music” campaign by Essence Magazine. Finally, this chapter examines the connections of the protest to the historical continuums of First and Second Wave Feminism.

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Chapter Two: When Black Feminism Faces the Music at Spelman College¹⁵



Figure 1. *Take Back the Music. Essence Magazine. New York.*

I strongly believe that hip-hop is more misogynistic and disrespectful of Black girls and women than other popular music genres such as the blues. The casual references to rape and other forms of violence and the soft-porn visuals and messages of many rap music videos are seared into the consciousness of young Black boys and girls at an early age. The lyrics and the images—and attitudes that undergird them—are potentially harmful to

Black girls and women in a culture that is already negative about our humanity, our sexuality and our overall worth. They are harmful to Black boys and men because they encourage misogynistic attitudes and behaviors, and misogyny—woman hating—is not in the interest of men no less than women.

Johnnetta Cole, President Emeritus, Spelman College, *Ebony* March 2007

The sad truth is that hip-hop artists' verbal and visual renderings of black women are now virtually indistinguishable from those of nineteenth-century white slave owners.

William Jelani Cobb, Spelman College Professor, *The Devil and Dave Chappelle* (40)

It is because I love hip hop that I critique it and as part of the hip hop generation, who better than I to bring the music back to what I loved about it in the first place?

Moya Bailey, President of the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance
at Spelman College, May 24, 2005

¹⁵ The title of this paper pays homage to an article by Michele Wallace in the New York Times on July 29, 1990 titled “When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap.” In this early Black feminist critique of misogyny in hip hop she concludes “What won’t subvert rap’s sexism is the actions of men; what will is women speaking in their own voice...but with and to men.”

Introduction

The 2004 Spelman College protests will be remembered in the years to come as a milestone in Black feminist organizing with respect to the hip hop generation.¹⁶ Young women at America's premiere Black women's college, also the highest-ranking Black college in the nation, spearheaded a campus-wide intervention against popular rapper Nelly for his highly misogynistic "Tip Drill" video. Their actions would touch off an overdue national debate within the hip hop generation itself concerning portrayals of Black women in music videos and hip hop lyrics, a dialogue that engaged national media, scholars, educators, activists, record industry executives, and a documentary filmmaker. The initial protests sparked national and sustained discussion on the negative depictions of Black women in commercial rap video and lyrics, and challenged artists, hip hop consumers, parents, educators, media makers, record labels and sponsors of hip hop to demand alternatives to the predominant representation of Black women as hypersexual objects, video hos, strippers and sexual appliances.

Inspired by the Spelman women, *Essence* magazine nearly nine months later launched an extensive public education and awareness campaign called "Take Back the Music" featuring town hall meetings, forums, and extensive coverage about presentations of Black women in popular music and videos.¹⁷

¹⁶ Bakari Kitwana in *The Hip Hop Generation* defines the hip hop generation as those who were born between 1965 and 1984.

¹⁷ Further sources may be found in Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley. "The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women's Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2008, Vol. 8, no I, (236-260).

Tip Drill premiered nationally on BET Uncut, an adult-oriented show that aired at 3 a.m. in January 2004. In the video, Nelly hosts a sprawling outdoor orgy at a mansion with scantily clad women, who shake their rumps, perform lap dances, bump and grind, and engage in sex with other women for Nelly and his crew. Nelly and his boys, who are fully dressed, ogle the women physically, slap and squeeze their behinds, point at them, and throw money at their crotches while rapping “it must be yo ass ‘cause it ain’t yo face.” In a scene that pushed some members of the hip hop generation to the proverbial “last/final straw” point of no return, Nelly swipes a credit card between the buttocks of a young Black woman, reducing her to an appliance. It is a disturbing moment in an already disturbing video.

Moya Bailey, then a junior, a Comparative Women's Studies/Pre-med major and President of the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA) at Spelman remembers, “My Spelman sisters and Morehouse brothers alike were shocked by this recent low in depictions of African-American women on the small screen.” Bailey and the FMLA dubbed Nelly “Misogynist of the Month.” Their critique of the Tip Drill video was amplified by fellow students at Howard University, another Historically Black College/University (HBCU.) Howard students had launched a protest in mid-December in front of Viacom to express their outrage. Bailey felt that Spelman’s FMLA needed to take an action as well. The organization, however, was unaware that Asha Jennings, the president of Spelman’s Student Government Association, had accepted an offer from 4sho4kids, Nelly’s nonprofit foundation to hold a bone-marrow drive at Spelman. Jackie Donahue, Nelly’s sister, had been diagnosed with leukemia in 2001 and needed a marrow transplant.

Both Jennings and Baily were members of a feminist theory class taught by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, an acclaimed Black feminist scholar and founding director of the campus' Woman's Center (Bailey). When Jennings learned about the video and watched it for herself, she was torn between supporting an important health cause--a drive to increase the number of African American bone-marrow donors-- and a burning issue concerning the characterizations of African American women and men. She revealed her quandary in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: "It was a moral issue for me. My integrity was on the line."

Ultimately, with the encouragement of Guy-Sheftall and her class, Jennings continued with the bone marrow drive knowing that her classmates and the FMLA planned an action to protest Nelly. Leana Cabral, a junior and member of the FMLA made and distributed fliers throughout the campus that read: "We care about your sister, Nelly, why don't you care about ours?: (Farrell). The students conducted research and learned that definitions of a tip drill included, "a woman with a nice figure but an ugly face, a woman who may have an STD and therefore only the tip of the penis can be used to have sex with her, or a stripper who prompts men to keep throwing money at her." These definitions were incorporated into protest fliers (Bailey).

Soon afterward, Charlena Mack, Director of Nelly's foundation, 4sho4kids, saw the fliers while visiting the campus. Mack scheduled an emergency meeting with the Student Government Association and made what Jennings described as an "impossible and ridiculous" request—to stop the protest. Jennings informed Mack that she could not accommodate this request and that the drive could continue only if Nelly agreed to participate in a small forum to address student concerns about images in his videos.

Shortly afterward the foundation cancelled the drive (Bailey). As Bailey recalls “The foundation was apparently so upset about the issue that they went to the press, saying that Spelman cancelled the drive because of the video Tip Drill. . . .their plan backfired, and the media coverage blew up and ending up depicting them [Nelly] negatively (Bailey).

Spelman students protested Nelly and told their story to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. The newspaper included interviews with Bailey and Jennings who said the issues were much bigger than Nelly, and that it was Nelly’s foundation that had cancelled the bone-marrow drive. This story went out over the AP wire.

“What we never could have been able to anticipate, however, is the national attention that the student protest engendered,” remembers Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Farrell). Almost every major U.S. newspaper devoted space to the Nelly protest at Spelman. In *USA Today*, Black feminist cultural critic Jill Nelson asked, "Why is it, many of the women at Spelman want to know, that we can respond to Nelly's sister's need for bone marrow and yet he doesn't seem to care that his video insults and degrades black women?" In the *Washington Post* columnist Courtland Milloy remarked, "Nelly... comes across simply as two-faced. Rather than having a double consciousness, he behaves at times as if he has none." Mary McCarty of the *Dayton Daily News* wrote: "By canceling, Nelly isn't taking a principled moral stand on bone marrow donations. He's refusing to take the heat for his own actions." Hundreds of letters flooded Spelman thanking the students for their stance (Farrell.) The Nelly protest struck an existing chord with the African American community over portrayals of women in rap music.

However, the students were not without their detractors. In fact, the women faced criticism from their peers and from Black media including several Black radio stations¹⁸ in Atlanta and from students at Morehouse College and some Spelmanites themselves (Farrell.) The priorities of the Spelman women organizers of the protest were questioned since Nelly continually claimed that it was the *students* who cancelled the bone marrow drive, and that they failed to consider the life-saving issues. (San Miguel; Bailey)

However, once Nelly's foundation pulled out of the drive, Jennings and other students organized their own bone-marrow drive at an Atlanta mall, and registered 300 donors. Jennings said, "I couldn't handle the thought that someone would not get a transplant because our drive was canceled." (Farrell) Sadly, despite the Spelman bone-marrow drive as well as drives hosted elsewhere by Nelly and his foundation, a donor was never found for Jackie Donahue. In March 2005 she died¹⁹.

Bailey reflects:

Some thought we were angry emasculators who were too concerned with images and not at all concerned with bone marrow. It is so easy to portray us as angry black women unwilling to stand behind a black man, even though he is doing something good. Our questions for Nelly were recast as vociferous attacks and have allowed people to feel sorry for Nelly, a supposedly helpless bystander caught in the misdirected rage of young black women (Bailey).

Notwithstanding the detractors, the actions of the students sparked a wider national debate on sexism and misogyny in rap music and galvanized Black feminist voices both inside and outside of the academy around the issues. All told, this seemingly

¹⁸ I was unable to secure documentation of these local scenarios. However, the then ongoing controversy that continued and the backlash that Bailey actually received when Nelly began rehabilitating his image around this confrontation speaks to the ongoing resistance that Bailey and other Black feminists encountered in making this a public issue. In *Hip Hop versus America*, a BET series of conversations about controversy and supposed misogyny in hip hop in 2008, Nelly was provided with an ample forum to rehabilitate his image from the controversy.

¹⁹ See Abbey Goodman, "Nelly's Sister Loses Her Battle With Leukemia." *MTV News*. March 24, 2005. <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1498948/20050324/story.jhtml>

spontaneous lesson in activism and consciousness building raises some critical questions: How and why did this significant protest happen at Spelman? What were its connections to the historical continuums of First and Second Wave Black Feminism? Why was the Tip Drill video the catalyst for intervention? And what lessons can be gleaned to advance a transformative anti-sexist cultural politics for hip hop culture and beyond?

The Campus That Launched the Protest

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Elizabeth F. Farell wondered, "Why did students at Spelman have such a strong reaction to the video? One explanation is that the campus has a unique environment: Out of 105 historically black colleges in the United States, Spelman is the only one with a women's studies department (28)." According to Beverly Guy-Sheftall in "Whither Black Women's Studies?"

... the work of our Women's Studies Program and the feminist organizations on campus that it has spawned have been a major catalyst for the kind of feminist activism that the Nelly protest was about... were it not for our women's studies curriculum and the activities of the Women's Center, our students might not have responded to the misogyny of the Nelly video in the ways they did. Two of the major organizers of the protest were actually in my Feminist Theory class when the issue of what to do about Nelly's video arose. (18)

Guy-Sheftall clearly created a safe space for Black feminism to flourish and presents a model of what is possible when the African American community centers its politics and cultural practices round the needs of women as well as men. The seeds for this flowering became firmly rooted with the 1983 establishment of the Woman's Research and Resource Center under the direction of Guy-Sheftall, a 1966 graduate of Spelman. The Center became the first feminist institute as well as the first curriculum integration project in women's studies at a historically Black college. In 1983, Guy-

Sheftall co-founded *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, a highly influential publication that would provide a major outlet for feminist perspectives for thirteen years (McFall 11).

Furthermore, the presidency of Johnnetta Cole in 1987, a cultural anthropologist, and the first African American woman to assume leadership of the College, further galvanized Spelman to become a Black feminist center and a place where future generations would challenge misogyny in all its incarnations. Cole envisioned Spelman under her leadership as a “renowned center for scholarship by and about Black women.” She herself was among a handful of pioneering Black women scholars in the 1970s who carved out a space for Black Women’s Studies in both Black Studies and Women’s Studies programs in mainstream universities and colleges (Bell-Scott, Hull, and Smith xxvi.) Noted historian Paula Giddings asked Cole ten days before her inauguration took place on June 24, 1987 to imagine what Spelman would be like in the year 2021 having experienced Cole's presidency. Cole responded

...in the year 2021 when we walk around campus, we'll see people from all over the world. They'll be on our campus because we are the world's center of scholarship on Black women. I'm really serious. At the Atlanta airport there will be signs that say, "This way to the Center on Black Women's Studies." And there will be a serious Think Tank of Black women, and men too, where people can begin to imagine and to think and to dare to invent around serious social and political questions (27).

During Cole’s tenure at Spelman, Guy-Sheftall continued to develop the Women’s Center, and wrote and edited several important books about Black women including the comprehensive reader *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American*

*Feminist Thought*²⁰ (1995). She and Cole became friends and together they authored *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (2003). In *Gender Talk*, Guy-Sheftall and Cole list a blueprint for Black feminist change; parts of which follow:

As Black women, we can

- Call sexism as we see it and experience it
 - Teach ourselves, our children, our friends, our loved ones, and everyone we come in contact with that it is time for a change and the time is now
 - Raise feminist sons and daughters who regard one another as equals rather than as enemies.
 - Remind ourselves and our children that we are not "niggaz" "bitches," "dawgs" and "hos."
 - That we—not celluloid celebrities—are our children's truest role models.
 - ... We can practice gender equity in elementary, middle, high, and Sunday schools and other religious institutions, colleges and universities (220.)
- Sheftall and Cole speak of working with progressive Black men to challenge

patriarchal dominance and gender inequity in these ways:

- Each brother can monitor his own individual language, gender attitudes, and behaviors that suggest a belief in male dominance and the idea that only men should be in control of families, churches, organizations, and "their" women.
- Each brother can challenge other Black men who exhibit sexist/homophobic behaviors.
- ...As parents, Black men can begin to model different and nonsexist behaviors.
- Black men should cease buying and supporting profoundly misogynist services and products such as gangsta rap and pornography.
- Black men should acknowledge their gender privileges and work to challenge the sexist oppression of Black women.
- Gender-progressive African American men can help to construct healthier, more humane definitions of "manhood" and "maleness" than those currently dominating popular culture. They can serve as role models for other men (220-221.)

²⁰ *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, is the first major anthology to track the evolution, from the early 1800s to the present, of Black feminist thought in the United States.

Cole, Guy-Sheftall, and others helped shape Spelman College as a Black feminist intellectual and activist center. It is not surprising, therefore, that students at Spelman in Dr. Guy-Sheftall's class would find themselves in direct confrontation with one of the world's most popular hip-hop artists.

Nelly, Hip-Hop and the Pimp Ethos that Launched the Protest

The Nelly confrontation at Spelman College unleashed a wave of indignation and activism across the country. Women who had been uncomfortable with misogyny in rap music, but censored by the attitude that Black woman who critiqued rap music were selling out black men, began to speak out. So did mothers, journalists, men, and educators. In March 2005, Diane Weathers, the then Editor-in-Chief of *Essence* Magazine wrote

For me, the line was crossed two years ago when my daughter, 11 at the time, announced that one of her classmates had called her a ho. Since then it's become increasingly clear to me that a pimp ethos and all the paraphernalia of the pimp's world are battling for the heart and soul of commercial Black music.

Video director and choreographer Fatima Robinson wrote in the magazine's same issue

Videos have to come out of the strip club. Someone needs to start being honest about it... The fact that every video is based on that is ridiculous. The reason they are putting it out there is because folks are playing it, and it's selling. If it were not being played and not selling, artists would not be making this music.

In fact, Nelly engendered controversy the prior year in marketing an energy drink called "P.I.M.P. Juice" based on one of his popular songs. He faced harsh criticism from a variety of leaders including Reverend Paul Scott, founder of the Messianic Afrikan Nation, who launched a campaign to keep it off shelves in Durham, North Carolina.

Scott told the *Christian Science Monitor*

We don't want our young people walking around with Pimp Juice in their lunchboxes thinking that it's cool...Four hundred years ago, black women were being sold into slavery...and now someone wants to come out with a drink selling women. (Miller)

In the March 2005 issue of *Essence*, journalist Jeannine Amber writes about the image of the pimp:

In hip-hop, pimp is a signifier of charisma, power and wealth. Pimp is masculine flamboyance, tricked-out cars, one of a kind 'gators, bejeweled goblets full of Cristal. Pimp is domination in the bedroom, respect on the streets, a romantic illusion of alpha-male greatness. Gangster, the archetype of choice a decade ago, is played out; now it's all about the pimp... Women here have one job only: to portray every shade and variation of a girl enthralled, enslaved by and beholden to a rapper-pimp. It's the ho show.

Nelly's Pimp Juice controversy was fresh in the minds of the hip hop generation when his Tip Drill video was released on BET Uncut. William Jelani Cobb, a Spelman College history professor who taught several of the women who participated in the protests and encouraged them in their actions (120) notes that "this single video is part of a centuries-long debasement of black women's bodies. And the sad truth is that hip hop artists' verbal and visual renderings of black women are now virtually indistinguishable from those of 19th century white slave owners" (121).

Kathryn T. Gines writes of Tip Drill and further observes:

...these videos reduce women *en masse* to mere sex objects. Objectification is the reduction of a person to an object to be dominated, manipulated, constrained, or even ignored (also known as *non-recognition*)... By denying their individuality, music videos often allow the male performers to see Black women as sexual objects without being seen by the women, a concept known in French philosophy as the *gaze*... They are seen and manipulated yet unable to see or be acknowledged as persons (97).

The women of Spelman College engaged in analysis of the images of Black women under the tutelage of Guy-Sheftall and others (Bailey). Nelly, though a hugely

popular artist with a reputation for “giving back to the community,” (Milloy) had already entered their radar screen as a problematic salesman and promoter of a misogynist and controversial beverage and a song glorifying pimps. The release of the video Tip Drill-- with its pornographic and derogatory imagery targeting Black women as skeezers, hos, faceless women upon whom to “pull trains”, procure sex, and exploit for the camera— convinced Moya Bailey, Leana Cabral, Asha Jennings, and others that an action against Nelly was merited (Bailey). In taking collective action, they tapped into a 150-year tradition of Black feminist activism.

A Black Feminist River

The esteemed historian, theologian, and veteran Civil Rights Movement activist Vincent Harding wrote in 1981 in his classic text *There Is A River*

...the Black struggle for freedom is at its heart a profoundly human quest for transformation, a constantly evolving movement toward personal integrity and toward new social structures filled with justice, equity, and compassion. Though it has often seemed to be a restricted political, economic or racial struggle, it has always tried to help men and women discover their tremendous capacities as individuals and as members of an empowering society. **Thus at its deepest levels the river moves toward a freedom that liberates the whole person and humanizes the entire society, pressing us beyond the boundaries of race, class, and nationality.** (xxiv)

I borrow from Harding’s poetic discussion of the river and add the missing ingredients of *gender* and *sexuality* to picture a river of African American feminism that moves toward a freedom that liberates the whole person and humanizes the entire society. Yet this river is obscured by masculinist tendencies in the African American community which have prioritized the empowerment and needs of Black men over Black women. As I write, I am struck by my own transformation over the years around feminism. As a young Black

woman beginning a career in social issue documentary film, I was entirely inspired by Hardings' book 27 years ago. Yet in attempting to fashion his river metaphor into a discussion of Black feminism, I became aware of this great thinker's limitations in 1981—for he failed to envision the boundaries of gender and sexuality.

Black women feminists from the Civil Rights Movement and beyond continually struggled to expose the impact of gender and sexuality on Black liberation politics. At Spelman College from 1983 to the present Black women scholars were able to forge a safe space in this historically Black college where Black women, particularly young Black women, could think critically about gender and sexuality (Cole and Guy-Sheftall.) Thus, students like Moya Bailey, and Asha Jennings, could unite in a feminist theory class with a Black feminist mentor to organize a critical intervention against commercialized misogyny in hip hop (Farrell.)

* * *

Black feminism is a vital tradition, one with roots into the 19th century leading back to Sojourner Truth, Frances E.W. Harper, Frederick Douglass, and Anna Julia Cooper. In the late 1960s through 1970s Black women like Frances Beal, Margaret Sloan-Hunter and Barbara Smith formed unique organizations²¹ to aid and promote the new politics of Black feminism in the Black liberation and woman's liberation movements; Black women artists and writers like Ntozake Shange, Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker wrote transgressively about Black

²¹ Beal was a co-founder in 1967 of the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC) of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. BWLC morphed into a multiracial organization called the Third World Women's Alliance. Sloan-Hunter was a co-founder and first president of the National Black Feminist Organization that began in 1973 and grew chapters in more than a dozen cities over several years. Smith was co-founder of the Combahee River Collective in Boston in 1975, a Black lesbian, socialist, feminist organization. (Springer 2005).

women's lives and conditions, their feeling thoughts and experiences with gender as well as race oppression and sometimes about the experience of being a lesbian sister outsider.

(Guy-Sheftall 1995)

The Black Power Movement, between 1966 and 1970, enunciated a decidedly masculinist tone that began to permeate its ranks. A sexist cultural nationalism as exemplified by Ron Karenga's US organization began to permeate many organizations. Karenga and his followers called for Black men to step up to the helm as leaders and fathers, and as heads of the new Black nation, and for Black women to step back, to literally walk several paces behind Black men, tending to the house, and to the children and their education. (Taylor 1998, 243; Franklin 2002, 435-436)

In response to this new development in the Black movement as well as to the rise of mainstream women's liberation, Beal—who co-founded the Black Woman's Organizing Committee of SNCC which materialized into the Third World Woman's Alliance—wrote a groundbreaking article in 1969²² “Double Jeopardy: To Be a Black Woman.” It became the most anthologized essay in the early years of women's liberation publications and is considered a founding document of modern Black feminism.

... It is fallacious reasoning that in order for the black man to be strong, the black woman has to be weak... Those who are exerting their "manhood" by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter-revolutionary position. Black women likewise have been abused by the system and we must begin talking about the elimination of all kinds of oppression. If we are talking about building a strong nation, capable of throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression, then we are talking about the total involvement of every man, woman, and child, each with a highly developed political consciousness. We

²² Though originally published in Robin Morgan's edited book *Sisterhood is Powerful*, 1969, Beal's "Double Jeopardy" reached many Black people nationally a full year later, especially Black women, when the essay was reprinted in the now classic 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* edited by Toni Cade. I chose therefore to cite "Double Jeopardy" as it appeared in *The Black Woman*.

need our whole army out there dealing with the enemy and not half an army (Beal).

Beal references the extreme sexism surfacing in so many arenas of the Black movement, including the burgeoning Black Arts Movement led in part by Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka. A year later Baraka would write:

We do not believe in “equality” of men and women... We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation. How do you inspire the Black man? By being the conscious rising essence of Blackness...By race, by identity, and by action. You inspire Black Man by being Black Woman. By being the nation, as the house, the smallest example of how the nation should be. So you are my “house,” I live in you, and together we have a house, and that must be the microcosm, by example, of the entire Black nation (qtd. in Collins 1998, 169).

Though Baraka would repudiate this deeply sexist position in the years to come²³, his pronouncement at the time was a pervasive feature of cultural nationalism. Beal’s essay “Double Jeopardy” anticipates and “talks back” to patriarchal nationalist assertions like this one. She writes of a new world with new values and critiques the idea that Black women would need to retreat to a submissive domesticated position. If this were the case, she wrote, “the whole movement and the whole struggle will have retreated in terms of truly freeing the colonized population.” She argues that Black women have very specific problems that must be addressed and that they must be liberated with the rest of the community (1970, 99). She writes:

... We cannot wait to start working on those problems until that great day in the future when the revolution somehow miraculously is accomplished.

...A revolutionary has the responsibility of not only toppling those that are now in a position of power, but of creating new institutions that will eliminate all forms

²³ Baraka publicly renounced his prior sexist positions on a panel at the October 1997 Yari Yari -- Black Women Writers and the Future: An International Conference on Literature by Women of African Descent at New York University. This writer was present and took notes.

of oppression. We must begin to rewrite our understanding of traditional personal relationships between man and woman. (Ibid, 100)

Yet each generation of Black women is forced to (re)learn, through discovery of Black feminist literature and history, that it is not only important to confront gender discrimination and sexism in the African American community, but that many significant Black women and a few men have done so in the past and under the name of Black feminism. The student activists at Spelman learned the lessons well. Though progress has been made, the modern Black feminist movement remains marginalized in contemporary Black community politics and Black feminists, even today, can be painted as “traitors to the race” when challenging sexism and patriarchy.

Indeed, in the wake of the 1995 Million Man March, when a group of Black feminists including Angela Davis, Marcia Gillespie, Paula Giddings, and Byllye Avery, among others, held a press conference and critiqued the march for its patriarchal tone, they were publicly condemned in Black media. Davis, the most visible Black feminist at the conference, and an iconic figure of the Black Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, delivered the group’s critique of the march on television. She found herself denounced in several Black publications, including the *Amsterdam News* and the Nation of Islam’s *Final Call*, and simultaneously outed as a lesbian. Over the next few years, she encountered something entirely new—from time to time she was booed at rallies and public events--by Black people. She heard again and again, “What happened to you. You used to have so much vision. When did you become so out of touch?” (Davis interview, 1996).

bell hooks connects contemporary misogyny in hip hop to the patriarchy of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early '70s. She writes in *We Real Cool* that:

Patriarchal hip-hop ushered in a world where black males could declare that they were “keeping it real” when what they were doing was taking the dead patriarchal protest of the black power movement and rearticulating it in forms that, though entertaining, had for the most part no transformative power, no ability to intervene on politics of domination, and turn the real lives of black men around. (149)

The Seductions of Commercial Hip Hop

Tricia Rose in her book *The Hip Hop Wars* provides some vital new markers for framing contemporary hip hop culture:

We have arrived at a landmark moment in modern culture when a solid segment (if not majority) of an entire generation of African-American youth understands itself as defined primarily by a musical, cultural form. Despite the depth of young black people’s love of the blues, jazz, and R&B throughout various periods in the twentieth century, no generation has ever dubbed itself the “R&B generation” or the “jazz generation,”... It is now extremely common for hip hop fans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially black fans, to consider themselves more than fans. They’re people who “live and breathe hip hop every day.” (8)

Hip hop has evolved into a global phenomenon and one of the most dynamic cultural formations in recent history. It is also a multi-billion-dollar industry. At its inception in the mid-1970s as a youth movement created by working class and poor African Americans and Latinos in the South Bronx, hip hop was characterized by rapping, turntables, scratching, beat boxing, breakdancing, and graffiti. Hip hop—also known as rap—later expanded to include music videos, spoken word performances, and fashion among other things. In the 1980s, rap music entered its “golden age.” Rap diversified to include a variety of styles including gangsta, political, afrocentric, and avant-garde (Kitwana; Pough).

Despite hip hop's masculinist stance, Black women have contributed greatly to the art form as rappers and MCs. Tricia Rose (1994) and Gwendolyn Pough (2004) have written extensively on Black women performers in hip hop since its early days including Sha Rock, Roxanne Shante, Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Yo-Yo, Da Brat, Eve, and Sista Souljah. Notwithstanding the contributions of these women, as well as Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliot, and others, many hip hop scholars and journalists argue that sexism and misogyny in commercial hip hop is as dominant and pervasive today than ever before (Rose; Sharpley-Whiting.)

In the early 1990s the hypermasculine genre of gangsta rap rose in popularity and engendered controversy over lyrics and music videos that promoted violence, misogyny, homophobia, materialism, drug use, profanity, and promiscuity. Tragically some rappers also lived a version of their songs and like Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, died senseless violent deaths. However, Tupac, along with KRS-One, and N.W.A.'s Ice Cube revealed another dimension to their music. Like Public Enemy, these gangsta rappers also rapped about social justice, racial profiling, police violence, the criminal "injustice" system, Malcolm X, and "fighting the power" (Forman and Neal; Rose.)

Rose makes a cogent argument that by the mid to late 1990s the more politicized, affirming, creative stories and characters that, "stood at the defining core of hip hop had been gutted" (2). Replacing these narratives was "the trinity of commercial hip hop—the black gangsta, pimp and ho" which has been "promoted and accepted to the point where it now dominates the genre's storytelling worldview" (4). Rose attributes this narrow range of stories in commercial hip hop to the corporate ownership of all major media by

five conglomerates—Time/Warner, Disney, Viacom, Newscorporation, and Bertelsman (of Germany.) She points to a collusion between the mass media corporations, “mainstream” White America, as well as Black youth and existing and aspiring Black moguls. (25)

A young White journalist, Justin Ross, describes in the *Washington Post* a “racial tourism” on his part and that of other young White male consumers of commercial hip hop. Ross writes:

Across the country, white kids in comfortable suburban neighborhoods... sit in their cars or bedrooms or studio apartments, listening to the latest rap music that glorifies violence, peddles racist stereotypes and portrays women as little more than animals. We look through the keyhole into a violent, sexy world of “money ho’s and clothes.” We’re excited to be transported to a place where people brag about gunplay, use racial epithets continually and talk freely about dealing drugs.” (Ibid 233)

Further, bell hooks observes that

...not only is hip-hop packaged for mainstream consumption, many of its primary themes—the embrace of capitalism, the support of patriarchal violence, the conservative approach to gender roles, the call to liberal individualism—all reflect the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalistic patriarchy, albeit in black face... (150)

Finally Rose asks, “How do we--those who have progressive visions and appreciate hip hop’s gift - participate, judge, critique, reject and support hip hop? How can we change the conversation and the terms of play in hip hop itself?” (27)

* * *

I experience personal contradictions in writing this chapter. As an African American heterosexual feminist with a film in progress about Black feminism I have joked for years that I am a “closet Nelly fan.” In studying the content of Nelly’s videos and music in greater detail, I am further convinced of the seductions of commercial hip

hop. Despite my politics, I find a number of his videos from his first two albums *Country Grammar* (2000) and *Nellyville* (2002) charming, sexy, and highly pleasurable.

My favorite video “Country Grammar (Hot S—t)” from Nelly’s very first single captures a vibrant community—in the midst of a St. Louis block party. There is a barbeque going on, and the song repeats lyrics that mimic a hand game played by little Black girls called “Down Down Baby” or “Roller Coaster.” It features families, dancing children, fathers with their sons, men in barber shops, women in hair parlors. Nelly dances with a young woman dressed in normal summer fare—shorts and a top, then he dances with another young woman who shows slightly more skin. Not surprisingly, given the track record of Black music videos and casting, both of these women are very light complexioned. The video also features a long parade of scantily clad “hoochie mamas” of various nationalities (including Black, Latina, and Asian women) who are gyrating or seemingly performing lap dances to a fleet of fancy cars. This is the backdrop for a spectacular tracking shot of a dancing strut that Nelly performs in profile, throughout the video, occasionally turning his head or body to rap and dance directly into the camera. The lyrics describe driving in a range rover through the ‘hood, smoking “blunts” of marijuana, procuring cash, becoming rich, and having wild sex. By the video’s end he faces the camera head on, pretends to knock on an invisible door and chants tellingly, “Donald Trump, Bill Gates let me in, let me in.”

Several other videos concern Nelly and his boys—members of the group the St. Lunatics—hooking up with hot girls at parties. The visuals in these videos do not visually denigrate women in the same way that *Tip Drill* does. However, on a closer listen, some of these songs involve lyrics or raps about the exchange of money for sex and certainly

call women “hos.” One video, EI, culminates with Nelly and his boys throwing money at the camera, ostensibly a woman who can be paid to perform a sexual act. The EI video is a timid precursor to Tip Drill, Nelly’s foray into soft core porn. What makes Tip Drill so much more problematic than his other videos is that it is an unrelenting visual as well as aural assault on Black women. What was slightly coded in his other videos, playful and even at times suggesting agency for the women involved devolves into straight up commercial transactions for sex in Tip Drill. Interestingly enough, all the women in Tip Drill appear to be Black. The video explicitly focuses on degrading interactions between Nelly and his crew with paid hookers and strippers at the ultimate “bachelor party.” Of course, one might argue, it is the women, not the men, who are degraded. It is here in this mansion setting where we fully glimpse the interplay of Nelly’s materialism, devotion to capitalism, and his unrepentant misogyny. Yet Nelly is no different than many of his peers, other successful commercial hip hop artists, and the themes of this “x” rated video are similar to the non “x” videos.

In recognizing this tendency within myself to respond to this artist’s raw talent, I am better able to understand the position of many members of the hip hop generation who have had difficulty critiquing contemporary artists who create misogynistic, deeply problematic images of Black women -- and anyone else for that matter! -- What has been wonderful about the Spelman protests and the subsequent dialogue that ensued is that this infusion of Black feminist activism has jarred many people, me included, out of our complacency. As Moya Bailey declares

I want to make it clear that this is so much bigger than Nelly, that he is not the scapegoat but the spark that ignited the need for a public critique of how we as women are being portrayed. I see "Tip Drill" in the broader context of a racist, capitalist, patriarchal system that has a vested interest in feeding stereotypes of

both black men and women as hypersexual in the quest for the almighty dollar (Bailey).

Bringing Black Feminism Home

Barbara Smith, a founding scholar in the development of Black women's studies and the modern Black feminist movement writes

Black feminism has probably been most successful in its impact on the academy, in its opening a space for courses, research, and publications about Black women... When we search for Black feminism outside of the academy and ask how successful have we been in building a visible Black feminist movement, the answer is not as clear . . . *I believe our movement will be very much stronger when we develop a variety of ways to bring Black feminism home to the Black communities from which it comes.* (Smith 2000, 50)

Smith's statement challenges us to bring Black feminism home to "the Black community from which it comes" begs the question--what vehicles outside of academia can bring Black feminism to Black people? One answer is media and popular culture, including television, radio, the internet, magazines, literature, film, music, and music videos.

The Spelman College confrontation which morphed into the *Essence* Magazine's Take Back the Music campaign was the culmination of a Black feminist intergenerational project involving a historically Black college, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall—a prominent Black feminist professor, and her Black feminist students led by Moya Bailey, and a Black women's magazine. It created connections and galvanized many self-proclaimed hip hop feminists including scholars. Thus, though incubated on academic soil, the Nelly protest disrupted misogynistic rap video culture through the widespread dissemination of the action that brought a Black feminist critique home to the Black community.

Furthermore, “home” now includes television outlets (BET),²⁴ including the now defunct BET UnCut where the Nelly video premiered and was in rotation for several years, YouTube, radio, blogs, magazines, online communities, and documentary films.

There is outrage in the African American community regarding the misogynistic lyrics and videos and their portrayals of Black women, thanks in small part to the spotlight the Spelman protest helped to shine on the situation. This outrage may have had an impact on consumer buying trends. *Essence Magazine's* Angela Burt-Murray writes

According to *The New York Times*²⁵, hip hop sales fell 21 percent from 2005 to 2006 (Sanneh), and the trend seems to be continuing. More and more people appear to be fed up. Grassroots organizations are lodging protests around the country to hold corporations accountable for the negative stereotypical images of Black women and men in music and videos. Bloggers are posting insightful commentary on their sites and holding passionate radio roundtables to debate the issue of misogyny in music.

Professor Cathy Cohen directed a study --The Black Youth Project at the University of Chicago. The project found that the majority of young people find the images and lyrics in gangster rap degrading:

Overwhelmingly, almost all young people told us that they believe that rap music videos contain too many references to sex. A near majority of the young black people said they believe that rap music videos should be more political. Overwhelmingly again, young black Americans believe that rap music videos are demeaning both to black women in particular, but also to black men. (Blair)

Thus, it is important to consider the larger implications of the Spelman College protest. The African American community is increasingly concerned about the impact of rap music and videos. In a Capital Hill report to the Committee on House Energy and

²⁴ Though it remains a “Black” television station, BET no longer has Black ownership, rather it is owned by the mega conglomerate Viacom. Similarly, *Essence Magazine*, which for 35 years was a Black-owned company, is now owned by Time, Inc.

²⁵ Sanneh, Kelefa. "The Shrinking Market is Changing the Face of Hip-Hop" *The New York Times* December 30 2007, sec. 2; Arts and Leisure Desk; MUSIC: 1.

Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection in 2007, Lisa Fager Bediako from Industry Ears¹⁶, gave testimony that African American children listen to and watch more radio and television than any other demographic. Although Top 40 and Hip-Hop radio stations claim to target the 18-34 demographic their largest audience share is the 12-17-year-old segment.

Today, hip hop is bombarded by the demeaning images of the black male thug and the sleazy video vixen... These perpetuated stereotypes and demeaning images are reflective in the behavior of children and specifically children of color. We see an increase in risky sexual behavior—black girls 15-24 years old represent the fastest growing segment of HIV patients, devaluing of education and rise in the dropout rate—reports show as high as 75% dropout rate among black 9th grade students.

Bringing feminism home to the Black community means an engagement with hip hop culture through scholarship, grassroots organizing, education, and cultural production. In Paul Khalil Saucier's report on the 2005 Feminism and Hip-Hop Conference at the University of Chicago, he notes that panelists examined hip hop through a feminist lens and, in some cases, posed strategies for intervention.

Mark Anthony Neal...sought to draw a distinction between masculinity and heterosexism, arguing that the two are not synonymous. There are multiple ways, Neal argued, in which men can and do perform a masculine identity without necessarily adhering to heterosexist tendencies...Furthermore, Neal questioned whether it is possible to “do” feminism and still love hip-hop. Neal perceptively asked how we could use hip-hop to expand ideas of black masculinity, thus limiting essentializing tendencies that hip-hop discourse has on black masculine identity.

Byron Hurt, a male anti-violence activist and supporter of Black feminism released *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* in 2006, a riveting documentary film that tackles issues of masculinity, sexism, violence and homophobia in today's hip hop culture. Hurt, a life-long hip hop fan and former college quarterback turned activist, decided to make a film about the gender politics of hip hop, the music and culture that he

grew up with. “The more I grew and the more I learned about sexism and violence and homophobia, the more these lyrics became unacceptable to me,” he says. “And I began to become more conflicted about the music that I loved.” The result is a dynamic documentary that tackles issues of Black masculinity, sexism, violence and homophobia in today’s hip hop culture. Hurt included in his film a detailed segment about the 2004 Spelman College protest.

Filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons also released a poignant and explicitly Black feminist feature length documentary last year, *NO! The Rape Documentary* which she spent ten years making. In a segment entitled “Media, Music & Misogyny” Simmons interrogates images in rap music that encourage rape and violence against Black women and Tip Drill is featured strongly. Simmons, who is an out lesbian, has screened the video throughout the country and internationally and engages along with her many participants in well promoted community forums around screenings. *NO!* is accompanied by a free downloadable 98-page study guide created by Salamishah Tillet and Rachel Afi Quinn in collaboration with Simmons. This well-crafted, comprehensive and highly accessible guide appears to be designed for discussions with high school students as well as adults.

In the guide, Simmons writes:

I am an African-American feminist lesbian cultural worker who for fifteen years primarily used the camera lens...to make central some of the many things that have been on the periphery—the lives of African-American lesbian and heterosexual women. I believe that using the camera lens to bring progressive ideas, images, perspectives, and voices from the margins to the center is a form of social change. In 1992, I chose film/video as my tool to make progressive social change irresistible because we live in an age where people are inundated with images—the majority of which are both directly and indirectly manufactured by a handful of global corporations...My goal with my work is to visually engage audiences while educating them and encouraging them to work toward eradicating all forms of oppression, which include but are not limited to: racism, sexism,

homophobia, xenophobia, colonialism, and imperialism, in all of their violent manifestations. (8)

Tricia Rose offers a Black feminist analysis for making interventions in hip hop and, importantly, a blueprint for action that problematizes patriarchal concepts of “respect” *and* anti-Black youth (and hip hop) politics.

So then, the challenge is three-fold:

1. To develop and promote a serious, progressive attack on sexism in hip hop without patriarchal, conservative religious, or anti-black youth politics as its guide.
2. To encourage, promote, and support those young women and men who are embedded and invested in hip hop music but who also want to fundamentally challenge the sexism that defines the music.
3. To educate all youth, both boys and girls—especially those with the least access to ideas about gender equality—about sexism: how it works, why it works, and how to “keep it real” without it. (131)

We are in the midst of exciting new conversations about gender, race, and sexuality in the early 21st century concerning the forty-eight-year-old cultural phenomenon known as hip hop and the nearly two-hundred-year-old tradition of African American feminism. In concluding this chapter, I argue for the increased practice of incorporating the scholarship and narratives of Black feminism into broader venues of Black popular culture such as documentary and feature filmmaking, spoken word, and hip-hop music and videos. Through these streams it will be possible to uncover the river of Black feminism to more effectively challenge and transform our communities around sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia. My own documentary on Black feminism in progress *When and Where We Enter: Stories of Black Feminism* will

contribute significantly to this endeavor of bringing Black feminism home to the Black community from which it came.

In locating the Spelman protest in its larger context as a Black feminist intervention I am inspired by the space and nurturing that Spelman College provided to Moya Bailey, Asha Jennings, Leana Cabral, and their fellow students to create an urgent Black feminist action. And I am grateful to those students for helping to light the path for the hip-hop generation and others to follow.

Black feminist women writers have also helped light the path for African Americans with respect to feminism, though not without controversy. Chapter Three entitled “The Color Precious Controversy: Writing Black Family Secrets onto the Big Screen” explores the controversies around both the 1985 cinematic adaptation of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* and the film *Precious Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire* released in 2009. Indeed, this chapter situates the controversies within an historical collision between Black feminist writers and patriarchal cultural nationalism, “the politics of respectability,” and notions of Black representation.

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Chapter Three: The Color Precious²⁶ Controversy:
Writing Black Family Secrets onto the Big Screen

*[T]he most chilling thing to me about the response to *The Color Purple* was that people said ‘this doesn’t happen’... They said this was totally an anomaly. This is all Alice’s problem. But what was really upsetting was the total lack of empathy for [Celie, the book’s protagonist.]*

Alice Walker—quoted in *Ebony Magazine*, May 1992²⁷

I write about black women because it’s the world I know... I would like to see black males less defensive and more courageous in their investigations of sexual abuse in the black community. I would like to see more, not less, written about rape by African-Americans.

Sapphire responding to Ishmael Reed’s op-ed piece in the *New York Times* on the film *Precious Based on the Novel “Push”*, by Sapphire February 12, 2010

The tumultuous conflicts in the African American intelligentsia over the film *Precious Based on the Novel “Push”* by Sapphire released in November 2009 are eerily reminiscent of *The Color Purple* controversy in 1985—now a full quarter of a century ago. Hostile critics of both films have charged that *The Color Purple* and *Precious*—based on books by Black women writers—endanger and undermine Black men, assault the Black family, buttress White supremacy and situate Black women writers in cahoots with White feminist and White male oppressors.²⁸ Aspects of the debates are in fact so similar, despite the twenty-five-year differences that, even the same phrases have been used to attack and discredit the films. In each case, an African American critic has argued

²⁶ I am indebted to Salimishah Tillet for the title of her thoughtful online commentary “The Color/Precious” dated November 12, 2009. <http://www.theroot.com/views/color-precious>

²⁷ Charles Whitaker. “Alice Walker: *Color Purple* Author confronts her Critics and Talks About her Provocative New Book.” *Ebony*, May 1992 (88).

²⁸ For the film *The Color Purple* see Pat Aufderheide, “the Color Lavender,” *In These Times*, 22-26 Jan. 1986: 15; *Tony Brown’s Journal*, PBS, 6 Apr. 1986; and E. R. Shipp, “Blacks in Heated Debate Over *The Color Purple*,” *New York Times* 27 Jan. 1986. For a range of responses to *Precious* see Erin Aubry Kaplan’s “Black Viewers are divided on film’s ‘Precious’-ness,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Nov. 2009; Ishmael Reid, “Fade To White,” *New York Times* 5 Feb. 2009; Armond White, “*Pride and Precious*,” *New York Press* 4 Nov. 2009.

that each film is the worst depiction of Black people since D.W. Griffin's racist silent film "masterpiece" *Birth of A Nation*.²⁹

At the heart of these controversies are best-selling novels by Black feminist authors—Alice Walker and Sapphire—concerning sexually, physically and psychologically abused dark-skinned Black girls and women who are violated in the confines of "family" and damaged by patriarchal sexual violence. Both books/films portray bisexual and lesbian characters as catalysts to self-actualization and the redemption of each story's heroine. Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push* is, in fact, an homage to Walker's *The Color Purple*, which it both references and reflects in its diaristic form.

Although the film adaption of *The Color Purple* provoked volatile gendered disputes about the film's ostensibly "negative portrayal of Black men,"³⁰ there are Black feminists who criticize the film *Precious Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* as a film that demonizes poor single Black mothers, "mother blames," casts "the system" as *Precious*' salvation and renders patriarchy³¹ invisible. Further, many—including Black feminists—contend that the film promotes African American "colorism" in depicting those who help *Precious* as White and light-skinned and those who oppress and brutalize

²⁹ Tony Brown, the then-PBS talk show host (Ibid) called *The Color Purple* "the most racist depiction of Black men since *Birth of a Nation* and the most anti-Black family film of the modern film era."

Armond White, film critic for the New York Press (Ibid) wrote, "Not since *Birth of a Nation* has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of black American life as much as *Precious*." Ironically, White was one of the few Black male journalists who publicly championed the film *The Color Purple* on Brown's 1986 show. On another note, Ntozake Shange's Black female centered, anti-violence choreopoem was similarly compared to D.W. Griffin by Vernon Jarrett of the *Chicago Defender* when it opened on Broadway in 1976.

³⁰ Spike Lee appeared on Phil Donahue and Washington Post journalist Courtland Milloy as detractors of film *The Color Purple* both citing a Hollywood conspiracy to undermine Black communities through attacks on Black men.

³¹ See Malkia Cyril's "Precious, My Precious: Black Female Citizenship, Complexity, and the Politics of Unrelenting Survival" posted November 16, 2009; and Juell Stewart's "The Black Matriarch as Villain" *Colorlines* 29 October 2009. on WIMN's Voices: A Group Blog on Women in Media and News. <http://www.wimnonline.org/WIMNsVoicesBlog/2009/11/16/precious-my-precious-black-female-citizenship-complexity-and-the-politics-of-unrelenting-survival/>

her as dark complexioned.³² Too, some commentators espouse a respectability “politics of representation”³³ critique that marginalizes the harshest realities of the African American poor.

This chapter situates the controversies of the two books and their subsequent film adaptations within a historical collision of Black feminist art and patriarchal cultural nationalism, the “politics of respectability,” and notions of Black representation. Furthermore, I examine the translation of the novels to the big screen respectively by two male Hollywood directors—one, Spielberg, a Jewish American heterosexual man; and the other, Lee Daniels, an out-gay African American man. Finally, the paper engages diverse Black feminist impressions of the film *Precious Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire* including that of my own. I am drawn to what Erin Aubry Kaplan of the L.A. Times describes as the “story-outside-the-story...that’s equally fresh and complicated: black people’s reaction to [*Precious*] and what it means.”³⁴

The Color Purple: A Redemption Tale and Ode to Zora

Alice Walker's now classic epistolary novel, tells the story of Celie, a 14-year old impoverished Black girl in the South in the Depression era who is pregnant for the second time with her father’s child. Her father steals her first, then her second child from

³² See White, *Ibid*; and “She Ain’t Me, Babe” by Jill Nelson in *Niaonline*. December 9, 2009.

<http://www.niaonline.com/ggmsblog/?p=3834>

³³ Vaughn Carney wrote in his June 17, 1996 review of *Push* in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Why does the publishing industry have this morbid fascination with the most depraved, violent and misogynist, vulgar, low-life element in the African American experience?... I resent having my people defined by the lowest elements among us. To see the majority of African-Americans as shards of a degraded and dysfunctional monolith is hugely insulting and unfair.”

³⁴ Erin Aubry Kaplan. “Black Viewers are Divided on Film’s ‘Precious’-ness” *L.A. Times*. November 29, 2009.

her at childbirth and tells her that they are dead. Celie is then married off to a cruel and violent man who beats her and treats her like a mule. She addresses him as “Mr. ___” throughout most of the book. She is forced to serve him, keep house, cook, raise his unruly children from a previous marriage, farm his land, and service him sexually upon demand.

From such difficult beginnings, Celie forges close bonds with other women, and finds sensual and emotional awakening in her relationship with Shug Avery, a blues singer, who is also Mr. ___’s lover. Shug inspires Celie to remake her idea of God from an old, white, bearded male into a God who encompasses everything and lives within her. By the book’s end, thirty years from its start, Celie finds freedom, love, and prosperity. She remakes the notion of family and gender roles, transforming and helping to redeem Mr. ___ whom she now calls Albert. Finally, she is reunited with her sister Nettie, who disappeared decades earlier, and Celie’s own two children—whom we discover are not the products of incest after all. The man who raped her turns out to be her stepfather. Celie learns her two children have been alive all these years and living with Nettie in Africa.

The late Cheryl Wall, a scholar of Black women’s literature, observes

Walker imagines a world where personal transformations induce social transformations... *The Color Purple* revises conventional definitions of family... Lesbian bonding is celebrated, even if the sexual relationship between Shug and Celie is relatively short lived. Their bond outlasts their romance. The family that gathers at the novels conclusions includes lovers and former lovers, biological and adopted children, and relatives born in America and Africa. (161.)

Wall also notes Walker’s ode to blues women Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith in the characters Squeak/Mary Agnes, and Shug Avery, respectively. At the same time, Shug Avery is also an incarnation of Walker’s literary foremother – Zora Neale Hurston,

a prolific writer and anthropologist who died in poverty, obscurity and was buried in an unmarked grave in 1960.³⁵ Walker, in the late 1970s through the 1980s, worked tirelessly to reclaim and promote Hurston's work, and edited an anthology of her writing *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing... And Then Again: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. In fact, *The Color Purple*, is arguably an homage to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her non-fiction anthropological hybrid text on Southern Black folklore and hoodoo, *Of Mules and Men*.³⁶

Shug Avery, the travelling bisexual blues woman, is an artist and a guiding star for Celie. Celie finds sensual fulfillment, creativity, and reclaims her own voice through her relationship with Shug, the embodiment of Hurston. Wall writes

Shug inspires Celie's and Albert's transformations because she is the novel's moral agent. Of course, hers is not the received morality; when judged by conventional standards, Shug is deemed profoundly immoral (as were Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and others). But, as the novel asserts continuously, standards that sanction oppression, exploitation, and abuse must be rejected before any valid standards can be devised. (149—150)

Walker labors throughout her novel to redeem Mr. ___/Albert's humanity. Despite his cruelty and brutality to Celie, he is by the story's conclusion transformed as literary scholar Molly Hite describes, "within a context of redefinition that not only denies male privilege but ultimately denies that the designations "male" and "female" are meaningful bases for demarcating difference (441.)"

In spite of the spiritual gifts within the book *The Color Purple* and the redemption of Mr. ___/Albert the book was met with vociferous disapproval for its depiction of

³⁵ Walker chronicles her quest to find and place a tombstone at Hurston's grave in "Looking for Zora" in *In Search of our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*.

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates writes in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, that *The Color Purple* is Walker's "letter of love to...Hurston (244)."

domestic violence in Black families, and Walker's critique of patriarchal traditional family structures in which women are stifled, repressed and often beaten down physically or psychologically. In addition, the presentation of a loving and sensual lesbian relationship between Black women disturbed and repulsed some African American naysayers.³⁷ When the book won the Pulitzer Prize and became a national best seller, a swift backlash arose, primarily from Black male writers and intellectuals³⁸ but a few from Black women critics and writers as well.³⁹ Notwithstanding this, three years passed before *The Color Purple* controversy resurfaced in full bloom, this time with the release of the film directed by one of Hollywood's leading commercial filmmakers, Steven Spielberg.

The Color Purple and Black Female Spectatorship

Due to its widespread dissemination through the technologies of Hollywood and mass media, *The Color Purple* brought an even greater exposure to issues considered "dirty laundry" and worse—a treacherous maligning of Black men by Black female "traitors to the race."⁴⁰ Opposition to the film grew exponentially. *The Color Purple* forums and protests took place in nearly every major city in the United States in 1986. Many popular talk shows of the day including Phil Donahue and Tony Brown—the African-American talk show host who waged a one-year media war against *The Color*

³⁷ See Evelyn C. White's *Alice Walker: A Life* (422).

³⁸ Deborah McDowell charts the backlash to the book in "Reading Family Matters" published in Cheryl Wall, Ed. *Changing Our Words*. See also David Bradley's "Telling the Black Woman's Story," the *New York Times Magazine*; Philip Royster's "In Search of our Fathers' Arms: Alice Walker's Persona of the Alienated Darling," *Black American Literature Forum*; and Darryl Pinckney's "Black Victims, Black Villains," the *New York Review of Books*.

³⁹ See Lucille Clifton's "'The Color Purple' Tells Its Story in Letters," the *Baltimore Sun*.

⁴⁰ See Jacqueline Bobo's "Black Women's Response to the Color Purple," Feb. 1988.

Purple—devoted full panel discussion shows to the film, and numerous Black publications dedicated special issues and sections of their magazine to the raging debate.⁴¹

Black radio additionally aired forums and debates. The Hollywood Branch of the Urban League called for a national boycott of the movie. Alice Walker herself was booed and picketed at the 1986 Oscar Awards where the film was nominated for 11 awards. However, the film did not receive a single award.⁴² Conventional wisdom suggests that the film industry was cowed by the massive angry protests by African Americans organizations that snowballed against the film. Despite Spielberg's Hollywood conventions and Eurocentric interpretations of the novel,⁴³ *The Color Purple* was immensely popular among Black women. In a definitive study "Black Women's Responses to *The Color Purple*" Jacqueline Bobo noted that Black women as a demographic saw the film in great numbers and often repeatedly.⁴⁴ Literary scholar Barbara Christian stated that Black women, "adored the film despite middle-class intellectuals telling them that they should not like it." Christian's own mother had seen the film seven times.⁴⁵ Yet even Black feminist cultural critics, many of whom admired Walker's novel like Christian, expressed ample criticism of Spielberg's adaptation of the

⁴¹ See *Black Film Review* Winter 1985, Spring 1986, and Winter 1986.

⁴² White (428-433)

⁴³ Michele Wallace wrote in "Blues for Mr. Spielberg," *The Village Voice* 18 Mar. 1986, "Spielberg juggles film clichés and racial stereotypes fast and loose, until all signs of a Black feminist agenda are banished, or ridiculed beyond repair." See also Bobo (Ibid): 43-51; and Calvin Hernton's *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers*.

⁴⁴ Bobo, Ibid.

⁴⁵ Barbara Christian, "De-Visioning Spielberg and Walker: The Color Purple--The Novel and the Film," Center for the Study of Woman and Society, University of Oregon. Eugene, 20 May 1986.

novel.⁴⁶ One unnamed reviewer, according to Bobo, wondered, if it were obligatory in every film that contained Black actors and actresses that they sing and dance. Walker herself was shocked to learn that Spielberg considered *Gone with the Wind*, the ode to the Southern confederacy, “the greatest film ever made.”⁴⁷

Bobo furthermore noted that Spielberg caricatured two pivotal figures of Walker’s novel that represented Black feminist transformation—Sofia, who is widely understood as the book’s most revolutionary woman, and her husband Harpo. Harpo is turned into a buffoon because the film was not able to portray a man uncomfortable with the requirements of patriarchy. Christian adds that “the movie makes a negative statement about men who show some measure of sensitivity to women.” Wallace in her *Village Voice* review wrote⁴⁸

In the book Sofia is the epitome of a woman with masculine powers, the martyr to sexual injustice who eventually triumphs through the realignment of the community. In the movie she is an occasion for humor. She and Harpo are the reincarnation of Amos and Sapphire; they alternately fight and fuck their way to a house full of pickaninnies. Harpo is always falling through the roof he’s chronically unable to repair. Sofia is always shoving a baby into his arms, swinging her large hips, and talking a mile a minute. Harpo, who is dying to marry Sofia in the book, seems bamboozled into marriage in the film. Sofia’s only masculine power is her contentiousness.

Yet, Bobo contended that Black women spectators extracted their own “subversive cultural readings” from the film, ferreting out that which they found beneficial and discarding the rest. She described how Black audiences deployed this technique as an unconscious reaction to and defense against racist stereotypes of

⁴⁶ See Jill Nelson, “Spielberg’s Purple is Still Black,” *Guardian* 29 Jan. 1986: 1; Barbara Smith, “Color Purple Distorts Class, Lesbian Issues,” *Guardian* 19 Feb. 1986; Michele Wallace, *Ibid*; Frances M. Beal “The Purple Comes Through, But Not the Black.” *Frontline* 20 Jan. 1986: 16.

⁴⁷ See Evelyn C. White (406)

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

themselves in media. Bobo concluded that, “Black female viewers ‘rewrote’ the work and were able to uncover something worthwhile and progressive from the film (11).”

By the mid to latter part of the next decade *The Color Purple* morphed into an African American cinema classic, owned by and screened by many African American families around the holidays and special events.⁴⁹ The film’s migration to home video and later DVD markets shifted spectatorship from the public sphere in theatres to the private sphere in homes. Therefore, it is no leap of faith to surmise that the enthusiastic African American women moviegoers described by Barbara Christian and Jacqueline Bobo probably numbered among those who purchased *The Color Purple* on home video and later DVD.⁵⁰ Significantly, the controversial “airing of dirty laundry” about African American family secrets—stories of gendered domestic violence and incest and the film’s ostensibly unflattering portrayal of Black men, ceased to garner outside scrutiny from mainstream media. Today, the market for entertainment vehicles derived from this transgressive Black feminist novel continues to expand. The musical based on the film has reinvigorated the novel and plans are afoot for a musical-to-film adaption.⁵¹ *The Color Purple* is one of the most-read books about incest in the world.⁵² But what are the lessons of this controversy with respect to more recent iterations?

⁴⁹ This citation is based on my personal observations over the years. For example, the late Dr. Cheryl Wall noted in a conversation with me that the film was screened in a Black hair salon that she patronized and the women there practically lip-synced dialogue from the film line for line. My girlhood friend Karen spoke of screening *The Color Purple* annually with her college-age daughter Lauren since Lauren’s childhood. “It is Black folks’ own *Gone with the Wind*,” she beamed.

⁵⁰ I have several members of my family who are among this group.

⁵¹ *The Color Purple* musical website http://colorpurple.com/the_color_purple_musical.php

⁵² Janice L. Doane, and Devon L. Hodges. *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2001 (63.)

Push: A Novel of Incest, H.I.V. AIDS and Transformative Literacy

The novel *Push* concerns an obese illiterate impoverished Harlem teenager—Claireece “Precious” Jones who is sexually abused by both her mother and father growing up in Harlem in the 1980s in the midst of the crack epidemic and the beginnings of the AIDS crisis. Now pregnant for the second time with her father’s child (her first child – a daughter she called Mongo, short for “Mongoloid”—has Down’s Syndrome), Precious is “pushed” out of her Junior High School and accepted into an alternative school. There, an extraordinary teacher, Blue Rain—a dreadlocked lesbian poet like *Precious’* author Sapphire—helps her find a new path in her life through literacy, journaling, exposure to Black feminist literature, especially *The Color Purple*, and a subsequent new personal and spiritual politics.

By the book’s conclusion Precious has given birth to her second son—Abdul Jamal Louis Jones—who is free of Down’s Syndrome, escaped her hellacious home and violent mother to a halfway house for girls, and earned a citywide award for literacy. Yet with these achievements, she learns that she is H.I.V. positive, a disease passed onto her by her now-deceased crack-addicted father. Challenged to say the least, Precious is nonetheless empowered by a new vision of herself. She has been emancipated from her isolation and oppressive home life through loving relationships—with her teacher, supportive Latina and Black female classmates in her pre-GED literacy program, new membership in a multiracial incest survivor support group, and especially through her growing literacy and personal writings. Despite her H.I.V. positive status, she is on the path to realizing her dreams of graduating high school, possibly going to college, and caring for her son in a loving space.

Push pays homage to *The Color Purple*, the book Blue Rain assigns to the class and Precious reads with great difficulty. The novel also highlights the writings of other Black authors, including the African American lesbian feminists Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, who also influence Precious. Precious' language and dialect reflect the influence of Walker's *The Color Purple* and several works by Zora Neale Hurston. In her New York Times review Rosemary Mahoney writes

Much of the novel is told in a hobbled, minimal English that defies the conventions of spelling and usage and dispenses with all verbal decorum. Yet Precious' persona swiftly overrides whatever irritation the reader may feel at having to puzzle through her not always convincingly misshapen words.⁵³

Precious' voice develops along with her classmates as she learns the alphabet and begins to phonetically write poetry and prose. As a longtime victim of her father's rape and violence, Precious is conflicted by her own experiences of pleasure, that she is still able to have an orgasm with him. When her father completely disappears from her life, she experiences confusion. In addition, colorism—discrimination against Precious on the basis of her dark skin—is continually enacted and perpetuated against her. Encouraged by her teacher Ms. Rain to write about her fantasy of a perfect life for herself, Precious wishes for light-skin and long hair which she believes will bring her protection, worth, and admiration.

As *Push* progresses, Precious' ideas about lesbians and homosexuals, and her desire for a corrective and responsible Black patriarchy expressed through her admiration for Minister Louis Farrakhan “a real Black man... who doesn't fuck his daughter, fuck children...” are also challenged (58). Precious initially views Farrakhan's teachings

⁵³ The same thing happens with Celie in *The Color Purple*, as the reader becomes more engrossed in her character than her Southern dialect.

about benevolent patriarchy in Black families as an anecdote to the incest and brutality she has suffered. Farrakhan's picture is taped to her bedroom wall.

Yet Ms. Rain challenges Precious' ideas about Farrakhan calling him "a homophobe and anti-semite (58)." Though Precious does not give up her admiration for Farrakhan, by the middle of the book Precious has placed a picture of Harriet Tubman next to him, metaphorically adding a Black woman to her repertoire of icons. By the book's end she has added Alice Walker's photo next to Farrakhan, Tubman and underneath it her literacy award (88).

A classmate, Rita Romero, initiates Precious into an incest support group at the Gay and Lesbian Center on 13th Street in New York City. As she listens to the many women of different ethnicities, ages, races, and colors, and as she tells her own painful story to the group, her sense of isolation as an African American incest survivor begins to melt away.

What am I hearing!

... All kinda women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no *the* thing, is we was rape. (131)

There are two endings to the book. In the first one, Precious is sitting in the halfway house with her son Abdul, reading him *The Black BC's* by Lucille Clifton.

When the sun shine on him like this, he is an angel child. Brown sunshine. And my heart fill. Hurt. One year? Five? Ten years? Maybe more if I take care of myself. Maybe a cure. Who knows, who is working on shit like that? Look his nose is so shiny, his eyes shiny. He my shiny brown boy. In his beauty I see my own. He pulling on my earring, want me to stop daydreaming and read him a story before nap time. I do. (138-139)

In the book's alternative or second ending there is a series of 35 unpaginated journal entries that include not only Precious' writing but those of her classmates, Rita, Jo Ann, Jermaine and Rhonda. In her closing poem Precious writes

Ms. Rain say
 walk on into the powem
 the HEART of it
 beating like clock
 a virus
 tick tock

The final words of the novel “tick / tock”—remind us that the future of Precious and her child is perilous, although she has come so far.

The Film Precious and Colorism

As I write this paper the lines between the film *Precious* and the book *Push* blurred months ago, as have my readings into both works. And so have the various debates. In late November 2009 I see the film. I am moved and stunned into silence like the primarily African American audience at the Magic Johnson Theatre in Harlem who file outside after the screening. Much of the audience is young and includes teenage girls and boys.

I have never seen this story of the Black incest survivor told or visualized with such interiority and artfulness. This was certainly not my experience of Celie in Spielberg’s *The Color Purple*. I am haunted by *Precious*, yet troubled by some of its aesthetics—the film’s own internal dynamics of “colorism.” Many African American reviewers, myself included, note that the characters who help Precious are light-skinned or White.⁵⁴ Furthermore, outside of two classmates in the Each One/Reach One pre-GED program that Precious attends, all the characters who harm, menace or brutalize Precious—especially her parents—are dark-skinned.

⁵⁴ See Jill Nelson; Ishmael Reid; Salimishah Tillett; Armond White,

To director Lee Daniels' credit he openly admits (or testifies) to his biases and presumptions in *The New York Times Magazine* cover story "The Audacity of Precious"

What I learned from doing the film is that even though I am black, I'm prejudiced. I'm prejudiced against people who are darker than me. When I was young, I went to a church where the lighter-skinned you were, the closer you sat to the altar. Anybody that's heavy like Precious—I thought they were dirty and not very smart. Making this movie changed my heart. I'll never look at a fat girl walking down the street the same way again.

I spent eight years making a documentary film for national PBS on African American internalized racism concerning skin color, hair texture and facial features—*A Question of Color* (1993.) I know that the colorism of *Precious* is glaringly problematic. Notwithstanding this fact *Precious* has profoundly affected me. And there are aspects of the film that powerfully convey Precious' conflicted self-image and vulnerability.

In a scene early in *Precious*, Gabourey Sidibe, the 350-pound first-time screen actress who powerfully portrays the title role, uncurls a roller from her straightened hair. As an obese, dark-skinned African American girl, she looks in the mirror, and sees a slender "attractive" White girl looking back at her with blonde hair. It is one of many powerful fantasy scenes in the film that Precious retreats to in order to survive her violently tragic young life. Though no such scene exists in Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push*, it is reminiscent of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* and that is no accident. Sapphire, a consultant to the film *Precious*, locates her own work in the tradition of *The Bluest Eye*, an earlier and highly acclaimed African American novel about incest and colorism that predated *The Color Purple*.

Sifting Through the Precious Discourse

Within a few days, I am in the midst of an ongoing disagreement with one of my close friends, also a filmmaker, about the film. We agree on the colorism critique, and both express some concerns about the way that *Precious* is “under exposed” throughout most of her footage with the exception of her fantasies. However, my friend increasingly dislikes the film while I increasingly defend it. Look at how the film casts the institutions that have failed girls like *Precious* as her savior, she says. Look at how the film “mother blames.” While I am in agreement with her over these points, I cannot discount the power that this film has had on me, nor the ways that I find it valuable. Over the next few weeks, we begin trading emails.

I begin an e-list and send reviews and some arguments to various friends. I am also saying early on that this debate is reminding me of the *The Color Purple* controversy, even before I see the film. Once the Oscar nominations are announced the “hating” on the film increases. I wonder if *Precious* will ever be seen judged on its own merits and weaknesses by people like myself and whether it actually ever should be. I found large numbers of Black people are choosing to not see or “boycott” the film, and quite a few are blogging about it.

Conversely, I observe a resounding positivity about the film amongst the working-class Black women and girls I speak to about it—including my aunts and cousins who find the film to be “hard” but “real.” After I see the movie *Precious* I read the book *Push* almost immediately. I find it powerful, stronger than the film, and more politically progressive with its inherent critiques of the workfare program, homophobia,

xenophobia and patriarchal Black nationalism. However, it is the public sphere of cinema where the controversy around *Precious* like *The Color Purple* has fully exploded.

I discover a complexity of views about the film by scholars Imani Perry, Salamishah Tillet, Aisha Durham, Jennifer Williams, and writer/activist Malkia Cyril and others whose perspectives parallel and influence my own. Imani Perry, a legal scholar, writes online in *Afronetizen* that *Precious* has touched off a conversation about race and representation of African Americans in the 21st century at time when the gaps between African American “haves” and “have nots” has widened and deepened. She cites this schism as beginning in the 1980s during the setting of *Precious*. Perry describes how deindustrialization, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the emergence of a range of opportunities for Black college educated people that had never before been possible, served to broaden the gap. The results today are evidenced in a larger, more empowered Black middle and elite class, emblemized by an Ivy-league-educated Black president. However, the growth of the prison industrial complex and the loss of blue-collar jobs also yield a poorer, more fractured, and disempowered African American poor.

Perry asserts the value of the film

On the one hand we embrace a film like *Precious* because it highlights a kind of suffering that our society fails to respond to. Children who are poor and of color... are less likely to have families that are able to marshal resources to deal with trauma, mental illness, and addiction. At the same time, poor, emotionally scarred parents who become abusers have virtually no resources to repair themselves.

Conversely Salamishah Tillet, an English professor, writes in *The Roots* of some of the film’s limitations

Precious does not make the same formidable critique of patriarchy that *The Color Purple* does. While we are repulsed by the incest narrative, there is no Pa or

Mister, who governs over Celie with an iron-fist. In his place is Mary, Precious' cruel, welfare-dependent, African-American mother whose very presence conjures up stereotypes about deviant black motherhood that bloomed during the Reagan era in which the film is set.

As filmmaker Aishah Simmons also points out, while the film innovatively highlights the reality of mother-on-child violence, audience members can only wonder if “the film is much more palatable to digest because darker brown skinned, overweight black women, especially single mothers, are so demonized in society.”

Aisha Durham, an Assistant Professor of Communications and Africana Studies writes about ground breaking class implications in *Precious*, the film's projection of new and multiple stories of Black female subjectivity, as well the ways that Black women's life chances are deeply impacted by their navigation through and their cooperation with the state.

There can be multiple stories. There can be multiple stories. There can be multiple stories. What *Precious* reveals is the cultural politics surrounding class for black folks...

I liked *Precious* because it does illuminate the impact of the patriarchal state vis-à-vis violence. Violence is structural and systemic through poverty, institutional and disciplinary through the welfare, juvenile justice and educational system, and interpersonal through emotional, physical and sexual, and verbal abuse and aggression. (And, yes those are interrelated.) The life chances of the poor black women in the film are deeply impacted by their navigation through and their cooperation with the state. Food, shelter and family cohesion are tied to (or severed by) the state.

Precious must perform a re-victimization for the caseworker to “get her check” while performing acceptable black motherhood for another caseworker to keep her kid(s). The state commands the performance while simultaneously using these “acts” as evidence of black pathology. While national discussions about the state has routinely addressed the lived realities of black men, *Precious* forcefully depicts the significant role of the state in the policing and surveillance of poor black females.

Malkia Cyril an activist asks

Can you imagine that patriarchal colonialism and a generational experience of slavery can result in an experience of powerlessness and shame that can twist the mind and give rise to the belief that your three-year-old child has stolen your man? These women are two sides of the one coin, mother and daughter. Both trapped in different ways, both villainized by “culture of poverty” research....

While *Precious* received almost uniform praise from White critics, it has been significantly more controversial amongst African American intellectuals. A Black feminist writer Jill Nelson and anti-feminist writer Ishmael Reed both deplore the film, call it an ode to self-loathing, cite its colorism in particular but generally suggest the entire film is a conspiracy to degrade African Americans. In Reed’s Op-Ed article in the *New York Times* he accuses the filmmakers and Sapphire of suggesting that incest is more prevalent among African Americans and working to further defame the image of Black men as brutal rapists.

Sapphire writes in response to Reed that she would like “to see black males less defensive and more courageous in their investigations of sexual abuse in the Black community.” She reminds Reed that while the effects of sexual abuse are traumatic for any group of women, black women more often than any other ethnic group must deal with being infected with H.I.V. by our perpetrators.

Armond White of the New York Press appears to despise *Precious* with a passion and as a member of the New York Circle of Critics actively campaigned against it. Ironically, he was one of the few men who championed *The Color Purple* on Tony Brown’s Journal and elsewhere in 1986. He refers to *Precious* as an “orgy of prurience,” “a Klansman’s fantasy,” “racist propaganda cast from ‘Birth of a Nation’” and “bad art because it is a bad representation, a reminder that for black people, art and politics are inseparable.”

Erin Aubrey Kaplan of the Los Angeles Times argues against White, stating “...one of the unusual things about *Precious*” is that it doesn’t try to separate those things, and so forces us to think beyond negative positive binary that often keep discussions about movies like this airless and superficial.”

Further, Janet Williams, a self-described Black feminist literary and cultural critic, blogs on March 3, 2010 that

pushes toward ‘positive’ representations tend to be a middle class and masculinist means of disciplining the working class, queers, and women in order to represent a ‘respectable’ face of blackness to the (white) public. Granted PRECIOUS merits critique... At the same time, far too many critiques orbit around the ‘politics of respectability’ and the need for black cultural producers to produce ‘positive’ images of black people. Who determines what’s ‘positive’? Far too often, so-called ‘positive’ or ‘heroic’ images of black people undermine our humanity. They do not account for fallibility, desire, and homogeneity.”

<http://blackfemme.blogspot.com/search?q=precious>.

In Conclusion

As a Black feminist, a filmmaker and increasingly a writer, I am drawn to the novel *Push* and its cinematic adaptation *Precious* --now teaching it, writing about it, and occasionally still arguing about it. More than twenty-five years ago—I was a young filmmaker—and more than a full decade away from naming myself a Black feminist. I stood on the naysayer side for a time of *The Color Purple*, critiquing Alice Walker and wondering why she was so willing to demonize Black men. Despite my love for her book *Meridian* and many of her other writings, I was thoroughly influenced by the popular politics of the “Endangered Black Male Narrative” that cast Black men as the central victims of racism. Consequently, I read Walker’s novel with some trepidation in 1983.

Yet by the time I saw the film, I wondered what all the uproar was about. In the pre- *Daughters of the Dust*⁵⁵ years of Black independent cinema, I had rarely seen dark-skinned Black women so lovingly lit as in the Spielberg's Hollywood close-ups as the heroines of their own stories. I found *The Color Purple* not particularly offensive, but it soft-pedaled the book's Black feminist themes and the depiction of southern racial apartheid. Moreover, regarding the contention that the film demonized Black men, I actually found the film rather innocuous. In short, seeing the movie propelled me to revisit and rethink my objections to the book. In the years to come I would completely re-evaluate my thinking on Walker's novel, name myself a Black feminist, and find myself amazed at the *déjà vu* aspects of the *Push/Precious* controversy.

I am therefore drawn to this statement by E. Frances White (2000)

I interrogate the ideology of respectability that has motivated many African Americans, from black nationalists to black feminists... I am particularly concerned with the ways that we build political cohesion and form community by drawing too narrowly the boundaries of our (imagined) community... (14)

Alice Walker and Sapphire shred Black respectability politics and extend the boundaries of Blackness with their respective novels *The Color Purple* and *Push*. *Push*, as aforementioned, is also Sapphire's homage to *The Color Purple*. In the next chapter "Cinematic Audre Lorde: *Pariah* and the Possibility for Transformation," I explore how Black lesbian feminist filmmaker Dee Rees draws inspiration from and pays tribute to Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami*. Encouraged by *Zami*, Rees pens and directs her narrative feature film *Pariah*.

⁵⁵ Released in 1991 *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash was the first feature film directed by an African American woman to receive national distribution. Arguably, the film reclaimed and redefined Black women's cinematic representation and is noted for its striking portrayals of dark skinned African American women with natural hair.

Pariah concerns a shy, sexually curious lesbian teenager, Alike, who has not yet “come out” to her middle-class parents. Alike’s mother in particular, who is deeply religious, is mired in heteropatriarchal respectability politics. I contend that *Pariah* in its ode to Lorde’s *Zami* follows a genealogical path of African American feminist cultural production that challenges patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia and expands the boundaries of Blackness, like the novels *The Color Purple* and *Push* and the film *Precious Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*.

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Chapter Four: Cinematic Audre Lorde:
Pariah and the Possibility for Transformation

As black filmmakers, how can we broaden gay and lesbian experience and imagery beyond the “celluloid closet”? How will we construct an ethnocentric, diverse nation of lovers? How will we undertake this birth of a notion?

Michelle Parkerson “Birth of a Notion: Towards a Black Gay and Lesbian Imagery in Film and Video (1983)”

Only by telling our stories in the most specific, imagistic, and imaginative narratives do the lives of black lesbians take on long-term literary and political significance.

Jewelle Gomez, 2000

Introduction

Part of the title of this article is a variation on a seminal 1983 essay by poet/scholar/activist Cheryl Clarke entitled “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community.” Clarke takes the Black Arts Movement to task for its homophobia arguing that, “not only must black lesbians and gay men be committed to destroying homophobia, but *all* black people must be committed to working out and rooting out homophobia in the black community. (79)” The two African American lesbian artists quoted –Michelle Parkerson, a pioneering documentary filmmaker and Jewelle Gomez, a celebrated poet, novelist and essayist, posit challenges for future queer Black cultural production.

Writer and director Dee Rees’ critically acclaimed feature film *Pariah* takes a giant step toward furthering/addressing the directives/or queries of Clarke, Parkerson, and Gomez. Despite *Pariah*’s seemingly conventional coming of age and coming out narrative, *Pariah* is a subversive film that breaks new ground artistically and socially and serves as a historical marker of this contemporary moment in African American cultural

politics. Filmmaker/cultural critic Nelson George described *Pariah* as, “the most visible example of the mini-movement of young black filmmakers telling stories that complicate assumptions about what ‘black films’ can be by embracing thorny issues of identity, alienation and sexuality.”

Pariah tells the story of Alike (pronounced ah-lee-kay) or Lee, portrayed by Adepero Aduye, a shy, sexually curious lesbian teenager in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, who is struggling to “come out” within the confines of her rigidly religious and strait-laced middle-class family and in sectors of her African American community. She is also a virgin and her struggle is also to define what kind of lesbian she wants to be. Sneaking out to a nearby Black lesbian club with her best friend, she dons a cap, and loose fitting clothes and enters a gangster hip hop themed world where “A.G.’s”—meaning “aggressive girls”, lesbians who adapt a gangster hip hop macho persona, reign supreme. It is a world where Alike is not entirely comfortable, and where she subtly questions the binaries of “butch” and “femme.”

Alike’s openly lesbian, butch best friend Laura—played by Pernell Walker—tells her to look tougher and her conservative, churchgoing mom Audre—played by Kim Wayans—wants to dress Alike in frilly pink clothes, effectively stifle her lesbianism, and enforce compulsory heterosexuality. Audre attempts to enlist her husband Arthur, a decorated police detective in this endeavor. The filmmakers entitle the film *Pariah*, defined as “a person without status, a rejected member of society, and an outcast.” One of Alike’s struggles is that she neither fits the lesbian butch/femme dichotomy practiced by Laura or the heterosexual world of her parents.

Yet she finds an ally in her warm but distant father Arthur, who bitterly remains in an unhappy marriage and is likely having an outside affair. Both parents demonstrate intense denial about Alike's sexuality. Yet Alike never fully hides her lesbian identity but negotiates her way between worlds with distinct wardrobe changes. Her straight disguises are indifferent but attempts to strap on a rubber white penis and pose as an A.G.—that is a hypermasculine “butch” identified lesbian—do not work for her either.

A brilliant student and budding poet, Alike is casually seduced by Bina, a seemingly “straight” girl, whom her mother has pre-approved and pressured Alike to befriend. Flirty, bohemian, and bi-sexually curious, Bina proves to be a heart breaker. She abandons Alike the morning after their night together yet requires that Alike keep their affair a secret. Distraught by the rejection, Alike is drawn into a disturbing and violent confrontation with her mother as Alike finally comes out. Her high school poetry teacher, her friend Laura, and ultimately her father and sister help Alike to recover. Through her poetic voice and by coming out she is empowered.

Rees foregrounds *Pariah* in the writing of Audre Lorde, a self-described Black lesbian mother feminist warrior woman. I argue that *Pariah* through its ode to Lorde and cinematic reflections on key Lordean concepts follows a genealogical path of groundbreaking African American feminist cultural productions in literature, cinema, and the arts which challenge patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia and expand the boundaries of Blackness. I furthermore locate *Pariah* in several Black cinematic movements. In addition, the rich visual aesthetics of *Pariah* reflects a powerful artistic collaboration that I liken to a previous groundbreaking film by Julie Dash *Daughters of the Dust*. Simultaneously, the film can be viewed as a corrective to Spike Lee's own seminal but

misogynistic and homophobic Black independent cinema classic *She's Gotta Have It*. In sum, I argue that Rees' dramatic film broadens Black gay and lesbian experience and imagery beyond the Black "celluloid closet" and heterosexist imagination, and beyond the homonormative binary constructs of butch and femme.

Pariah: Literary and Cinematic Genealogies

1. Black Feminism and *Zami*: The Literary Influence

Dee Rees was a baby when Bernice Reagon published her much cited essay "The Borning Struggle: The Civil Rights Movement" in 1979. Reagon's text describes how the Black freedom struggle in the 1960s shook up the U.S. social order so thoroughly that it cleared the way for many other liberation movements, including various incarnations of the modern woman's movement and the gay and lesbian movements.⁵⁶ While cultural critics and scholars like Salimishah Tillet, Nelson George and Kara Keeling provide vibrant analyses of Black cinema genealogies that lead to Dee Rees' emergence as a film artist and *Pariah*'s unprecedented success, I specifically advance the argument that *Pariah* as a Black cinema milestone is equally linked to a movement of literary and political interventions made by Black feminist writers in the 1970s through the 1990s.

Film critic B. Ruby Rich in discussing race and queer cinema in 1993 identifies a literary lineage of African American and Latina lesbian anthologies--*Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, and *This Bridge Called My Back*. She cites Jewelle Gomez, Gloria

⁵⁶ Notably, a range of Black women of various political persuasions played a formative role in the formation and development of a number of these movements. See Alice Echol's *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* and Kimberly Springer's *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*.

Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith, and especially Audre Lorde who created vital literature for these projects and beyond. These writers helped lay the theoretical groundwork for a range of Black lesbian filmmakers who would follow.

In an interview in *The Root* with Linda Villarosa—a journalist who wrote her own coming out story in *Essence Magazine* in 1991⁵⁷--Rees speaks of finding a home in books, in “womanist literature” by Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison. Rees describes feelings of being an outsider in Nashville, Tennessee and not knowing how to articulate it. “Reading made me feel like I was OK, like I wasn’t alone.” Rees discusses her coming out process in *The Independent* when she directed her first rendition of *Pariah* as a short film in 2007. She read a great deal of Audre Lorde and listened to Nina Simone “...but Audre Lorde was who I latched on to and followed her life journey.” *Pariah* opens with a quote from Lorde’s biomythography *Zami*, “Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs.” According to Rees, “...that means she has no place and there is no place for her and that’s how I interpret it... She feels like she doesn’t have a place.”

Historian E. Frances White writes

In *Zami*, Lorde interrogates the meaning of community. She poses these questions: Where is my community? Is it among white lesbians who could not deal with my blackness? Is it with black female friends who pretended to ignore my sexuality? *Zami* is an intensely erotic book firmly positioned in the “sex debates” of the 1980s. Lorde argued strenuously for the importance of the erotic and open sexuality in women’s lives. (50)

⁵⁷ Linda Villarosa and her mother Clara Villarosa wrote candidly about their experiences in “Coming Out” *Essence*, May 1991. The story generated an unprecedented and largely positive reader response.

Jewelle Gomez further situates *Zami* and Alice Walker's lesbian-themed novel *The Color Purple* as works that served to validate her own life, by historicizing the existence of Black lesbians.

The idea that lesbianism was a white, modern thing was challenged when we read about the loving between Shug and Celie in the era of juke joints and moonshine. Reading about Audre Lorde making her way through the lesbian life of New York's West Village in the 1950s makes that sexual self-determination a heroic goal akin to the other struggles for human rights she's experienced. And just as it had been true with the recovery of black history in the 1960s, it was no longer easy to dismiss black lesbians once we were identified as part of black history. (172-173)

Rees says, "A big part of my struggle was not just knowing that I loved women, but who I was in the world. I had to learn to be OK with myself, and I wanted to dramatize that." Rees came out as she defines it "late in life" to her parents--at aged 27. She describes feeling herself like a pariah, which ultimately became the title of her film. Rees' family arranged interventions in person and through cards, emails, letters and Bible verses. In an online interview⁵⁸ Rees talks about how her father even wondered if divorcing her mother "caused" her to become a lesbian." "It took some time to get them to understand that my sexuality was not a choice...And that I was the same person that I always had been⁵⁹." However, Rees describes her elation at the New York City premiere of *Pariah* seven years later when her parents told her how proud they were of her, how much they loved her... "It was magical."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Interview with Quincy McCoy, December 26, 2011.
http://www.salon.com/2011/12/26/%E2%80%9Cpariah%E2%80%9D_director_dee_rees_the_catharsis_of_coming_out/

⁵⁹ Ibid, Villarosa.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Rees utilized *Zami* as a production tool. She provided a copy along with a collection of Lorde's poetry to actress Adepero Aduye⁶¹ to prepare her for the role of Alike. Aduye, who grew up in Brooklyn, the daughter of Nigerian immigrant parents, spoke of reading and re-reading *Zami* along with the script. Aduye was inspired in particular by one quote by Lorde that encapsulates Alike's journey: "I knew what it was like to be haunted by the ghost of a self one wished to be, but only half sensed." Aduye wrote the quote on the front page of the script. She reflects, "That is Alike, and as Adepero I know what that feels like—somewhere deep inside, to know that there's this person who is free, that the possibility is there... she knows there's an option to be who she is, and not juggle and be what other people want her to be."

Lorde's writing also informed Rees' authoring of a powerful poem by Alike that concludes the film. Alike is inspired by her teacher upon a series of rejections, first by Bina, then her mother, to "go deeper" into her poetry. Alike describes herself as "broken" and "yet free," a powerful metaphor for Alike's transition to becoming an empowered autonomous subject, able to represent herself in the world. In a perhaps too-tidy rush to conclusion ending, Alike leaves Brooklyn to attend a pre-college writing program for high school students in California.

Sarah Schulman, author of the recent book *The Ties that Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*, discusses homophobia in the family as being the most common queer experience that transcends every national category, every way a

⁶¹ Meryl Streep in her 2012 Oscar Best Actress acceptance speech hailed Aduye as an actress who could have just as likely received the Oscar that year. This is all the more noteworthy in that Aduye was not even nominated but mentioned alongside the four other Oscar nominees. Jorge Rivas. "Adepero Oduye Responds to Meryl Streep's Shout Out at Golden Globes" in Colorlines. <http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/01/adepero_oduye_responds_to_meryl_streeps_shout_out_at_golden_globes.html>

queer person thinks of themselves—class, race, language, and age⁶². Sympathetic family members, Alike’s father and sister Shorandah, are mirrored in *Pariah* in empathetic ways and positioned against Audrey who is revealed to be caring, yet wrongheaded and desperate in her doctrinaire beliefs informed by religiosity. Shorandah for instance, assures Alike, “you know it doesn’t matter to me what you do.” *Pariah* addresses this conflicted family dynamic experience with such poignancy it helps advance an urgent discourse, particularly in African American communities where racial uplift and respectability politics is mired in patriarchal heteronormativity. I now turn to a discussion of Black cinema genealogies beginning with that of Black lesbian filmmakers.

II. *Pariah* and Black Lesbian Cinema

An astute article in *The Root* by cultural critic/scholar Salimishah Tillet entitled “20 Years of Black Lesbian Cinema” states that “a slew of unheralded but significant films helped pave the way for critically acclaimed *Pariah*” and cites a range of work including coming-out films released between 1991-1996 as the part of “the golden age of black queer cinema.” Tillet links this five-year outpouring to an overlapping slightly earlier wave of Black independent cinema—films produced outside of the Hollywood mainstream—that included Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It*, Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* and two highly influential documentaries by Marlon Riggs—*Tongues Untied* and *Black Is... Black Ain’t*. My goal here is to attenuate aspects of her article and embellish the discussion of two key filmmakers—Cheryl Dunye and Michelle Parkerson whose connections to *Pariah* become apparent.

⁶² “Sarah Schulman Takes on the Gay Gatekeepers” interviewed by Antonio Gonzalez Cerna in Lambda Literary. <<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/07/22/sarah-schulman-takes-on-the-gay-gatekeepers/>>

Cheryl Dunye's comedic 1996 documentary *Watermelon Woman*, the first Black lesbian feature-length film to receive a theatrical release, is a landmark film. As a film within a film, *Watermelon Woman* concerns a Black lesbian filmmaker named Cheryl—played by Dunye herself—who is researching Fae Richards, a Black actress known for her mammy roles in the 1930s. Cheryl uncovers a hidden history, that Richards was part of an underground black lesbian community in Philadelphia throughout her life, and involved in a sexual relationship with Martha Page, a White female director. Since the release of *Watermelon Woman* there have been more than 20 features directed by black lesbians. Tillet notes that the success of *Pariah* and a recent film by Ava DuVernay *I Will Follow*, “indicates a significant shift in the exploration of the inner lives of black women—their sexual desires, contradictory emotions, lost loves and found selves—on the big screen.”

One of the most prolific Black lesbian documentary directors is Michelle Parkerson, whom I have previously quoted. The Washington, D.C. based poet turned filmmaker became one of the first out Black lesbians in the 1970s -1980s to produce and direct documentaries, largely on the lives of African American women artists. One of her early works was *But Then She's Betty Carter* (1980) on the internationally acclaimed jazz singer and “scatter” Betty Carter. The film was followed by Parkerson's PBS documentary *Gotta Make this Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock* (1983) concerning the a cappella singing group, co-founded by Bernice Reagon. *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987) followed, chronicling the life of Stormé DeLarverie, emcee and male impersonator at the Jewel Box Revue, which featured gender-impersonation and played largely on the segregated Black Theatre Circuit from the 1950s through the 1960s.

Parkerson teamed with Ada Gay Griffin to complete the feature length documentary *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1995), an experimental documentary about the life and contributions of Lorde told through Lorde's own voice, including her poetry readings, speeches, and portions of *Zami*. The film also offers the musings of friends and colleagues—a veritable who's who and visualization of Black, White, Brown and Asian lesbian feminist writers and activists in the late 1980s to the early 1990s including Adrienne Rich, Barbara Smith, Jewel Gomez, and Sapphire. The documentary follows Lorde through the end of her life as she is physically diminished by the cancer she fought and held at bay for more than a decade. An inspiring and archivally rich work, it was later edited for PBS into a one-hour version that unfortunately lacks some of the power and complexity of the original feature length documentary.

Tillet cites Aishah Shahidah Simmons' coming-out short films *In My Father's House* and *Silence... Broken*; Jocelyn Taylor's *Like a Prayer*, *Looking for LaBelle* and *Bodily Functions*; and Yvonne Welbon's *Living with Pride: Ruth C. Ellis@100* which offer powerful testimonies of Black lesbian experiences. Simmons⁶³ and Welbon⁶⁴ have produced a body of work in particular as well as critical writings and websites that deserve greater analysis in another text. In addition, to *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye also directed six short works prior to *The Watermelon Woman*. Two short narratives *The Potluck* and *The Passion* (1990) and *She Don't Fade* (1991) concern the screwball sensual escapades of a young lesbian who seeks pleasure in a variety of beds. Dunye,

⁶³ Simmons completed *NO! The Rape Documentary!* in 2010 concerning Black women and sexual assault. The film includes a detailed study guide and interactive website.

⁶⁴ Welbon has made eight films and produced a dozen others. Notable is her feature length documentary on Black women independent filmmakers *Sisters in Cinema* (2003.)

who plays the protagonists in both films, breaks the third wall and often speaks directly into the camera.

Dunye discusses⁶⁵ having made these films in response to the problematic lesbian character, Opal Gilstrap, in Spike Lee's landmark first feature film *She's Gotta Have It*. Gilstrap, as Michelle Parkerson has pointed out, is a "predatory lesbian vamp (234)" and seems to exist for the sole purpose of seducing the heterosexually identified Nola Darling. Dunye playfully and effectively shreds the Opal Gilstrap caricature in a world where young twenty-something-ish African American and Latina lesbians happily pursue erotic relations with one another. Dunye, Parkerson, Yvonne Welbonne, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, Dawn Suggs, and Jocelyn Taylor among others prefigure and foreground Dee Rees who emerges in 2007 with *Pariah*, first as a critically acclaimed short film that creates a "buzz" at the Sundance Film Festival. Later with the backing of the Sundance Institute, The Tribeca Film Center, and—ironically with a seemingly karmic turn—her New York University professor/mentor Spike Lee, Rees is able to parlay a critically acclaimed short film into a completed feature film that gains a national art house audience and builds a critical online community. I now engage in a discussion of contemporary Black independent cinema. My purpose is to connect key aesthetic and representational issues over time and space between Julie Dash's groundbreaking *Daughters of the Dust* and *Pariah*.

⁶⁵ Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz, eds., *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making*. Duke University Press, 2018.

III. Contemporary Black Independent Cinema and The Julie Dash Connection

Nelson George's in the New York Times positions Rees alongside a group of emergent young Black filmmakers whose feature narrative films were released at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and for whom the designation of the identity African American alone may be confining. Among them are Rees' recent New York University classmates and other cinematic cohorts. Rashad Ernesto Green who directed *Gun Hill Road* is both Black and Puerto Rican and takes on sexuality and race in a South Bronx community. Andrew Dosunmu, who directed *Restless City*, is Nigerian, and reflects the hustle and grind of African immigrants who work in the Canal Street area of Manhattan. Victoria Mahoney, director of the autobiographical *Yelling to the Sky* is Black and Irish and directs a seemingly autobiographical film about an outsider experience of being biracial in an African American Queens community.

George also usefully links this "mini movement" to other contemporary Black cinema movements. Included in this group of three are the entirely male African American directors who helped create the genre known as the "blaxploitation" films between 1970 and 1977; as well as a renaissance in Black filmmaking in 1991 in which 16 feature films by Black directors were released. That banner year witnessed the release of films Black feminists describe as "endangered Black male narrative films" -- *Boyz n the Hood* by John Singleton, *New Jack City* by Mario Van Peebles, and *Menace to Society* by the Hughes Brothers. *House Party* by Reginald and Warrington Hudlin was among the comedies and only one woman director, Julie Dash, released a feature film that year, *Daughter of the Dust*. She was in fact the first African American woman

director whose feature film received a theatrical release in the United States.⁶⁶ Dash, in fact, participated in the politically and artistically Pan Africanist “L.A. Rebellion” group who coalesced around the University of California, Los Angeles between the late 1960s – 1979. While these other movements were nearly entirely male, the L.A. Rebellion group, with its anti-Hollywood aesthetics, Third World Marxism, and Black feminist influences, included more women—among them Dash, Carroll Parrot Blue, Alile Sharon Larkin, Barbara McCullough, and Zeinabu Davis.

The L.A. Rebellion filmmakers were primarily concerned with artistic Black films that challenged Hollywood and operated in opposition to Blaxploitation cinema. These artists concerned themselves with the reconstruction of Black cinematic identity. Among the best known were both Charles Burnett, director of *Killer of Sheep* and later *To Sleep with Anger*, and the Ethiopian born Haile Gerima. Gerima, in addition to making eight feature films since 1974, taught filmmaking and Black film theory at Howard University since 1977.

I explore Dash in particular for her pioneering work that re-imagines African American women in cinema, particularly her aforementioned feature 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. Cinematically, the film represents a powerful collaboration between Dash and her then-husband and Director of Photography Arthur Jaffa who cultivated many of his ideas about Black visibility as a student of Gerima. It is notable that three of Gerima’s former students Ernest Dickerson, Arthur Jaffa, and Malik Sayeed

⁶⁶ The Martinican-born Euzhan Palcy directed and co-wrote *A Dry White Season* in 1990, becoming the first Black woman director to direct a feature film in Hollywood to receive a theatrical release. Her direction of Marlon Brando in the anti-apartheid film earned him an Oscar nomination. Palcy, at 25 years old had already been celebrated as a world-class filmmaker for her extraordinary Francophone feature film debut in 1983, *Sugarcane Alley*.

respectively became Spike Lee's first Directors of Photography. More recently, Bradford Young, a former student of Gerima's worked closely with Dee Rees as Director of Photography of *Pariah*. Therefore, Dee Rees as a filmmaker follows a powerful path that links her to earlier cohorts of outstanding Black filmmakers within an African American film movement.

Daughters of the Dust is also the first commercially released feature-length film written, directed and produced by an African American woman. Set on Ibo landing at the turn of the 20th century, the film witnesses the migration of the Peasant⁶⁷ family of the South Carolina Sea Islands to mainland, on route to the North. *Daughters of the Dust* depicts a struggle between the elder great-grandmother of the clan Nana to help the family retain the traditional spiritual and cultural ways of the family that she has passed down from her African lineage and those who wish to abandon Nana's "backward, hoo-doo" ways. The film's focus is on the stunning primarily dark-skinned women of the family who are central to most of the film's frames. Dash reconstructs beauty and humanity in *Daughters of the Dust* from a Black woman centered Pan-Africanist perspective. Arthur Jaffa lingers on the Peasant women, their smooth brown and dark-complexioned skin tones set off by elaborate natural hairstyles of braids, upsweeps, twists and dreadlocks and their flowing turn of the century white dresses.

Daughters of the Dust captured the imagination of several generations of politically and culturally conscious African Americans, particularly Black women. Film and literary scholars, cultural critics and media activists explored the film's many

⁶⁷ The family name Peasant is derivative of the word "peasant" which means according to Oxford Dictionary "a poor farmer of low social status who owns or rents a small piece of land for cultivation." It also reflects the status of most African Americans at the turn of the century.

meanings. They heralded the theatrical release of the film as a major cinematic event and cultural intervention and pondered its impact upon its primarily middle class Black female audiences who returned multiple times to see it. Gloria Gibson Hudson, Cheryl Wall, Yvonne Welbon—a filmmaker in her own rite, Toni Cade Bambara, Jacqueline Bobo, and bell hooks who was on the set of *Daughters of the Dust* when it was being filmed, were among those Black women writers who wrote about many aspects of the film. Janell Hobson contends that Dash alters not only the essential gender paradigm but also the racial paradigms of “looking” relations. She displaces the White male gaze as “bearer of the look” for she removes this gaze from her frame of reference. Dash also visually “challenges” Hollywood film models and focuses instead on images of black people—especially close-ups of brown-skinned and dark-complexioned African American women with natural, unprocessed hair (45).

Importantly, *Daughters of the Dust* contains a subtle presentation of a lesbian relationship. One of the Peasant women, Yellow Mary—a brown skinned woman who is somewhat lighter than most of the Peasant clan but “not that light to some people” is a businesswoman in the North, a sex worker. She returns home on the eve of the family’s departure from Ibo Landing with an even lighter complexioned female companion with long curly hair, Trula, who remains silent through much of the film. Dash explains in *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*

In my research I found that most prostitutes of that time were involved with other women. Their “significant others” were other women, so they were bisexual. And in developing Yellow Mary’s character I realized that she, as an independent businesswoman would not be traveling alone. In fact, she would have a significant other person (66).

Their lesbian relationship is subtly signified in this remarkably inclusive work that cinematically reconceptualizes Black women's historic image in cinema. Judylyn Ryan observes that

[Dash] uses the silent vocabulary of embrace, touch, and gaze to narrate the lesbian text of Trula and Yellow Mary's relationship. Given the film's 1902 setting, to have done otherwise, to have allowed a verbal narration of this "visual subplot," would have represented the discursive constraints on lesbian experience (1323.)

Dee Rees as a filmmaker follows a path forged by prior generations of Black artists and is broadly connected to a range of cinematic, literary and political movements. Like *Daughters of the Dust* the look of *Pariah* is distinctive, powerful, and deeply intimate. The central character Alike, is both dark complexioned with natural hair like her middle-class parents. Her sister Sharondah and best friend Laura are lighter skinned as is her love interest—the highly closeted Bina. The camera work is almost entirely handheld. Rees' Director of Photography and visual collaborator Bradford Young notes that, "There's been a gap where not a lot of work has been done to make people of color look (on screen) like we see them in the world." Young credits the work of two Gerima alumnae -- Malik Sayeed, as well as Ernest Dickerson in expanding the cinematic realm of people of color. He describes a visual curriculum with Gerima influenced by black art, literature and science, "We looked on African art through the centuries... paintings, murals, sculptures. So our references on what skin tone can look like come from art—Ethiopian church paintings and Nigerian textiles—not from the American cinema context" (Lindeman "Below the Line).

In a discussion on Pariah’s website Rees speaks of working closely with Young,⁶⁸

“

He and I collaborate from the heart to tell the story better, while maintaining a constant creative flow.” The two artists discussed Pariah for three years and shot it on 35mm film.

Rees explains

In closer angles on the characters, the camera is handheld, so it becomes more kinetic and personal and “breathes” with them. For wider angles, the camera is more omniscient and moves more subtly on dolly-mounted shots. Whether handheld or mounted, the camera is always moving with fluidity and motivated by the action that’s occurring in the scenes.

This is especially the case with the coverage on Alike, which consists of a lot of “peeking” or “eavesdropping” camera movements behind or between objects with long lenses that further enhance the sense of her being secretive and hiding.

Rees describes Alike as a chameleon and opts to use lighting such that Alike is “painted” with the dominant colors in her environment—purple in the nightclub, green on the bus. By the conclusion of the film she is “white” lit by “sunlight” in the final scene of the film. Yet Rees sees Alike’s best friend and mentor Laura in contrast as, “a proud peacock” though her world is a bit subterranean. Rees notes that, “She is in natural light a lot and is far more colorful; purple, blue, and fuchsia in the nightclub environment and lighter, freer colors like periwinkle and lavender in the home environment that she has made for herself. Laura’s wardrobe has much brighter, flashier hues than Alike’s,

⁶⁸ Transforming Passion into Pariah: A discussion with writer/director Dee Rees and producer Nekisha Cooper <http://focusfeatures.com/article/transforming_passion_into_pariah?film=pariah>

including blues, greens, and pinks. That underlines her basic spiritual freedom and independence.”

Young notes that, “Dee likes to live at the threshold where if you go either way, it might fall apart. She’s adventurous and confident in herself, so you have to bring that spirit too.” Owing in part to Rees’ desire to work intimately, the crew was “insanely small... Dee does not want a lot of stuff or people around. She wants the actors to be totally in their world.” Young shot most of the film using available light, including nighttime scenes in a bedroom using only Christmas lights and an Ikea lamp with a red lampshade (Lindeman).

IV. Strapping on the White Penis

In one comic scene bathed in a variety of hues, Alike decides to take on a more masculine role like her friend Laura in hopes of attracting a girl from school. Alike attempts to strap on a White penis—a dildo—and wear it to the club scene where the A.G.’s or masculine aggressive girls reign supreme. “This looks stupid,” she moans to Laura who purchased it for her. “Couldn’t you find a brown one?” Laura retorts with a smile, “They too big for you.” Alike’s younger sister Sharonda walks in on her struggling to position the dildo outside of her clothes and threatens with shock and then glee to tell their mother. Yet she doesn’t. Later, Alike is so physically uncomfortable wearing the dildo, she withdraws from the club scene and in an ensuing scene, wraps up the dildo, stuffs it into a paper bag and discards it deep in an outside trash can.

This scene signifies the pressure Alike feels to embrace a greater macho bravado like Laura and the other A.G. or aggressive (masculine) girls, who like masculinist

“gangsta rappers,” seem to appropriate White patriarchal power, or some version of it. Yet *Alike* intrinsically rejects these binary extremes and is never comfortable in the world of femmes and butches. She finds herself in neither of these roles. Part of *Alike*’s status as a pariah is in her struggle to find an identity free of oppressive role playing. Filmmaker Dee Rees found her own story in Audre Lorde’s *Zami*. One of the things that undoubtedly influenced her is Lorde’s discussion of dominance/submission in the lesbian world.

For some of us, however, role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes toward women which we loathed in straight society. It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to “the life” in the first place. Instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic, we recognized oppression as oppression no matter where it came from. But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/submission, rejected what they called our “confused” lifestyle, and they were in the majority (221).

V. *Social Activism and Pariah*

The social activism of *Pariah* is a critical part of its legacy. The film maintains a robust website through their distributor Focus Features⁶⁹ and includes pages such as “Dee Rees wants your stories.” Rees asks that people make videos about their own stories and share them with others on Youtube. She includes instructions on how to do so. There is also link to videos by LGBTQ youth through Los Angeles LifeWorks called “What *Pariah* means to me.” Four separate young people testify wholeheartedly to their profound identification with *Alike* and her coming out process. One African American teen—a seemingly masculine African American lesbian teenager—testifies that viewing

⁶⁹ <http://focusfeatures.com/pariah/overview>

the film is “seeing me... I could identify with the things she went through, changing clothes, and not being accepted. I definitely think more young people like me should see the film. And I especially identified with the poem, “not broken... free!”

The filmmakers also demystify their filmmaking process on the site. Crew members provide interviews on video about their roles, and how the cast was outfitted. One link takes a viewer to Poetry in Motion: Actress Adepero Oduye on Creating the Character of Alike. Dee Rees and her producer and intimate partner Nekisha Cooper discuss “Transforming Passion into Pariah.” Cooper asserts that, “My parents don’t accept that I’m gay, but they love me. I guess that’s as good as it gets... But we also never talk about it... That’s the intersection, of fear and hope, where this movie sits. We want Pariah to give people the courage to discuss coming out.” Rees furthermore wants parents and people who are not yet open to better to be provided with ways to become so. She advocates for unconditional love. Cooper, who was responsible for the film’s unique marketing strategies, posited that the film might not change people’s minds, but at least it could get them talking.

Yet I wonder if Pariah *can* change some minds. I have now taught *Pariah* for three semesters. One of my students, a male South Asian Sikh student wrote in an essay that the film transformed him, that he had never really fully identified with a gay or lesbian person before he watched that film in the way that he had, that he now believed it was tremendously unjust to discriminate against someone because of their sexual preference and he could never go back to the way he had operated before. A fellow graduate student, Natalie, a self-identified bisexual Black woman who sat in on a screening of *Pariah* with my class spoke to me in subsequent interview about how the

film mirrored her own coming out story. She spoke of every Black woman like her going through the process of coming out to her mother. She said that she had to make the decision, “to be me and not live for my family.” She also spoke of her own mother still harboring resentment, of her having to partition off aspects of her life. Finally she says, “I want her to be close to me, yet I can not allow her to. I have to detach from that mother/daughter relationship to be happy.”

Conclusion: A Twenty-five Year Corrective

While Spike Lee served as the film’s Executive Producer and was Dee Ree’s teacher/mentor at New York University’s Graduate Film School, a full circle moment is in evidence. His first feature film, *She’s Gotta Have It* also shot in Black Brooklyn, some twenty-five years earlier is noted by Black feminists, particularly bell hooks, for the casual and uncontested rape of the its female protagonist Nola Darling by her lover Jamie. Salimishah Tillet notes that this scene is the one film in all his movies Lee now wishes he had changed or edited out. Furthermore, as Cheryl Dunye observes, the first Black lesbian character in a Black independent cinema is a sexual predator of the heterosexual Nola Darling. This callous representation helped light a fire for Dunye and an emerging generation of Black lesbian filmmakers to create their own scripts. Has Lee in part rewritten his own gendered legacy in executive producing *Pariah*? Clearly this urgent, disarming, and poignant film opens a variety of dialogues about coming out, being in the open, and reveals some problematics within butch/femme binaries in LGBT youth communities of color that reproduce repressive roles served up by a racist, heteronormative and patriarchal society.

Lorde reminds us in her classic essay “There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions”

...I have learned that sexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby its right to dominance) and heterosexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby its right to dominance) and heterosexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby its right to dominance) both arise from the same source as racism—a belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby its right to dominance.

...we diminish ourselves by denying to others what we have shed blood to obtain for our children. And those children need to learn that they do not have to become like each other in order to work together for a future they will all share.

I return to the question posed by Michele Parkerson at the opening of this article, “As black filmmakers, how can we broaden gay and lesbian experience imagery beyond the “celluloid closet”? Rees proclaims in George’s New York Times article: “There is no monolithic black identity. My film is less about coming out than who you are and how to be that person. I think we want an extreme diversity of images and voices. And it is not enough to have a lot of films one year, but to have an ongoing supply of films.”

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