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Source: *Feminist Teacher*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Fall/Winter 1994), pp. 129-139

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40545678>

Accessed: 02-05-2019 19:25 UTC

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# Gender, Race, and Radicalism: Teaching the Autobiographies of Native and African American Women Activists

By Joy James

## 1992—The Post-Columbus Classroom: Women's Resistance to American Racism

In American society where indigenous and African Americans signify the primitive, exotic (often dangerous) “Other,” anti-Black and anti-Indian racism coexist within a larger context of political opposition to radicalism. Antiradicalism often appears in reactionary or conservative politics. At other times, radicalism is depoliticized and coopted into trendy rhetoric and fashion: for instance, TV commercials inform that the soft-drink Mountain Dew is “radical” and that Revlon makes “revolutionary cosmetics for revolutionary women.” As in pop culture, within academe, radical and antiracist politics are usually distorted if not denigrated. With some exceptions, dominant trends in academic studies seem to either denounce radicalism and antiracism as misguided approaches to redress injustices (that are increasingly denied)—even the liberal remedy of affirmative action is now considered “reverse racism/sexism”—or reduce radicalism and antiracism to a surrogate liberalism or literary “insurgency.” Obviously there are exceptions: those who most often go beyond rhetorical antiracism and radicalism are student and faculty activists engaged in social justice organizing. My own student experiences reminded me of how academic sites tend to silence or view radicalism suspiciously.

Since my days as a student organizer, the meanings of “radicalism” have encompassed not only political ideas or rhetoric about political ideas but also practices and strategies for uprooting oppressive structures rather than assimilating into or reforming them. After several years as a full-time academic in western Massachusetts, estranged from the urban activism I had known in New York City, I was unsure about the nature of progressive politics and race discourse: most of what I had known as “radical” from NYC organizing and teaching ethics with religious leaders was generally received, by more seasoned academics, as inappropriately political (polemical) or academically “uncivilized” in a university setting. As an assistant professor in women’s studies engaged in antiracist education, my work focused primarily on marginalized Black and, increasingly, indigenous women. Both groups of women figured prominently in my courses, given that material and “existential” wealth in the U.S./Americas was (is) accumulated through systemic exploitation of these women and their peoples.

While teaching, I often wondered, pessimistically, how

students perceive “women of color” whom they encounter as “texts,” particularly those activists who critique the U.S. state. I imagined that it was difficult for academics to conceptualize such women as something other than fashionable literary commodities, colorful accessories to eurocentric as well as trans-ethnic conservative/liberal paradigms. With the ascendancy of post-colonial/postmodern/postracial discourse, I was also curious as to whether students considered antiracist, radical activists as politically antiquated, cultural throwbacks or ethnocentric oddities. My pessimism about the academic reception for the worldviews and politics of Native and African Americans confronting genocide was tied to a general reading of dominant, academic politics in which most teaching (conservative, liberal, or postmodern/colonial hybridity) privileges eurocentric or multicultural paradigms over antiracist frameworks: with little critical juxtaposition with radical critiques from nonacademics or non-elites.

The year 1992 was a watershed for education analyzing structural violence and genocide. That fall, community, student, and faculty intellectuals worked to critique the quicentennial and celebrations of the “discovery” of the Americas. In Amherst, faculty, staff, and students initiated curriculum changes, held campus forums, and promoted recent publications by Native Americans and others on contemporary indigenous oppression and resistance. This call issued by progressive academics led to various responses. Mine was to develop and teach a first-time course offering at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst the following semester called *Gender, Race, and Radicalism: Native and African American Women Activists*, which was opened to students in the Five College system (UMASS and Amherst, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, and Hampshire Colleges). I had taught the autobiographies of Black women active in the civil rights/Black liberation movements of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s in other courses. Over several years, Mohawk scholar-activist Donna Goodleaf, who co-lectured in this course, had introduced me to the writings of contemporary Native American women in resistance to state domination or colonization. *Gender, Race and Radicalism: Native and African American Women Activists* seemed an ideal opportunity to synthesize studies of women in two marginalized ethnic groups into a unique, comparative women’s studies class. That the women to be studied were also radical activists brought added significance: more than its marginalization of conservative-liberal “women of color,” academe has erased radical “women of color.”

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Often comparative women's studies centers women of European descent as well as liberal or conservative women as normative. Most studies of radicalism emphasize men, as does the comparative literature on Black/Red-Black Indians and Native and African Americans (an estimated one third to one quarter of African Americans have Native ancestry). Departing from those norms, Gender, Race, and Radicalism emphasized writings by Native and African American women radicals from "captive communities" within nonconventional analytical frameworks. As an upper-level elective, it brought together approximately twenty students, mostly juniors and seniors interested in not only "women of color" but political radicalism in the lives of Native and African American women activists engaged in liberation movements for humane, democratic societies.

### **Classroom encounters**

As an experimental, one-time course offering seeking to expand the context(s) for progressive politics by encouraging the study of women's radical antiracist politics, Gender, Race, and Radicalism was atypical in subject matter, texts, and pedagogy. In this comparative study of American women which examined the politics of recent indigenous and African American social movements from the perspectives of their women leaders, the assigned texts were by academic or activist Native and African Americans engaged in Red/Black liberation. Course pedagogy incorporated journals for individual reflection, comparative essays, and group presentations on paired autobiographies. Occasionally, students were asked to participate in on-campus cultural and political events organized by women of color (in spring 1993 these events included a performance by the Native American SpiderWomen Theater collective and a conference on women and organizing keynoted by Angela Davis). Exposed to social issues in personal narratives and asked to share their own reflections and experiences, students were confronted with ethical questions. Autobiographical reflections (of student-writers and Native/African American activist-writers) encouraged the class to depart from the explorer-colonizer encounters of contact voyages. (Not every student was willing to engage in such a

journey: some failed to submit the journals which focused on student introspection and reflection on their relationship(s) to text, class, pedagogy, instructor, and women's radical antiracist politics.)

On the first day of teaching, I was pleased to encounter a fairly diverse women's studies class. Two thirds of the students were female, nearly half of the students were of African, Latino, or Asian descent; the remaining half were Euro-American. The students held politically diverse views as well, although all generally considered themselves progressives. A quarter or more of the class identified themselves as community activists. Most of those with extensive organizing within nonacademic/middle-class communities were (upper) middle-class White women in their third year at Hampshire College, an "alternative" small liberal arts institution. As self-identified activists, these European and Jewish American women had political organizing experience on issues of sexual and racial violence which increased their receptivity to developing critical perspectives on the connections between women's struggles, antiracism, and genocide. A small number of these women activists provided the student comments reprinted below (I thank Rebecca Gould, Joanne Lehrer, and Jenna Magruder for permission to quote from their course papers).

The political experiences of student activists shaped their ethnic and gender identities so that they tended to more quickly disengage from self-absorbed reflections or narrow identity politics. During the semester, other students, White and people of color, male and female, who had little or no experience in political organizing more often disassociated introspection from structural analyses to emphasize their personal anxieties and desires over race and acceptance over critiques of racism and genocide. Perhaps because they had a pragmatic approach that connected critiques with practical applications, women student activists tended to advocate classroom attempts to build useful critical analyses:

Both of us came into "Gender, Race and Radicalism" with a commitment to playing an active role in bringing about social justice in the world, and with experience in attempting to act on this commitment in coalition with other people. We lacked, however, a political analysis which dealt explicitly with genocide and colonialism. Without this analysis, our political actions in the past have often felt incomplete or misguided. (JM, JL)

Not only students felt their past and present political actions to be incomplete.

Early on, I had shared with the class my view that the life stories of indigenous and African American women—who survive and resist the most intensive forms of state violence—reveal something of tenacious faith and fierce love in confronting oppression. Suggesting that we encounter these women as conduits for reviewing our own political commitments, rather than models to be emulated, I did not share with the class my personal search: working with students to analyze the autobiographies of Native and African American women activists might help me find my own answers, as an academic, about political integrity and social justice. Teaching from these women's autobiographies for answers to the questions I silently asked myself, I

asked the class: “What does it mean to be a woman in a captive community, in resistance, and, what is your relationship to such political actors/actions?” I could not and did not assert what those meanings or relationships were or should be, only that these questions had to be addressed. Throughout that semester, students and teacher struggled with their spoken and unspoken questions. Often these questions crystallized and collided around the issue of “genocide” in America.

### Questioning “genocide”

During the first class, I lectured on the conditions of Native and African Americans historically devastated by state policies. Today, both peoples suffer greater discrimination and higher infant mortality and mortality rates in the U.S. than the national population. For decades, African and Native American activists have organized around U.S. racism and human rights violations. My introductory lecture referred to the African American led Civil Rights Congress (and its 1951 petition to the United Nations, *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*) as well as the more recent International Indian Treaty Council’s work to interpret and append the 1948 *UN Convention on the Prevention and Elimination of Genocide* to U.S. domestic policies. The *UN Convention* defines genocide as “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, racial, ethnic or religious group or kill or inflict serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” (Patterson xi).<sup>2</sup> Both African Americans and Native Americans have used the language of human rights and international law to redress destructive state policies.

Stressing that struggles around law and (legal) language also seek to inspire and shape consciousness and activism to counter racism, I raised in our first sessions the role of conventional speech in obscuring critical thinking about genocidal racism in U.S. domestic and foreign policies. For most, U.S./American racism is conceptually severed from genocide. This conceptual estrangement obstructs a national, common language for analyzing genocide against indigenous and African American peoples. I maintained that it was important for the class to engage in critical discussions on contemporary genocide in order to construct a lens for viewing a women’s autobiographies which refer to cultural and/or physical genocide as a byproduct of state racism.<sup>3</sup> For examples of women seeking to build a common language about racism and genocide, I referred to Native American scholar Paula Gunn Allen’s critique of the American moral amnesia concerning the U.S. anti-Indian wars:

We are horrified by South African apartheid and the removal of millions of indigenous African black natives to what is there called “homelands”—but this is simply a replay of the nineteenth-century U.S. government removal of American Indians to reservations. Nor do many even notice the parallel or fight South African apartheid by demanding an end to its counterpart within the borders of the United States. The American Indian people are in a situation comparable to . . . genocide in many parts of the world

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*The course encouraged students to reexamine gender analysis by expanding their concept of gender-progressive to include women who emphasized the concerns of their disenfranchised, ethnic communities.*

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today . . . deliberately, as a matter of national policy, or accidentally as a matter of “fate,” every single government, right, left, or centrist in the western hemisphere is consciously or subconsciously dedicated to the extinction of those tribal who live within its borders. (190)

The familiar, shared context for linking South African apartheid to genocide, or even Nazi anti-Semitism to genocide in Germany, has no counterpart connecting racism to genocide in the U.S./Americas. Annette Jaimes’s comparison of U.S. political ideology in historical wars against Native Americans to the campaigns of Nazi Germany was part of course readings that offered a similar argument.

These discussions of language, meaning, and violence were not purely theoretical. The issue of relationships (of student readers to the political struggles of women and oppressed/colonized peoples) and ethics continuously circulated. Exploring the meanings of genocide and Native/African American women’s resistance, I asked the class how our speech about and conceptions of “racism” determine what we say and do about genocide. In their writings, some students expressed that they felt inadequately prepared to analyze genocide as a contemporary phenomenon:

it is not often in academia (even at oh so liberal [X] college) that we talk about genocide, as a political reality, not off in the past somewhere, but here and now, in attempting to do so, i feel at loss for language. the tools i have been taught to use in writing analytical papers seem insufficient. this seems to be the case more and more as i have made the decision to no longer detach myself from what i write. at the same time, developing a stronger analysis of how systematic oppression/genocide has worked and works in the united states is an incredibly important part of working to end them. (JM)

Emphasizing the moral dimensions of speech and acts, students become more engaged in personal reflections. Considering their reflections as their personal responses to

the lives of women committed to resisting racist, state oppression, students initially showed discomfort; this dissipated for some but continued throughout the course for others. There was no way around feeling uncomfortable if grappling with ethics was critical to our study of the autobiographies. Ethics, a sense of personal responsibility, moral obligation, or accountability, was central in the autobiographies of the Native and African American women activists. I had incorporated ethical reflections into course pedagogy; reflection summaries concluded each analytical paper; student journals provided the space for less structured reflections; in class and small-group discussions, students were encouraged to explore their relationships to the writings studied. Classroom and small-group discussions sparked ethical debates that developed in student writings. Again, the point was not to dictate to students an appropriate response or reflection but to provide them with the space to incorporate those responses or reflections into their institutional education.

## Frameworks

In academic settings where “whites” study “people of color,” the middle class investigates the lives of poor/working class peoples, or where conservative/liberals critique radicals, constructing a critical framework or narrative lens for reading the autobiographies was crucial to deconstructing the “Other.” Consequently, the course was divided into two sections. During the first section, students were to quilt an analytical framework for critical reading or literacy in their studies of women struggling against genocide. The class spent the first third of the semester building rudimentary frameworks, which were to be continuously reevaluated and refined as later used in papers and oral presentations (which would analyze autobiographers’ political resistance and vision and include student reflections on the same). With references to T.S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, we discussed paradigmatic shifts, evaluating paradigms (political ideologies) for their ability to address the crises of oppression and point towards the possible strategies or solutions leading to just resolutions.

Building interdisciplinary, analytical frameworks based on course readings and discussions, students outlined key themes—agency, systemic oppression, auto/genocide, ethnic and gender identity—to explore in the paradigms or worldviews of the autobiographies as well as the worldview of the student writer. Most had never been asked to explicate the belief systems or (meta)paradigm shaping their political-social ideas and so found constructing analytical frameworks difficult. Many had naturalized the prevailing framework of their academic experiences, which were largely silent about antiracist radicalism. Pushing the parameters of conventional frameworks in which naturalized whiteness or conservatism–liberalism (for example of naturalizing whiteness, I recalled the commercials of my childhood marketing “flesh-colored” bandages—in one color).

Critiquing racism in political, economic, and cultural practices, not only as self-contained acts but as reflective of structures (paradigms) of thought and policy, proved very

difficult. Students struggled to construct a framework for examining the autobiographies as well as their own political thinking. Developing these frameworks or paradigms in the course’s first section, the class read selections from Manning Marable’s *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* and Jaimes’s *The State of Native America*. We also used visual resources: Marlon Riggs’s “Ethnic Notions” allowed us to examine U.S. dehumanizing, anti-Black icons and racial-sexual stereotypes of African Americans; and the PBS documentary “In the Image of the White Man” provided historical analysis on the U.S. quest to “de-Indianize” indigenous children through residential schools. Through these videos, students examined the images of cultural representations legitimizing violence against Blackness/Africanness and Redness/Indianness. Through the readings of Marable and Jaimes, we examined strategies for resisting dehumanizing images and practices.

During the remaining two thirds of the semester, using their frameworks and selective themes, students wrote comparative papers for each set of autobiographies. I had grouped the texts into pairs of Native/African American women authors. Although the course title identified the autobiographers collectively as “radicals,” their political ideologies were not monolithic. In fact, I had paired the autobiographies based on possible similarities between Native and African American women’s political views. The order in which they were read reflected my perception of increasing radicalism among the women’s strategies to counter state domination.<sup>4</sup>

I limited the African American autobiographies to activists in the civil rights/Black liberation movements. Given the limited number of autobiographies by U.S. Native American women radicals (Crow Dog lives inside the U.S. domain), I included works by American indigenous activists Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchu and Bolivian Domitila Chungara, who link their liberation struggles to U.S. foreign policy. Most students knew of Angela Davis and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Menchu. A few were familiar with Mary Crow Dog through women’s studies courses, and some had heard of Anne Moody (whose autobiography is also studied in courses on the civil rights movement); few had heard of Chungara or Assata Shakur.

With visual resources, students literally saw images of these women in their roles as activists. For the first set of autobiographies, *Lakota Woman* (Crow Dog and Erdoes) was read alongside the film “Bravehearted Woman: Anna Mae” on Anna Mae Aquash, the assassinated indigenous leader who had organized with Crow Dog at Pine Ridge, while “Eyes on the Prize” segments on SNCC framed Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. Reading the second set, Angela Davis’s *Autobiography of Angela Davis* and Rigoberta Menchu’s *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, students viewed “A Nation of Law?,” the “Eyes on the Prize” segment on Cointelpro and prison conditions in which Davis is interviewed on the violent suppression of the Attica uprising. Students also screened “When the Mountains Tremble”; this film, narrated by Menchu, examines the Guatemalan war against indigenous Americans in the 1980s and the funding of the Guatemalan military/death squads during the Reagan administration; along with the Amnesty International reports on Guatemala, the film provided a context for Menchu’s *I*,

*Rigoberta*. For the last pair, Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* and Domitila Chungara's *Let Me Speak!*, we watched "Interview with Assata," and reviewed information on and images of Bolivian workers and peasants.

### Student critiques

As useful as their frameworks proved in expanding their existing paradigms, students were reluctant to critique the writers' racial-ethnic politics and ethnic chauvinism between the two peoples. For instance, they were silent about the absence of Black Indians as either contributors or subject matter, as well as any discussion of color prejudice among Native Americans in Jaimes's anthology. When asked about their perceptions of a Crow Dog passage in which she refers to an African American man who assists her as her "slave," they were noncommittal. They were equally noncommittal about Marable's distorted portrait of African Americans as the most oppressed ethnic population in his disregard of ample documentation that Native Americans suffer the most depressed conditions in the U.S. When offered, student criticisms of Black/Indian bias were usually directed at African Americans. Students tended to romanticize and "identify" with Native Americans more so than with African Americans. Interestingly, all students had personal interactions with African Americans, including with those who comprised one third of the students of color who formed half of the class. On the other hand, class members had virtually no personal interactions with Native Americans, especially those represented in the autobiographies—Native Americans on reservations or in Latin America. Class participants almost uniformly, regardless of their ethnicity, idealized Native Americans as sacrosanct in terms of ethnic-racial politics and attitudes. They were more critical though of Native and African American gender politics.

The uneasiness and reluctance with which students addressed classism, (internalized) racism, and the inter-relatedness of gender, race, and class<sup>5</sup> issues among Native and African American communities disappeared in their discussions about sexism within those communities. Unsurprisingly, in a women's studies course, students focused on gender; however, in this focus they tended to isolate gender from class and race, ignoring its intersections with other variables. In class, I cited examples of sexism and misogyny among each people referring to contemporary examples such as the Indigenous Women's Network which faced criticisms from some Native American men in the International Indian Treaty Council and American Indian Movement (AIM) who argued that women dealing with the specificity of their struggle alienate themselves from "their" men and "community"; and there have been similar accusations used by African American males against African American feminists and women's organizations. Citing examples of patriarchy, though, is not a critique of gender and power relations in antiracist struggles for ethnic sovereignty or independence.

One of the greatest challenges posed by *Gender, Race, and Radicalism* was that it prodded students to maintain the specificity of gender for a category in critical analysis. It encouraged students to reexamine gender analysis by ex-

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## *The diversities of nationalism(s) encompass a range of ideologies spanning from the reactionary to the progressive revolutionary.*

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panding their concept of gender-progressive to include women who either did not identify as feminists and/or women who emphasized the concerns of their disenfranchised, ethnic communities. The gender perspectives of these 1960s/70s Native and African American activists could not be easily dismissed as a "prefeminist" or primitive feminism although they contradicted feminist ideologies which treat women as a class (a class which often universalizes privileged women). Students were initially inclined to view the activists as gender-retrogressive and racially retrograde on the question of nationalism.

Many considered nationalism as uniformly misogynist and counter-revolutionary. Largely ignorant of the works of gender-progressive women (and men) who identified with national liberation struggles, some students considered nationalist women as unenlightened or counter-feminists. Most generally failed to consider the non-essentialism of nationalism; that is, the diversities of nationalism(s) encompass a range of ideologies spanning from the reactionary to the progressive revolutionary.

The women's memoirs studied highlight a progressive, revolutionary "nationalism." Nearly all of the autobiographers strongly identify with their ethnicity, with some positing their ethnic group as a "nation" (among Native Americans this nation status is recognized by U.S. law). At the same time, each writer acknowledges the importance of friendships and alliances beyond their own ethnic group. Moody's and Crow Dog's autobiographies depict how each woman worked with progressive Whites. Other autobiographers explicate their liberation struggles within international politics; for instance, Davis writes of multiracial, transnational struggle:

[Through] political repression . . . racism, poverty, police brutality . . . Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, and white working people are kept chained to misery and despair. And it was not only within the United States of America, but in countries like Vietnam, with the bombs falling like rain from the U.S. B52's, burning and dismembering innocent children. (Davis 382)

For Davis, to address White supremacy one must address capitalism and economic exploitation: "When white people are indiscriminately viewed as the enemy, it is virtually impossible to develop a political solution" (150). Menchu also asserts the need for the development of oppressed ethnic communities within a just international world order. Shakur, the most "nationalist" of the African American

autobiographers, advocates internationalism as a balance to nationalist commitments:

It was also clear to me that without a truly internationalist component nationalism was reactionary. There was nothing revolutionary about nationalism by itself—Hitler and Mussolini were nationalists. Any community seriously concerned with its own freedom has to be concerned about other people's freedom as well. The victory of oppressed people anywhere in the world is a victory for Black people. . . . Imperialism is an international system of exploitation, and we, as revolutionaries, need to be internationalists to defeat it. (267)

One student wrote that Shakur's autobiography "illustrates the integration of multiple elements: art, music, poetry, history, education, armed struggle, day to day survival, and flexibility, which are necessary for a revolution."

Still others described Chungara's autobiography to be less engaging, partly because of its lack of creative writing, partly because of its silence about racism, ethnicity, and traditional indigenous values. Of the six autobiographies, Chungara's pays the least attention to ethnicity and race. Unlike Crow Dog, who emphasizes traditional religions, or Menchu, who seeks a return to ancestral ways and traditional indigenous culture as well as economic justice, Chungara focuses nearly exclusively on the Bolivian working class. An advocate for exploited miners, she emphasizes the importance of class, socialism, and especially internationalism:

Many other countries suffer persecutions, outrages, murders, massacres, like Bolivia. And how beautiful it is to feel that in other peoples we have brothers and sisters who support us, who are in solidarity with us, and make us understand that our struggles aren't isolated from one another. (37)

It was resistance to international solidarity for workers among some feminists that led to Chungara's strong critique of feminism. *Let Me Speak!* recounts Chungara's disappointment in an international women's conference after participants, most of whom were economically privileged or European/American, rejected her plea for assistance to independence movements and exploited laborers:

Our position is not like the feminists' position. We think our liberation consists primarily in our country being freed forever from the yoke of imperialism and we want a worker like us to be in power and the laws, education, everything, to be controlled by this person. Then yes, we'll have better conditions for reaching a complete liberation, including our liberation as women. (41)

The autobiographies challenge the construction of monolithic, or essentialist, approaches to nationalism as universally parochial, chauvinistic, and misogynist. Student generalizations of the Black liberation and Indian movements as uniformly shaped by patriarchal nationalism had led them to dissociate any gender-progressive politics from men or women in national liberation movements within the

U.S. in the 1970s. Their assumptions were reflected in an assigned reading, Manning Marable's essay "Groundings With My Sisters" which describes patriarchy in the Black liberation movements:

Every black leader of the 60s accepted and perpetuated the idea of the Black Macho, the notion that all political and social power was somehow sexual and that the possession of a penis was a symbol of revolution. (100)

In a passage that cannot be easily applied to women who formed a good part of the civil rights leadership, Marable's sexist language depicts Black leadership as uniformly male. A number of students referred to Marable's profeminist passage uncritical of its erasure of women's leadership or its divergence from the women's own accounts of the complexity of gender struggles within the movements; these accounts by women activists did not erase the sexist and abusive practices of indigenous or African American males. As accurate as Marable's statement is concerning tendencies and trends—patriarchy and misogyny obviously existed within the Black movement and the American Indian movement—it is unclear if this machismo can be generalized to all male leaders. For instance, Assata Shakur, a leader in the Black liberation movements who describes how sexism and elitism led her to leave the Black Panther Party (BPP), writes of her coactivist Zayd Shakur: "I also respected him because he refused to become part of the macho cult that was official in the BPP. He never voted on issues or took a position just to be one of the boys" (223).

Despite the constraints of conservative or reactionary gender politics, women's radical independence and interdependency shaped resistance movements and provided national leadership. According to Jaimes's essay, coauthored with Theresa Halsey, on indigenous women and feminism,

Contrary to those images of meekness, docility and subordination to males with which we women typically have been portrayed by the dominant culture's books and movies, anthropology and political ideologies of both rightist and leftist persuasions, it is women who have formed the very core of resistance to genocide and colonization since the first moments of conflict between Indians and invaders. (311)

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***The autobiographies describe how social justice organizing was met by a backlash of repression. All the writers were politically targeted for imprisonment and/or violence.***

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Alongside Jaimes's text, the autobiographical writings exhibit an awareness of gender/sexual oppression coexistent with other injustices and inequalities. Their concepts of liberation pursued *women's equality through the liberation of a people, not a gender within a people*. This of course meant that the goals of liberation could not be set by masculinist standards, a fact which women activists recognized alongside the various constituencies to be freed from oppression. As Rigoberta Menchu observes: "We have to erase the barriers which exist between ethnic groups, between Indians and ladinos, between men and women, between intellectuals and nonintellectuals, and between all the linguistic areas" (223). Erasing barriers and hierarchies in the pursuit of social justice proved extremely dangerous.

## Repression and women's resistance

The autobiographies describe how social justice organizing was met by a backlash of repression. All the writers were politically targeted for imprisonment and/or violence. Anne Moody, who was herself placed on a local Klan's hit list because of her civil rights activism, describes the use of lynchings or "terror killings" in the 1960s as a means of intimidating whole communities from human rights activism. In the 1970s, the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement were infiltrated by government informers, some of whom incited violent behavior within the organizations. The FBI and police were instrumental in assaulting indigenous and African American leaders in the 1970s: incarcerating some as political prisoners, such as Angela Davis, Leonard Peltier (who remains imprisoned), and Assata Shakur (in political exile in Cuba), as well as intimidating countless other activists in order to destabilize progressive movements.

The autobiographical accounts of violence are grimly shocking for most students unfamiliar with police brutality and police state measures employed during that era: Assata Shakur recounts New Jersey police actively anticipating her death by repeatedly obstructing her ambulance transport after she was severely wounded by state troopers' gunfire. Crow Dog describes her own violent arrest at Pine Ridge, where from 1973 to 1975, she reports, as many as twenty-five people out of a population of 8,000 were killed for their political activities or associations with progressives (193, 195); Crow Dog also links Bureau of Indian Affairs agent/tribal leader Dick Wilson and the FBI to those deaths, including the assassination and mutilation of Anna Mae Aquash (218–219). Beatings, torture, and the deaths of friends and loved ones marked and marred the radical women's lives in the United States.

Political violence against indigenous peoples and activists in Latin America was more brutish and pervasive though. Menchu and Chungara offer autobiographical accounts of systemic, devastating brutality.<sup>6</sup> Menchu's family was massacred by the military. While pregnant, Chungara, who identifies CIA agents as present during her interrogation, was detained in jail and tortured until she gave birth to her dead child.

Despite their experiences of state-directed atrocities, each woman critiques vanguard militarism among activists confronting state violence. Shakur, who argues for political

strategies that include large numbers of people, criticizes obsessive, romantic militarism within sections of the BPP. A founder of the Housewives Committee for peasant mining communities, Chungara maintains that Che Guevara's failure to organize an international liberation movement, and his capture and execution by the Bolivian military, were due in part to the revolutionaries' alienation from poor people who were not necessarily supporters of armed struggle: "It seems to me that that was the mistake these guerrillas made: they didn't get close enough to the people. No one can get anywhere if they aren't in tight with the people" (67).

Not only external violence but also violence internal to oppressed communities undermined Native and African American communities. In the class's definition, external genocidal violence included systemic poverty; the suppression of traditional cultural practices and languages through church and educational systems; repression from the police, army, and right-wing vigilantes. Using a term from *State of Native America*, the class referred to violence among Native and African Americans as "autogenocide." We understood autogenocidal violence as manifesting in community-generated violence. Expanding the definition of autogenocide to include the failure to resist oppression, assimilation, and working for oppressive conditions, students blurred the distinctions between passivity, opportunism, and complicity, setting very high standards by which to judge Native and African Americans. Paradoxically, they also relied uncritically on a presentation at a women's conference which described "horizontal violence" (autogenocide) as stemming from "vertical violence" (genocide). Some used this construct to absolve oppressed peoples from any responsibility for destructive behavior; this absolution extended to Native and African American men's sexual assaults and domestic violence (autogenocide) whose abuses were excused because the males were oppressed by "vertical" or state violence.

Examples of African or Native American genocide and autogenocide appear in each woman's autobiography. Concerning autogenocide, Angela Davis writes of her childhood classmates who "fought the meanness of Birmingham while they sliced the air with knives and punched black faces because they could not reach white ones" (94). Anne Moody describes her father's depression from his inability to provide for the family and his emotional violence inside the family. In addition, her mother—pregnant with her seventh child by Moody's unemployed stepfather—cried so much, according to Moody, that "she almost drove us all crazy. Every evening I came home from work, she was beating on the children making them cry too" (113). This violence, which Moody describes as based in racial and economic oppression, erupted in the streets as well as in homes:

Some Negroes would come to town on Saturday night just to pick a fight with another Negro. Once the fight was over, they were satisfied. They beat their frustrations and discontent out on each other. (261)

Drug abuse and domestic violence were also identified as aspects and instigators of autogenocide. In Native American communities, for Jaimes, the inability of Native males

to function in untraditional roles as “head of the household” or “breadwinner”

led to a perpetual spiral of internalized violence in which Indian men engage in brutal (and all too often lethal) bar fights with one another, or turn their angry attentions on their wives and children. (325)

Jaimes writes that colonization “has manifested itself in the most pronounced incidence of alcoholism of any ethnic group in the United States resulting in fetal alcohol syndrome, higher death rates from drunk driving and higher rates of child abuse and abandonment, [both] unknown in traditional native societies” (324–35). “Colonially induced despair” also created a wave of teen suicide in Native American communities in the 1980s which was several times higher than the national average (325).

Despite violence, betrayal, and massive fissures in community foundations, the autobiographies portray their ethnic groups as a people with shared interests, values, and culture, that is, as a community. The women’s affirmation of the ability to build community irrespective of genocidal and autogenocidal violence challenged students’ perceptions of agency and power that focused on the isolated individual.

Students found commonalities in the women’s resistance to violence and abuse. For instance, Shakur and Moody both write about their experiences as teenagers with sexual violence and harassment inside the African American community: Moody is sexually harassed by her stepfather and forced to leave home; Shakur, a runaway, escapes a “train” or gang rape by Black male teens. Moody’s accounts of sexual abuse, family rejection, extreme poverty as a girl and young adult resonated with women students. Although overwhelmed by racist violence, political repression, nonsupportive family, the financial burdens of attending and graduating from college, Moody continued to grow as a woman in the movement, through her struggles and in “the struggle.” Several student papers quoted Moody’s passage: “[S]omething happened to me as I got more and more involved in the Movement. . . . It no longer seemed important to prove anything. I had found something outside myself that gave meaning to my life.”

Moody’s and Crow Dog’s “coming of age” stories, detailing adolescent alienation and abuse, were especially compelling for students who were in their late teens or early to mid twenties. Young people struggling with racial identity, some with “mixed” parentage, noted how both autobiographies refer to racism and colorism, revealing painful, personal experiences of rejection or acceptance in which “light skin” or “high yellow” were constructed in opposition to “dark-skin” Blacks or “full blood” in opposition to “half-breed” Indians. Observing that White teachers/administrators favored lighter skinned Indians in the residential schools, some students compared the attempts to de-Indianize indigenous peoples with the dependence fostered on African American schools/education. However, the cultural genocide and violence of residential schools is unique to Native Americans.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of violent repression and internal, domestic violence, Native/African American women activists consistently advocated a democratic concept of power. In these writings, power stemmed from the people as a collective: it was not reducible to military or intellectual vanguards and

elites. The autobiographers criticize centralized, autocratic leadership, advocating a concept of shared, nonhierarchical leadership. Rigoberta Menchu maintains:

[W]e have understood that each one of us is responsible for the struggle and we don’t need leaders who only shuffle paper. We need leaders who are in danger, who run the same risks as the people. When there are many companeros with equal abilities, they must all have the opportunity to lead their struggle. (228)

Non-elitist notions of leadership coexist with recognition of the role of culture in community identity, spirituality, and resistance. Moody describes the inspirational role of music in Black liberation movements: “listening to those old negroes sing freedom songs was like listening to music from heaven. They sang as though they were singing away the chains of slavery” (303). Traditional forms of singing and dancing by enslaved Africans/African Americans were banned just as the religious singing and dancing of Native Americans had been: *Lakota Woman* recounts indigenous efforts to revive the sun dance (Crow Dog 253). Collective leadership and culture, tenaciously shared and renewed, were cementing bonds for women and communities in crisis and resistance.

## Radical visionaries

The concept of “community” was the most problematic and contentious for the class. Students frequently used the existence of violence within peoples or intraethnic relations to argue the nonexistence of “community.” Interestingly, student alienation from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse within their families and society (some students volunteered accounts of surviving rape and other abuse) did not lead them to assert the nonexistence of family or society. Somehow “community” in its ideal form supplanted communities in their imperfect forms. Using its imperfect manifestations as a reason to negate the possibility of community, class members courted nihilism. With the perfection of an idealized community unavailable, they argued that in the absence of a “realizable” ideal, there was nothing for which to strive; struggling to transform flawed communities became unrealistic. Using this line of argument, students resigned themselves to the given social injustices as unchangeable reality. Without the courageous optimism of Moody’s struggles, they echoed the pessimism of *Coming of Age in Mississippi*’s concluding paragraphs, which question the efficacy of communal power in the face of social/state violence and family betrayal.

When students stated that “they had no community, belonged to and identified with none,” their understanding of past, present, and future relationships were shaped by personal experiences of isolation as well as a social ideology of individualism. Detailing violence and betrayal in community, the autobiographies also presented communal, democratic society as the fundamental enterprise, describing it not only as objective but also as a vehicle for social transformation: liberation emerged from the unified efforts of people with common, progressive goals. Reflecting on

the Native and African American women's perceptions of liberation as a collective enterprise, students striving to comprehend the claims made by Davis (and others) that "Individual activity—sporadic and disconnected—is not revolutionary work" (162). In the process, class members began to reexamine their personal individualism as neither a universal that could be extended to the women activists, nor even uniformly applicable to their own lives:

many of my attempts to understand and name my community have been frustrated by my individualist education. my tendency has been to try and "figure out" where i "fit in," rather than recognizing that i am already a part of a community, and in actuality, many communities. (JM)

The concept of "many communities" rather than one exclusive community is found within the autobiographies. As members in multiethnic political groups, most of the writers present "community" as expansive and internationalist. At times their political affiliations, such as Davis's (former) membership in the Communist Party USA and Menchu's affiliation with *Comite de Unidad Campesina*, did not necessarily embody the cultural and spiritual values of the cultures of their youths. Davis describes an "overwhelming sense of belonging to a community of humans—a community of struggle against poverty and racism" (2). Menchu writes: "The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (1). For the autobiographers, "community" is transcendent, unrestricted by color, language, gender, or even conventional time and space. For some such as Davis, it includes ancestors:

[T]here were visions in my head of my grandmother going to join Harriet Tubman, where she would look down peacefully upon the happenings in this world. Wasn't she being lowered into the same soil where our ancestors had fought so passionately for freedom?

After her burial the old country lands took on for me an ineffable, awe-inspiring dimension: they became the stage on which the history of my people had been acted out. And my grandmother, in death, became more heroic. I felt a strange kind of unbreakable bond, vaguely religious, with her in that new world that she entered. (82)

A sense of community, independent of oppression, is reflected in Menchu's writings on her traditional customs:

So, a mother on her first day of pregnancy goes with her husband to tell these elected leaders that she's going to have a child, because the child will not only belong to them, but to the whole community, and must follow as far as he can in our ancestors' traditions. The leaders then pledge the support of the community and say: "We will help you, we will be the child's second parents." (7)

These understandings of community, as well as their sense of accountability to community, called women to, and

sustained them in, political activism. They became the conduit for students rethinking their own perceptions of communal relations.

## Radicalism demystified

In *Gender, Race, and Radicalism*, the initial student confusion and frustration with unconventional topic, texts, and pedagogy were predictable. However, for some students, classroom frustrations and uneasiness gave way to introspection and insight in papers and journal entries. Only that summer though, while reading anonymous course evaluations, did I find out that most students were deeply affected by our study of the autobiographies of Red/Black women activists.

Many students were/are survivors of racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and classism. Social violence and/or family abuse had led them to see and represent themselves as victims powerless to effect social change. Initially students were baffled at how women activists kept faith and agency amid oppression. Gradually, through their reflections on the political-spiritual values and collective struggles revealed in the autobiographies, students began to respond to narratives of resistance. Relatively privileged ones had been moved to write:

Reflecting on the tremendous fears that festered in these communities and served as a constant barrier to [unified resistance]... I began to analyze my own fears which keep me from truly dedicating myself to the struggle against racism... There are two primary fears which I find myself faced with as I work through and analyze my own racism and white privilege. The first is the fear of isolation, of losing support from family and friends for having ideas which are "too radical." The second, the fear of moving down the class system... All my life I have been prepared by my family, friends, and a white education system, to stay in the same class level or move up through individual achievement in high school and college in order to *succeed* in a well-paying job. (RG)

Using the course as a channel for examining the political commitments that they felt socially marginalized them, class members who sought to see themselves as engagees were empowered by Native and African American women radicals. Without sharing the experiences or political ideologies of the autobiographers, students reaffirmed their commitments to *actively*, and for some radically, counter racism, (hetero)sexism, and economic poverty, irrespective of the (un)popularity of these politics in the general society. Displaying a resiliency for critical inquiry and self-reflection, some confronted their fears with a resolve to continue their investigations and commitments:

so severe is the reality of political repression, that we at times find ourselves paralyzed by fear and overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness and grief. the emphasis so often placed on the realities of the oppressions we act to counter can sometimes obscure the fact that the history of oppression is also a history

of resistance. it is our connection to this history of resistance, to this history of pain, joy, struggle, strength and freedom, which brings guidance and sustenance to our work. (JM)

Not only students found at least partial answers to spoken and unspoken questions. Over the years, I had repeatedly read the autobiographies as well as taught the African American autobiographers in other classes. In the past, I found these texts to be the most thought-provoking component in courses. In Gender, Race, and Radicalism, rather than the literature itself, it was students' use of the autobiographies to decipher their own life stories and strengthen a resolve for ethical practice that called me closer to my own beliefs about radicalism. Focusing on the developing critical consciousness of my students, my own vision and paradigm became less cloudy. I was better able to see that in one semester journey, student struggles for self and community transformation radicalized the course and shaped our relationships in an academic site. Although students had re-politicized the classroom, critical questions about radicalism and academic intellectuals remained.

Earlier in the semester, when I had encouraged students to differentiate between the radicalisms of the women's autobiographies, they responded by pressing me to give my own political identification: was I a "radical" or a "revolutionary"? if so, in what ways? These "naming questions"—which I had never put to them—I was unable and unwilling to answer at the time. In one of our last classes, I finally stated that an academic such as myself had self-selected out of a revolutionary praxis to work within a corporate setting that modifies radical notions of social transformation. Several of my students, disagreeing with my refusal to name myself—as a teacher—on a radical continuum, offered their own assessment of teachers and students struggling in academic sites:

[T]here needs to be some criteria for the evaluation of political action that claims to be revolutionary. . . . A revolutionary agenda is one which is able to adequately confront colonialism and genocide [one] which can not be co-opted by the oppressive dominant society. We feel however that actions in themselves are not inherently "revolutionary" or "nonrevolutionary"; it is the context in which they occur and their connection to a larger movement for change that determines their revolutionary status. In order for one's action[s] to be revolutionary, they must be consciously connected to a larger movement for revolutionary change. Under this definition, it is possible for even the University professor who makes concessions in order to remain in an academic institution to be contributing to a revolutionary process. (JM/JL)

#### Course Texts/Visual Resources

##### Historical/Analytical Readings

- Annette Jaimes, ed. *The State of Native America*. Boston: South End, 1992.
- Manning Marable. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*. Boston: South End, 1983.

##### Autobiographies

- Domitila Chungara. *Let Me Speak!* New York: Monthly Review, 1978.
- Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes. *Lakota Woman*. New York: Grove, 1990.
- Angela Davis. *The Autobiography of Angela Davis*. New York: Random House, 1974. International Publishers, 1988.
- Rigoberta Menchu. *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. London: Verso, 1984.
- Anne Moody. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. New York: Dell, 1968.
- Assata Shakur. *Assata: An Autobiography*. London: Zed, 1987.

##### Videos/Films

- Bravehearted Woman: Anna Mae* (film on Anna Mae Aquash and Pine Ridge occupation and police/FBI repression in 1973).
- Marlon Riggs, *Ethnic Notions* (documentary of anti-black racism in popular culture and entertainment from 19th–20th centuries).
- PBS/American Experience. *In the Image of the White Man* (documentary on the creation of and forced relocation of indigenous children into U.S. residential schools).
- "Interview with Assata." 1988. Gil Nobel Interview for "Like It Is" (African American, New York City based television talk show).
- "A Nation of Law?" (*Eyes on the Prize II* segment on FBI Cointelpro and Attica rebellion, includes interview with Angela Davis on prisons and human rights).
- When the Mountains Tremble*. (film on the U.S. funding of the Guatemalan military and human rights abuses against Native Americans, narrated by Rigoberta Menchu).

##### Optional Supplemental Readings

- Paula Gunn Allen. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon, 1988.
- Francis Boyle. "The Hypocrisy and Racism Behind the Formulation of U.S. Human Rights Foreign Policy." *Social Justice* (1988).
- Ward Churchill and Jim VanderWall. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's War Against the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the American Indian Movement (AIM)*. Boston: South End, 1989.
- . *Struggle for the Land*. Maine: Common Courage, 1992.
- Joy James. "African Philosophy, Theory, and 'Living Thinker'" and "Teaching Theory, Talking Community." Ed. Joy James and Ruth Farmer. *Spirit, Space and Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . "The Politics of Language and of Law: Racism, Resistance and the UN Treaty on Genocide." *Marxism in the Postmodern Age: Crises and Possibilities*. Ed. Antonio Callari, Carole Biewener, and Stephen Cullenberg. New York: Guilford, 1994.

William Loren Katz. *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*. New York: Atheneum, 1986.  
 T. S. Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963.  
 National Urban League. *The State of Black America*. New York: National Urban League, 1988.

#### Notes

1. This phrase is taken from Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."
2. The U.S. Senate's 1986 ratification of the *UN Convention on Genocide* with crippling amendments, according to Francis Boyle, was an attempt to prevent Native and African Americans from petitioning the government under the Genocide Convention.
3. This argument was published the following year in Joy James's "The Politics of Language and of Law: Racism, Resistance and the UN Treaty on Genocide."
4. Curious to see if students identified variations of radicalism, I asked about the differences between revolutionary, radical, liberal, and conservative politics. Our imprecise definitions (I refused to provide a "definitive" definition) reflected the general imprecision of political references and labels for political phenomena. Students who felt confident to distinguish, even if with some imprecision, between conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism were nonplused when asked to differentiate between "radical" and "revolutionary"; revolutionary was either indistinguishable from radical or, as irrelevant terminology, was absent from the political continuum.
5. I examine the autobiographical writings of African American women as a form of theorizing in "African Philosophy, Theory, and 'Living Thinkers'" and "Teaching Theory, Talking Community."
6. Distinguishing assimilation from acculturation, Menchu's autobiography presents ladinated Indians who joined the Guatemalan army and killed indigenous people as having assimilated or adopted the (genocidal) values of the dominant culture, while she depicts those who learn the language, trades, and technology of Guatemalans and the latter as the adaptation of methods or resources of the dominant culture to serve oppressed people as acculturated.

7. *Lakota Woman* describes this particular violent assimilation through institutional "education":

The kids were taken away from their villages and pueblos, in their blankets and moccasins, kept completely isolated from their families—sometimes for as long as ten years—suddenly coming back, their short hair slick with pomade, their necks raw from stiff, high collars, their thick jackets always short in the sleeves and pinching them under the arms, their tight patten leather shoes giving them corns, the girls in starched blouses and clumsy, high buttoned boots—caricatures of white people. When they found out—and they found out quickly—that they were neither wanted by whites nor by Indians, they got good and drunk, many of them staying drunk for the rest of their lives. (Crow Dog 30)

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