

REPRESENTATIONS OF

**BLACK  
FEMINIST  
POLITICS**



"Remarkable . . . James  
reveals a radical tradition  
that could free us all."

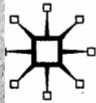
—ROBIN D. G. KELLEY

# SHADOWBOXING

Representations of  
Black Feminist Politics

JOY JAMES

palgrave



## SHADOWBOXING

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## DEDICATION

Sending her children to chapel and Sunday School on army posts and air force bases, my mother raised me in the state orthodoxy. Following tradition, I dutifully pursued instruction first in Catholic universities, then in seminary, only to find a spiritual home on the fringes of the South Bronx, in the religious house of Madrina. Aware of the rivalries between canonical and heretical views, I eventually sheltered in the camp of the latter, despite my early upbringing. Reminding that suppressed knowledge inevitably resurfaces, radicalism reconnected me with the spiritual and political heresies that make American life meaningful and its betrayals bearable.

Forewarned by the Gospel of Thomas: "If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you."<sup>1</sup> Prodded by 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak in the tongues of [wo]men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Pressed by 1 Corinthians 14: "And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?" Challenged by dual conflicting realities. Inspired by committed youths and the spirit of struggle continuously reborn. This work is dedicated to the mothers, Minnie James, Mattie Bailey, and Beatrice Adderley; the truth-telling kin; my partner, WJM; and, to the memory of Ingrid Washinawatok (1957-1999), whose courage and loving spirit outlive the executioners' act and corporate-state destruction of indigenous lands and peoples.

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	ix
Preface .....	xi
1. Introduction: Warrior Tropes .....	1
2. Forging Community: From Segregation to Transcendence .....	15
3. Protofeminists and Liberation Limbos .....	41
4. Radicalizing Feminisms from "The Movement" Era .....	73
5. Revolutionary Icons and "Neoslave Narratives" .....	93
6. Depoliticizing Representations: Sexual-Racial Stereotypes .....	123
7. Fostering Alliances: Black Male Profeminisms .....	151
8. Conclusion: Black Shadow Boxers .....	171
Notes .....	191
Index .....	217

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In the house of academia, research assistants Heather Larrabee, Leviticus Ra-Za'mien, and Sabrina Hodges contributed essential technical support for this book.

*Shadowboxing* is one of many works refracting "official" or state politics. Although its author is represented as an individual writer, its insights come from many political and cultural workers. To these intellectual and spiritual warriors, my thanks.

Unlock the silence and let us speak to the world.

—Ingrid Washinawatok

People of color have always theorized . . . our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create . . . [in] dynamic rather than fixed ideas. . . . How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world.

—Barbara Christian

Get used to being outrageous.

—The Urban Bush Women

## PREFACE

Beyond conventional politics, conditioned under marginality and censure, black feminist power emerges to display a radical singularity, one that has yet to be fully theorized. This political theorizing of radical black feminism begins in reflection with the "Introduction: Warrior Tropes," chapter 1, which provides an autobiographical snapshot of a youth grappling with antiracist feminism evolving amidst black fighters.

Emphasizing revolutionary tendencies in women's resistance politics entails looking at both historical legacies and contemporary practices. Chapter 2, "Forging Community: From Segregation to Transcendence," examines new forms of racial and class stratification resulting from opposition to affirmative action and advocacy for a racialized incarceration. Resurgent neoconservatism hostile to "racial preferences" for education and employment acquiesces to racial bias in imprisonment and state execution. Emergent segregated communities stemming from neoconservatism coexist with political communities shaped by antiracist and feminist and African sensibilities. Collective identity that crosses spatial and temporal borders to establish high standards for political accountability creates the context for transcendent community. A review of African worldviews and African American political ideologies highlights intergenerational responsibilities that counter the new segregation and also provide a context for studying the liberation limbos of both ancestral and contemporary black female radicals. (Such worldviews and politics are not particular to African Americans given that the diaspora has "Africanized" many national cultures and, as some scholars argue, the Genome Project marks all people as of African descent.<sup>1</sup>)

The search for antiracist community can be measured by the heroic efforts of activist or ancestral African American women. Most Americans

are unfamiliar with the history of militant black female fighters, yet their stories are readily available. Memoirs such as *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*; *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*; and *Assata: An Autobiography* touch a raw nerve among those who become politically stressed or polarized when facing radical and revolutionary social justice battles.<sup>2</sup> (Paradoxically, political autobiographies expand an intellectual base for progressive struggles while simultaneously providing a comfort zone that validates images of revolutionaries marketed as commodities through publications for consumers.) Reading such autobiographies reveals rebellions that democratized American politics. Tens of thousands were and are inspired by Ida B. Wells's crusade against lynching, Ella Baker's organizing for civil rights, Angela Davis's support for prisoners (beginning with the Soledad Brothers in the late 1960s), and Assata Shakur's revolutionary battles in the black liberation movement (a movement eventually destroyed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]'s illegal counterrevolutionary program, COINTEL-PRO). The works of the four women highlighted here—Wells, Baker, Davis, and Shakur—are not uniformly “radical” or “revolutionary”; nor are they without their contradictions. Nevertheless, seeking liberation, each pushed beyond conventional politics. Agitating for economic and social justice, each offered models for shadowboxing as black female resistance to political and social or state dominance.

In twentieth-century movements, African Americans fought in marginal sites and forward movements—limbos—to build radical communities that challenged political and social exclusion. “Protofeminists and Liberation Limbos,” chapter 3, focuses on antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells at the turn of the century and civil rights activist Ella Baker during the depression decades. It discusses both the gray areas of indeterminate place and the limber flexibility surrounding black women's organizing. Chapter 3 also observes how black women's legacies can be appropriated; for instance, in the 1987 Tawana Brawley case African American spokesmen accused white state officials of abducting and raping Brawley, using “symbolic rage,” the historical victimization of black females, and the memory of antilynching crusades to imitate the prosecutorial performances of white lynch mobs (allegedly protecting the virtue of “their” females).<sup>3</sup>

Following the unique limbos, or political maneuvers, executed by Wells and Baker, black women continuously organized and shaped liberation leadership, leaving significant, although scarcely noted in conventional politics, imprints on the movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter 4, “Radicalizing Feminisms from ‘The Movement’ Era,” reviews the emergence and conflicts of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. It offers working definitions of “radicalism” and “revolutionary” politics for contemporary struggles. Building on these definitions, “Revolutionary Icons and ‘Neoslave Narratives,’” chapter 5, examines several leaders in those movements, focusing on the radical Angela Davis, now public intellectual-academic, and the revolutionary Assata Shakur, currently in political exile in Cuba. In the 1970s, targeted for political activities but imprisoned on criminal charges, each woman mirrored archetypes shaped by Wells and Baker. At a time of mass, militant unrest, through bold confrontations with state authority, Davis and Shakur forged prototypes for late-twentieth-century black female radicalism. Rising public recognition for their contributions has led to a celebrity status—one that can transform the radical iconoclast into a deradicalized icon. (The destruction or co-optation of radical movements was furthered by commodification and performative politics that simplistically reduced the revolutionary Malcolm X to an “X” insignia on apparel; the radicalism of the women's movement to bra-burning; and liberation politics to the slogans of stage personas.) Since the 1970s, conservatism increasingly mainstreamed countermovements that challenged or dismantled feminist and antiracist gains—ones modified and institutionalized by liberals—generated from the social upheavals engineered by militants. The rise of a commodified black female radicalism in popular iconography coexists with new forms of racial and economic containment. As iconography deflects from contemporary repression and radical opposition, it promotes the disappearance of black female agency in political struggles.

Depoliticizing representations promote a restricted, dysfunctional democracy with cultural images that obscure black women's contributions to democratic politics. Where commercial and stereotypical portrayals of black females center not on political agency but on fetish and animalized sexual imagery, blacks, females, and politics become effaced

or distorted. “Depoliticizing Representations: Sexual-Racial Stereotypes,” chapter 6, details racial and sexual caricatures corseting the black female body. These stereotypes have a strong historical legacy. Intellectuals and activists have both satirized and critiqued denigrating stereotypes; yet “progressive” political cinema promotes black female visibility to recycle vilifying images. For instance, American filmmaker Warren Beatty’s *Bulworth* circulates images of black females as tragic mulattas, tricksters, and femmes fatales. Heralded for its liberal race politics, this film’s commercial attraction partly relied on the image of the white antihero protagonist aided by the eroticized black femme fatale. Its commercial and liberal appeal is fixed on the black female body.

Sexual-racial stereotypes circulating from a dominant culture clash with representations disseminated by black male feminists. Beyond the limiting roles of patriarchal protectors or oppressors, black males function as both racial and gender allies to black females. Male theorists are playing increasingly promising roles in black feminisms (for instance, “Depoliticizing Representations” cites the literary contributions of gay African Americans to black male feminism or profeminism). In some of their analyses, however, these contributions suggest new forms of erasure for black female radicalism. Chapter 7, “Fostering Alliances: Black Male Profeminisms,” examines the engagements of influential black and Latino academic writers with feminist theory. Recognizing the dominant role that these writers have in representing male antiracist feminisms, it focuses on Michael Awkward, Lewis Gordon, Devon Carbado, and Richard Delgado to examine male literary interventions in and inventions of feminisms. As is the case for black feminisms, there are a multiplicity of black male profeminisms. Literature significantly and disproportionately shapes representations for black feminisms and profeminisms; for instance, writings by nonactivists interpreting the 1995 Million Man March largely overshadowed the profeminist analyses of African American male *activists* who were critical of the event’s patriarchal politics.<sup>4</sup> Although better known than their activist counterparts, the works of male feminist writers, particularly black writers, have received insufficient critical attention. This literature, which forms an emergent (“black”) profeminist canon while influencing male profeminist activists, at times reveals contradictory tendencies. On one hand, it

refutes the stereotype of black males as more sexist or antifeminist than white males; on the other hand, it can introduce images of black male agency that deflect from black radical women, as progressive men repoliticize and frame feminism to include male agency.

Finally, “Conclusion: Black Shadow Boxers,” chapter 8, draws on the history of black pugilists in a so-called white culture to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between African American women and men “boxing” as Others in American society. Varied depictions or erasures of black women shape and frame feminism. The Conclusion reviews mainstream portraits depicting feminism as bourgeois and white; it also examines contemporary antiracist and feminist castigations that frame black feminisms for their alleged neglect of—in effect, independence from—some of the interests of either black males or white females.



## INTRODUCTION

# Warrior Tropes

(For Jesse)

Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.  
—Bobby Sands

It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a self perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to the struggle.

—Toni Cade Bambara

**A**ntiracist feminisms emerge from and are shaped by the conflicts and compassion guiding lifelong battles. Political ideologies frame these battles that separate the moderate from the militant. Conventional discussions of class or gender or race rarely reflect the struggles of radicalized racialized females. Although antiracist discourse at times seems to express more strongly the felt impact of the oppression of black females, it often fails to reflect their realities. On any given day, mirror reflections become shadows, as images fluctuate between those of soldiers routinized by obeying orders and warriors scarred and skilled from battle.

Both soldiery and shadow-warriors shape the family and social histories that brought me to a radical black feminism, one keenly aware of the conflicts between soldiers as state employees and warriors as rebel liberators. This awareness recognizes that hired fighters or soldiers routinely fall from the grace of self-directed dissidents; yet they manage to grasp at a benediction that eludes most revolutionaries—respite from interminable, soul-penetrating political battles—while sharing the internal and intergenerational turmoil of freedom-seeking rebels.

In the book's photograph, my mother, younger sister, and I stand in and throw Kurosawa-like shadows that project traces of our other selves and relations, shaped in love and conflict. We collectively cast the self-assurance, timidity, and wariness of warriors-in-training. I display my mother's "mop-up" after my older brother "did" my hair with cutting shears. Part of her dissatisfaction stemmed from her frustration that I consistently refracted rather than reflected Euro-American iconography for beauty, departing even from the standards for "colored beauty" embodied in the "mulatta." Dark-skinned, I held the dubious distinction of being the first preschool (perhaps the only) female with an Afro on our southern military post during the early 1960s. The photograph also shows that my face reflects a skeptical stance toward my father, the visitor-parent taking the picture. Later that distance and distrust would be extended to his employer.

Today what unsettles me most about the picture is *where* it was likely taken, not who took it. During the early 1960s, my father was stationed at Fort Benning, the military post in Georgia where the Bay of Pigs was planned. There I first encountered dogwood and learned to associate its showy flower clusters with the preference for cool forest shade behind our houses. Decades later I would learn to associate Fort Benning with the School of the Americas (SOA), known among human rights advocates as the "School of the Assassins."<sup>1</sup>

This fifty-year-old training site was relocated from Panama to Fort Benning and expanded in the 1980s under the Reagan administration. SOA teaches counterinsurgency and "population pacification" techniques to torturers and executioners compliant with U.S. foreign policy. SOA, as part of U.S. foreign policy, has predictably increased "low intensity" conflict in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Haiti and

supported recent military-paramilitary death squad activities against indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico. In my mind, the photo from my childhood couples the image that extends from the collective body of my mother, sister, and self with my adult awareness of the ignominy of soldiers, states, and shadow governments.<sup>2</sup>

A child-detective, growing up among shadow boxers, I would myself shadow the cocktail parties my parents threw for fellow black officers and military wives. Getting up repeatedly for water during late nights, I took mental notes on highballs, honey-colored Scotch, silk and satin cocktail dresses, cigarette and cigar smoke, blues and jazz, ice and laughter. I don't remember the exact words of the fragments of adult conversations that I heard; but I do recall the routinized sounds of mockery for their employer, notes that echo for me as an employee of state universities.

In cocktail conversations, voices spoke of tours of duty, racial indignities, institutionalized racism, and the policing of "nonwhite" Korea, Dominican Republic, and Vietnam. Having aligned themselves with a desegregated subculture that would rank as America's first and foremost integrated sector, my parents' narratives never seemed to discuss their own domestic alienation from the civil rights movement that dogged their purchased patriotism in the 1960s. I recall no mention of the use of the 101st Airborne (of which my father was once a member) in the 1967 occupation of Detroit to quell the urban rebellion. Nor of the United States being haunted by political memories of wars that revealed its unprincipled and destructive policies. Nor the mutiny of black troops' alleged grenade "fragging" of racist white officers that led my father to "Nam," where Vietnamese referred to Americans as "long shadows" and U.S. commandos in the war, with no rules of engagement, worked as assassins.<sup>3</sup>

With so much unspoken, my parents and their friends seemed to be battling in their silence and even in their laughter. They ridiculed their dependency—despite college, my father could find work only as a cook, so like other formally educated blacks he reenlisted—and performed hazardous duties with a false obsequiousness. Their conversations jeered at jobs they paid heavily for in order to acquire the mercurial respect of ritualistic deference and the material solidity of

comprehensive medical care, pseudo private schools, and subsidized housing. They masked the convergence of shame (from an inability to rebel when refused service in a segregated South) and sacrifice (in active duty). At the same time, their sense of pride in belonging with the victor seemed constantly disturbed by their interminable battles to become comfortable within a degraded democracy.

I never recalled my parents (or their friends) discussing violence, either foreign or “domestic” (in the nation and the home). Perhaps, having seen so much terror themselves—my father in combat, my mother in a childhood tour of duty in the 1930s and 1940s in rural Mississippi, both parents in daily living “black” in white America—they wanted their silence to shield their children, and themselves, from their own memories.

It was a false protection largely because fighting and violence are too familiar in American culture and in my own family story. Born in Frankfurt, Germany, I was soon returned to the United States to be raised and schooled on army posts in the North- and Southeast. While the United States waged a foreign military and a domestic police campaign to destroy revolutionary movements, I remained pre- or apolitical, at least until the family “settled” in San Antonio, the home of my patriarch and photographer.

In Texas, I became desensitized toward America’s comfort with weapons and sensitized to political struggle. Apolitically participating in mainstream America’s preadolescent fascination with weapons while in middle school,<sup>4</sup> I located my unimaginative parents’ handguns about the same time that twenty-year-old Black Panther leader and decorated Vietnam veteran Geronimo ji Jaga (Elmer Pratt)—after being forced underground by the FBI’s illegal and deadly counterintelligence program—established a military camp for black revolutionaries in Texas.<sup>5</sup> Four years earlier, in 1966, national discomfort with displays of weaponry predictably flared with the rising specter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Predictably, a home where no one discussed the civil rights or black liberation movements offered no words or language to evaluate militant, non-nonviolent fighters who advocated armed self-defense against state repression. For the next decade, though, I would be too young and politically isolated for the heated debates about armed struggle in antiracist or revolutionary battles to register in my consciousness.

Firing rifles first in high school Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), I later repeated the drill in a Catholic university. These experiences granted me a skeptical view of women warriors employed by the state, somewhat akin to the cynicism I had inherited from my parents concerning black fighters. This perspective distanced me from liberal feminist advocacy for the largely white body of young female cadets, destined for the officer corps who were attempting to integrate elite military schools. It also increased my empathy with the majority of enlisted women: young, working-class black and brown females who—seeking the economic resources that my parents had provided me—survived basic training and passed weapons instruction only to fail to attain middle-class status and security.

The long process of politicization began at home. Being raised by skeptical African American women discouraged me from a career as a state soldier or hired fighter. My mother and aunt, “the twins,” were apolitical political exiles from rural Mississippi who reconstructed themselves while employed as suburban officers’ wives. I studied as they—all the while demanding respect—inadvertently satirized the pretensions that they acquired. In their household, I read E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Black Bourgeoisie*.<sup>6</sup> At thirteen, as an alienated suburbanite, I began asking questions about the conflicting sentiments and antiradical or antirevolutionary tendencies of the black middle class.

At fifteen, as a subscriber to *Ms.* magazine—considered “radical” reading then in Texas—I had encountered the works of prominent white feminists Kate Millet, Erica Jong, and Betty Friedan. I began leaving the books of bourgeois white feminists in the home of Sue, the affluent white woman whose children I baby-sat. Sue’s boredom, depression, and leisure—her “help” included a Chicana maid and first myself and later my younger sister to watch her three young sons—suggested that the literature might be of interest, if not useful. The books went untouched. Weeks later after I walked them back up the street, I found that my now-divorced mother—laboring for low-paying wages outside the home to meet family expenses—had no time and little inclination to read this feminism.

At seventeen, I asked a liberal professor at my Catholic school to help me locate communists in San Antonio. He warned me against doing

so but gave the phone number for an elderly white Communist Party USA (CPUSA) leader who sold from his garage-bookstore works by Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, and Frantz Fanon along with pamphlets on labor history and revolutionary struggles. (Attempts to synthesize African and women's liberation through these texts marked my emergent antiracist feminist consciousness.) Local reactionaries had burned down the home-based CPUSA store more than once by the time I met him. Each time he rebuilt. At a political party in his backyard, I was introduced to one of the town's few Black Panthers, who in turn introduced me to the works of Amilcar Cabral. These encounters set me to thinking about social and political repression, militant ideas, and political courage. It would be several years, though, before my political actions began to more closely and consistently reflect my evolving critiques.

An early lackluster conformity to discipline and an ideologically vague progressivism were gradually supplanted by radical critiques obtained from meeting activists while I was in graduate school in New York, working to counter police brutality, violence against women, South African apartheid, the embargo against Cuba, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or "contra" wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and southern Africa. In the 1980s, known as the ultra-conservative or reactionary "Reagan years," African American women hosting book readings in Africana art galleries in the East Village and the Harlem State Office Building introduced me to *Assata Shakur: An Autobiography*.<sup>7</sup> Shakur in turn introduced me to the Black Panther Party, the Black Liberation Army, and revolutionary black feminism. By then my preadolescent fascination with guns had been transformed into an adult focus on my father's employer's use of repressive sanctions and political violence against insurrections. In dual focus, I saw radical organizing for community development and political autonomy and the sometimes sophisticated, sometimes brutal police and military destabilization of perceived threats to state dominance. As I became increasingly absorbed by the latter, I began to shadow or follow the state with an emergent perspective that demystified and de-demonized (at least in theory) revolutionaries' deployment of military strategies against police and state violence.

Conflictual communities prodded me to think critically about "my" military, black petit bourgeois caste engulfed by a dominant, more

privileged white bourgeoisie. Serving as a progressive professor, I studied parallels to the dichotomized world and "war" stories of my youth. With a respite from the skirmishes of my first academic job, and in filial duty, in the early 1990s I vacationed with my disintegrating father who had been in self-exile for decades. At his request, on what would be his last Christmas, I accompanied him to a firing range to try his Magnum. At fifty-eight, this retired career officer prematurely and permanently self-destructed. (Reportedly, more Vietnam vets have killed themselves in suicide than died in the war.) With flag-draped coffin, to the sounds of a nineteen-gun salute and bugles playing Taps, he was ceremonially interred in a military burial. Then, living with a phantom soldier and the funeral decorum of grief, I worked to make distinct political sounds. In the hope that these sounds would be underscored by and projected with some compassion mixed with outrage, I focused on social bias and repressive state practices.

As I learned to confront militarism, state co-optation and repression, and resistance (in the form of radical antiracist feminism evolving on U.S. battlefields), I encountered my own dark reflections—and those of Others—as African shadow boxers in American culture.

### BLACK FEMINIST POLITICS

[W]e find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. . . . Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways.

—The Combahee River Collective

Of the many branches of black feminisms extending from battles for a liberated African and female existence in "America," the following discussion takes root in black female radicalism.<sup>8</sup> Rather than attempt to offer a comprehensive survey of the ideological diversity or plurality of black feminisms—or the more subtle differences found even within radical black feminism (the feminism of choice here)—I examine the relationship of select black female militants to feminist and antiracist politics and participatory democracy, while reviewing images that detract from black women's contributions to democratic culture. Consequently, *Shadowboxing* stands as something of an anomaly in mainstream social and political thought, as well as in black feminist thought. Its discussions seek to unmask political dominance and the limits of liberalism or civil rights advocacy. The book highlights black women's challenges to state power and antiradicalism within conventional politics and within feminist and antiracist politics, as well as describes how cultural stereotypes obscure political agency. In a sense, this writing mirrors the historical role of blacks, females, and black females as petitioners and agitators in—or appendages and shadows of—American society and politics.

Although they have been marginalized, studies of black female radicalism nevertheless offer an important service in that they map shared and contested political terrain. Such studies contradict conservative or neoliberal claims that elite or institutional opposition to racial and gender equality is merely a fiction promoted by "victim" rhetoric or studies. Despite exclusionary practices set by racism, sexism, and class bias, African American women have made gains in the "public realm" of electoral politics and appointed office; these are the political victories most often seen and celebrated in antiracist feminist politics. The 1992 election of Carol Mosely Braun as the United States's first black woman Senator, and the reelections of Democratic leaders Maxine Waters, Cynthia McKenny, Corrine Brown, Carrie Meeks, and Eleanor Holmes Norton to the U.S. House of Representatives stand as key examples of black female progress in electoral political power. Outside of congressional halls, black women also have mobilized the "private realm" of local and religious communities, neighborhood schools, and cultural centers. Directly or indirectly opposing institutional control, and social and state neglect or violence, they have informed American political culture by

leaving indelible marks in anti-violence campaigns, resource redistribution for underresourced communities, youth and women's groups, and labor and civil rights activism. Both the highly visible Congresswomen and the nearly invisible community activists shape models of political progressivism.

Yet black women and feminists are not uniformly progressive, although they all invariably face marginalization and opposition fueled by white supremacy, corporate capitalism, patriarchy, and homophobia. Radical or revolutionary black feminisms also face resistance from liberal and conservative feminisms and antiracisms. *Shadowboxing* explores how black feminists have to negotiate the "internal" opposition of antiradicalism among feminists and antiracists and the counterfeminism evident among radicals.

Battling with state power, official culture, as well as anti-radicalism and counterfeminism among progressives, subordinate women have forged a feminist politics through militant antiracist movements whose contributions set the context for this text. This emphasis on political militancy and radicalism differs somewhat from the emphases of contemporary black feminisms that focus on cultural politics as isolated from state power and middle-class sensibilities. Deconstructing representations of black females as sexual deviants—images that promote antiblack and antifemale contempt and violence—has been a primary concern of black women writers and activists in the United States for centuries. I examine such concerns only in relation to their critical opposition to representations that detract from black women's political militancy. For instance, commercial images of the sexualized allure to or aversion for black females eclipse images of black female political agency in conventional culture: As the political outlaw is transformed into the sexual outlaw, the activist becomes a commodity consumed in the hunt, imprisonment, or rehabilitation.

Given the centrality of cultural criticism in black feminist discourse, it is important to note the contributions of cultural black feminisms deconstructing fetish. In visual culture, fetish has been associated with blackness as primitivism and sexual license. The fetishized are seen as interlopers, imitating or contaminating a "civilized" citizenry. Critiquing or accommodating fetish with the ingenuity of subordinate cultures

grappling with bad press, black women have produced diverse representations of black females and feminisms.

Following the black, brown, and red and women's liberation movements of the preceding decades, in the 1980s there was an explosion of black feminist culture and writings to challenge caricatures or one-dimensional representations of black females. As a consequence of these contributions, black feminisms became best known, and taught, through memoir, fiction, and film that examined gender conflict and community relations, but often in abstraction to political radicalism that confronted state or corporate systems. Popularized through Hollywood and television, key works include Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*, and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*. That liberal black feminisms are filtered through the cultural commodities market warrants a critical response. As author bell hooks notes: "Our creative work is shaped by a market that reflects white supremacist values and concerns. . . . novels highlighting black male oppression of black females while downplaying white racist oppression of black people would be more marketable than the reverse."<sup>9</sup> Some contemporary feminist and race discourse plays to the market, which provides steady incentives to present black feminisms in "acceptable," conventional forms.

Despite the drives of the market, and criticisms that black feminist productions promote "antiblack male stereotypes," such works have proven indispensable in highlighting the issues of alienation, abuse, and resistance in the lives of black females. They also illustrate the idea and practice of black female independence from both black males and white males and females. To some extent, though, racial-sexual fetish in a mass market undercuts the progressive politics of the works, an inevitable result in a market economy. Marketed as exotica, black feminist sensibilities and literature often appear as a source of emotive stories of feminine colored pain and ethnic eccentricities for consumers. The discomfort that arises from the telling of black women's stories may have more to do with a reluctance to hear the abuse and struggle, pain and anger embedded in the tale; this may be particularly so if the narratives are encountered through commercial culture. Inadvertently, as black women manage images auctioned in a market they do not control, black

feminisms function as spectacle and black feminists as storytellers for a society nursed on the colonized frame.

Although fiction has the greatest currency in black feminism, currently the most prominent delineators of black feminist politics are its academics and social theorists. For instance, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins describes a cross-gender (but not transracial) Afrocentric feminism as "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision" and "develop a theory that is emancipatory and reflective" for black female struggles.<sup>10</sup> Citing an undifferentiated, monolithic black feminism, she notes its limbo status in respect to both white and black women: The "term *Black feminist* both highlights the contradictions underlying the assumed Whiteness of feminism and reminds White women that they are neither the only nor the normative 'feminists'. Because it challenges Black women to confront their own views on sexism and women's oppression, the term *Black feminism* also makes many African American women uncomfortable."<sup>11</sup> Exploring a type of feminism unique to black females or women of color, Alice Walker, who has achieved prominence as both progressive theorist and novelist, contrasts black feminism with white or Eurocentric feminism to introduce the term "womanist." Walker renders the adjective "black" superfluous for feminist or gender-progressive women of African descent and "women of color" in order to posit a culturally specific womanism, noting that white women feel no need to preface "feminist" with "white," understanding the term as stemming from their racial/ethnic culture.<sup>12</sup> bell hooks' expansion on Collins's humanist-Afrocentric vision and Walker's cultural critique, (which has been embraced by "womanist theology"), repoliticizes feminism as "a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."<sup>13</sup>

All three writers identify a feminism/womanism with a unique cultural worldview that shapes gender consciousness. To some degree, then, we can distinguish between a conventional feminism embraceable by all progressive women, including those who happen to be black, and a *black* feminism or womanism, one particular to women of African

descent. Yet there is a third form of feminism applicable only to those black women who are left of liberal or stand outside conventional politics. For example, hooks's comprehensive definition of feminism as opposition to white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy goes beyond the negative impact of gender, race, and culture to highlight an antiracist, socialist feminism applicable to all like-minded women. Her analysis is more explicitly about state practices and institutions; it encompasses progressive, anticapitalist women to emphasize exploitation tied to corporate capitalism and racial imperialism. Therefore, it also provides a bridge to this discussion of black radical feminism.

Unlike many cultural feminists, this noted cultural critic describes being politicized by black or "third world" male revolutionary intellectuals. hooks writes: "I am often asked to chart a critical genealogy of my intellectual development. In the years before I became deeply engaged with the feminist movement and with the writing of feminist theorists, all the progressive critical thinkers who nurtured my emergent radical subjectivity were men: [Frantz] Fanon, [Albert] Memmi, [Amilcar] Cabral, [Paulo] Freire, Malcolm X."<sup>14</sup> The interest of black women such as hooks in radical subjectivity tied to political movements shapes this text's focus. Like hooks, a number of black women have been radicalized by the insurgent speech and struggles of black males (men who at times are credited as the only significant leaders of movements co-organized and led by black women).

The focus here is on women who uniformly considered themselves "antiracists" but not necessarily "feminists" yet who nevertheless expanded antiracist women's politics, community development, democratic power, and radical leadership. Given the primacy of movements in the formation and articulation of black female militancy, history plays a central role in contemporary analyses. In the 1960s, black women participated in the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Emerging from the black liberation and antiracist movements that helped to redefine radical action, in the 1970s black women's organizations such

as the Combahee River Collective issued cogent manifestoes that articulated a revolutionary black feminism.<sup>15</sup>

Historically, the strongest motivation in the development of black feminist politics in twentieth-century America stemmed from rebellions against racism or U.S. apartheid and segregation, specifically antiblack racism, revolts against racialized sexism and sexual violence, and wars against poverty.<sup>16</sup> Conventional political discourse—whether conservative, liberal, or radical—that obscures these battles and their emergent feminisms raises the leviathan of patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism to overshadow the work of black and female struggles (especially working-class or poor black female ones). African American women shadow both a subordinate race and gender—a fact noted in the black feminist adage: "All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave."<sup>17</sup>

Seeking to frame some aspects of that courage, I sketch a political trajectory in black feminisms to explore key intersections along the American cultural curve. The intersections include community, black women's political practices, revolutionary iconography, state punishment, fetishistic representations of sexuality and victimization, and black male patriarchy and profeminism. The discussions center on black women's quests for economic resources, social and racial justice, cultural autonomy, and sexual safety. Also discussed are the abolition of racist policing and executions as well as advocacy for political dissent and self-defense amid state repression.<sup>18</sup> Balancing historical and political critiques with cultural criticism, these observations contradict the grand narrative or "official story" of U.S. democracy as benignly impartial or just in respect to black or "colored," gay/lesbian or bi/transsexual, female, poor, and working-class life.

In a culture that greets antiblack and antifemale violence, and the vilification and abuse of black females and their kin, with considerable equanimity, many shadowbox. Those women who do so with distinct political intent to revolutionize rather than reform shape the concerns of this work. Battles to expand democratic freedoms amid a culture of dominance reveal fears and desires. *Shadowboxing* struggles with primal drives and the status of African American women as companion-

challengers to a dysfunctional democracy. Rather than showcase black feminism-as-spectacle, it attempts to unlock the glass case of the American shadow box that restricts, but has never shielded, the African female resistance displayed.

TWO

## Forging Community: From Segregation to Transcendence

I had seen their tears and sighs, and I had heard their groans, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them.

—Harriet Tubman

**R**acial, racist, and antiracist communities are social communities; they are spiritual communities as well, embodying both the political and the transcendent. “Community” shapes political rhetoric, concepts, and practices in late-twentieth-century U.S. society. Yet racial and class or economic segregation have become normative. During the current U.S. “economic boom,” which reflects the expansion of concentrated wealth and corporate financing of electoral politics, with the curtailment of social services and mass political rights, civic and grass-roots organizations have heightened their calls for term and campaign contribution limits.

Advocates for electoral reform have noted that material resources and wealth increasingly remain the possession of elites: From 1980 to 1990, the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee reported that pretax income for the poorest first decile fell from \$5,128 to \$4,695; for the



richest sector it mushroomed from \$312,816 to \$548,969. While class and social divisions are magnified, bold visions for economic redistributive justice to underresourced sectors are largely absent from corporate and state-funded media and education. Consequently, the nation seems to be suffering a severe national deficit both in funds for redistribution to nonelites and in radical thinking for racial parity in economic resources. This illusion of scarcity of resources for redistribution coexists with a rhetoric of abundance for the population in general and the corporate-managed economy specifically. Conventional political discourse pays little attention to advocacy for redirecting material resources and the dissemination of transformative ideologies, partly because a form of American race rhetoric masks the stratification of economic wealth and the emergent activism and theories that challenge impoverishment in this "age of abundance." Conventional race rhetoric is able to foster a sense of "community," one predicated on segregation and the denial of its resurgence as both a racial and economic phenomenon. It also functions as a form of policing, multifaceted in its scope and intent and capable of setting borders for those "worthy" and "unworthy" of participating fully in the political economy of a bourgeois democracy.

Conventional race rhetoric is compatible with conservative and reactionary racial rhetoric. Far-right rhetoric increasingly rejects the overt race hatred of white supremacist demagoguery to make the allegedly race-blind argument that neither blacks nor whites should succumb to race mixing because both groups must preserve and take pride in their respective racial heritages. This stance legitimizes rightist racial policing. It is counterpoised with the centrist race rhetoric emanating from the President's Race Initiative, or PRI, for race civility within a neoliberal paradigm. Yet President Bill Clinton's PRI did not challenge economic stratification as a form of racial division. Therefore, although distinct entities, the new segregationist—conservative—and new integrationist—neoliberal—race discourses both stem from the same conventional approaches to solving the "race problem" within the dominant political and economic systems. Unconventional or radical race rhetoric for community, emanating from activists and political prisoners, maintains that racialized U.S. domestic and foreign policies have created such severe conditions of repression and illusion that reasonable responses embody

radical and revolutionary theory and struggle for systemic changes.<sup>1</sup> Such changes include full and meaningful employment, comprehensive medical and educational services, and the abolition of prisons and the death penalty as racialized sites for repression and exploitation. Predictably such discourse and activism send alarm signals throughout corporate and middle America, which respectively seek and acquiesce to greater state police powers.

Policing is justified because it offers protection: protection from rhetorical excess, criminality, and political extremism. Race rhetoric in the marketing of scarcity functions to sell the consumer "protection." Most discourse on affirmative action and racial containment (and resegregation) through prisons focuses on the selling and buying of protection or insurance—moral, physical, psychological, and political. The arenas for racial discourse on affirmative action and incarceration mark the parameters of left liberalism in black feminist politics. These arenas are explored later. Another distinct form of community, one that emphasizes a black cultural context in confrontation with racist exclusionary practices and politically repressive measures, is also examined as an alternative to a regenerating segregation.

#### SEGREGATED COMMUNITY: FROM AFFIRMATIVE ACTION TO INCARCERATION

Affirmative action has a dual impact on segregation for racialized communities. Many speak of affirmative action disparagingly as "racial" or "group preferences," only within the areas of employment and education, not in the areas of incarceration and execution. Even those who believe that affirmative action is the key antiracist measure and litmus test for racial progressivism often do not analyze its deployment in incarceration as the method of resegregation for the racially privileged and disenfranchised. Increased competition for jobs and educational slots and a countercultural movement to the civil rights gains of previous decades have all fostered advocacy for the resurgence of segregation. Despite economic and educational abundance in the United States, economic and educational access has proven elusive for many black

Americans. Race rhetoric that obscures the relationship between racial-sexual disenfranchisement and corporate capitalism has reduced the demand for egalitarian economic and educational access. Consequently, political manipulation of racial and economic fears continues to reify and fuel racialized communities.

Much has been said about affirmative action, particularly within academe, where it has become the dominant discourse on racial inequality and a standard for determining racist or antiracist attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Affirmative action is embraced as the promise of moral protection against racism (specifically, white supremacy); conversely, anti-affirmative action advocates claim they seek protection from "reverse racism," marketing "fairness" in a popularized vision of a visually impaired or color-blind American society. Both proponents and opponents of affirmative action engage in advocacy, advocacy made problematic by the fact that often it takes little account of the conservative origins of affirmative action and its liberal intent. Given the origins of affirmative action, simplistic characterizations citing those who advocate it as "antiracist" are untenable. For, as Berkeley sociologist Troy Duster notes, former President Richard Nixon supported affirmative action.<sup>3</sup>

Following the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson maneuvered through Congress the 1964 civil rights legislation mandating selected forms of affirmative action in the workplace. While the Democratic president engineered the passage of legislation, Nixon institutionalized affirmative action, mandating that in select work sites corporations implement affirmative action programs. In his review of the memoirs of the Republican president's senior domestic aide, John Ehrlichman, his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, and historian Kenneth O'Reilly's work entitled *Nixon's Piano*, Duster notes that Nixon's support for affirmative action in employment was based on a shrewd cynicism and insight that it would be the wedge issue in the Democratic Party, splintering its coalitions of (white) labor, African Americans and Jews.<sup>4</sup> "Surely," writes Duster, "Nixon is wearing, even now, that familiar taut smile. . . ." <sup>5</sup> However, even Nixon, as prescient as he was, could not foresee that although "group interests were central to the fate of affirmative action . . . those group interests would reincarnate themselves in the disguise of claims to individual fairness."<sup>6</sup> According to Duster,

the former president's racially contentious vision allowed him to see that economic or class aspirations are racialized in the United States and so manifest themselves in a racial-collective formation; therefore, the majority of whites would assert themselves as a group, with collective interests. And, in fact, this is what they did in the 1970s, in opposition to affirmative action and other civil rights initiatives and in the largely white male flight from the Democratic to the Republican Party.

Although the Republican Party would undermine the economic interests of middle- and working-class whites, its use of economic fears and racial indignation, coded in the rhetoric of white innocence and victimization (traceable at least to the postbellum era and the rise of lynching, the convict prison lease system, and Jim Crow segregation) solidified group interests racialized as "white." Consequently, in the 1980s key Republican strategist Lee Atwater informed the Republican National Committee (RNC) that "class struggle in the South continues with the [white] populists serving as the trump card." The populists, according to Atwater, lean toward economic liberalism but social conservatism. "When Republicans are successful in getting certain social issues to the forefront, the populist vote is ours," he wrote.<sup>7</sup> Best known (along with Roger Ailes, currently a news pundit for the Fox Network) as one of the architects for the Willie Horton campaign to elect George Bush as president, Atwater understood that using economic and education redress mechanisms such as affirmative action could turn them into social issues that most white (especially southern) workers would vote to oppose. In fact, most whites voted against their own class interests during the 1980s by electing pro-corporate Republican administrations that cut social services: from 1980 to 1989, U.S. average hourly wages decreased from \$19.84 to \$19.66 per hour, while from 1989 to 1993, average U.S. household annual income fell 7 percent. Anti-affirmative action race rhetoric obscures white group interests by positing the notion of competing deserving and "undeserving" *individuals*, when in fact the battle is about racialized *groups* juxtaposed with the subordinate status of blacks.<sup>8</sup>

Conservative and neoliberal antiracist discourse works to counter race-baiting and scapegoating often without appealing to the political context and the co-optation of the radical antiracist struggle. For

instance, offering his own vision of fairness, morality, and good business, in 1997 Houston mayor Bob Lanier worked vigorously against an anti-affirmative action initiative so that it was eventually defeated by a vote of 55 to 45 percent. As a wealthy white real estate mogul, Lanier stumped against the initiative with the adage "Let's not go back to the time when all of the people who did business with the city looked like me."

At the time, only 20 percent of Houston's contracts went to women and people of color. Through the media, Lanier asserted a set of moral claims about fairness ("whites shouldn't have everything") and placed those claims squarely before voters with the reworded initiative that altered the initial 1964 Civil Rights Act wording. Originally, anti-affirmative action advocates crafted language that stated that the initiative *prohibited discrimination* based on race or gender or religion; Lanier's political crew changed the language so that the initiative's consequences were explicit and unambiguous; altered, it stated that a pro vote would oppose affirmative action for women and minorities. Yet this pro-affirmative action stance is abstracted from the larger political context of antiracist and antisexist struggles. To the degree that the struggle around affirmative action in education and employment has become synonymous with antiracist struggle in the United States, it has obscured the program's political intent, and serves as a surrogate for black and feminist struggles.

Some intellectuals seek to dispense with explicit antiracist strategies such as affirmative action. Their race rhetoric becomes an advocacy to struggle against discrimination and economic disenfranchisement that people of color face by dealing with class issues. Black neoliberal class discourse attempts to revitalize affirmative action as a class-based remedy, and, as such, as an alternative to a race-based strategy. Maintaining that affirmative action has "failed" because it is politically unpopular in a counter-civil rights era, Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson argues that massive intervention to expand urban housing desegregation and affirmative action is impractical because most Americans resist "race-specific policies." The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that at the August 1997 American Sociological Association meeting in Toronto, Wilson proposed a program modeled on the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Wilson's stated aim was to "inspire progressives of all ethnicities with a race-blind

vision of social justice."<sup>9</sup> Failing to note the racial bias of the New Deal programs (the 1934 National Housing Act and the 1935 Wagner Act for labor inscribed and exacerbated racism),<sup>10</sup> Wilson conveniently ignores the political reality that if mainstream America is hostile to affirmative action, it likely would not support a WPA work program, particularly now, when the poor have been racialized as culturally or inherently undisciplined and opportunistic (if not parasitic) and therefore socially and economically criminal. The selling of scarcity also has convinced many Americans of the viability and moral necessity of coerced, subsistence-wage labor through the workfare and prison industries. Both sectors are being privatized, a move that promotes superexploitation in the search for profits. Wilson attempts to counter the demand for racial or group preferences as white rights and entitlements by banning all rhetoric that refers to race and racism in affirmative action and by opening all such programs to whites—that is, white *males*, because the programs are currently open to white females.

In fact, the Clinton administration uses the same tactic in attempting to expand support for affirmative action by promoting the visibility of white women as its beneficiaries. In September 1997 the administration modified federal affirmative action policies to comply with the 1995 Supreme Court ruling restricting the use of race as a consideration in awarding federal contracts.<sup>11</sup> Under the program known as "8a," through the Small Business Administration (SBA), 3,000 companies became eligible to apply for federal contracts. In fiscal year 1996, 6,115 companies were awarded federal contracts totaling \$6.4 billion according to the *New York Times*. Of these, all but 27 were owned by ethnic minorities.<sup>12</sup> Through the SBA, Asians' participation in the federal program grew from 10.5 percent of contracts in 1986 to 23.7 percent in 1996; African Americans dropped by more than a quarter, from 50.5 percent in 1986 to 36.7 percent in 1996; Latinos stayed at 30 percent.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that affirmative action gains are overwhelmingly attributed to blacks in national racial rhetoric and imagery, although quantitatively the greatest beneficiaries have been white women and increasingly other people of color, attests to the endurance of the black/white binary in the American mind and the racialization of the deserving industrious sector as "white" and the parasitic sector as "black."

But the concept of group or collective white victimization and the need for group white racial redress appears even when there is no mention of race. Consider the anti-affirmative action rhetoric of Louisiana governor Mike Foster, who in 1997 labeled law students at Tulane University's law clinic "vigilantes" for litigating on behalf of a local black neighborhood that, having suffered from toxic waste dumping in the past, opposed a chemical company locating a plant in its community. Foster threatened to revoke the university's tax breaks and revenues, while leaders of the Chemical Consortium of Corporations vowed not to provide financial gifts to the school, because its students were, in effect, biting the hand that fed them.

In a 1997 letter to Tulane's president, Louisiana's Secretary of Economic Development, Kevin P. Reilly, Sr. suggested that the reason only 54 percent of Tulane Law School graduates pass the bar exam the first time might be linked to their clinic's advocacy/activism. Although none of this overtly appears as policing race rhetoric, it is coded by its speakers as such. For aligning themselves with impoverished blacks, largely white affluent students are accused of political extremism, ingratitude toward parental authority, and being afflicted by the bell curve's decline in intelligence. The Tulane episode suggests that class issues are racialized in the United States, despite Wilson's attempt to use class to bypass the issue of racism and social dilemmas about how to deploy responsible race rhetoric in public discourse.

In their rhetoric, the U.S. President, Houston's former mayor, and Harvard's sociologist do not address the ways in which affirmative action is tied to black performance to undermine its value as an antiracist project. Black performance in relation to affirmative action or "racial preferences" has an economic role; consequently it enhances the market value of the institutions or corporate entities within which people of color function. These corporate sites are not inherently vested in the development of African American, Latino, Asian, or Native American communities as a value in themselves; rather, state and corporate consumers are the greatest beneficiaries from the appearance and performance of people of color in state-corporate institutions.

For example, as a result of affirmative action, we encounter the phenomenon of black students performing as athletes to generate wealth

in public schools such as the University of Texas, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of Colorado (whose football coach's 1997 annual salary exceeded \$400,000). As such, black youths function as commodities or producers of commodities.

In 1996 the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Cheryl Hopwood and three other white students who sued the University of Texas law school for racial discrimination after they were denied admission.<sup>14</sup> In retaliation to the Hopwood case, Texas State Representative Don Wilson (D-Houston) introduced a bill in March 1997 to eliminate athletic scholarships at state universities unless the athletes meet the same academic requirements as nonathletes, with the rationale that if affirmative action is bad for nonathletes, it should be bad for athletes. The Texas legislature did not pass that bill. Its members considered keeping revenues from sports more essential than establishing a logical coherence to the stance on affirmative action, particularly given the selling of the idea of economic scarcity to Americans through state budgets, which increasingly spend more on prisons than universities and schools.

In addition to functioning as athletic entertainers and employees, students perform as "diversity investments." In the wake of the Hopwood decision and California's anti-affirmative action proposition 209, fewer gifted black and Latino students have enrolled in both Texas and California state schools, which they view as racially hostile. (Mexican-American or Chicano/a students have renamed UT Austin the University of Tejaztlan at Austin). Private institutions have "raided" what are now considered "scarce commodities." The selling of scarcity is fueled by rather limited notions of what constitutes a stellar student of color.

"People of color" can be seen as multicultural units for private wealthy institutions or corporations. Investments in multiculturalism give schools the appearance of being academically enriched in "diversity," where colored students (like those faculty members who are raided or recruited) share their narratives and appearance to become part of the unpaid educational performers in service of diversification; this service is unlike that which ethnic *majority* faculty, staff, and students perform. Fragile coalitions between "people of color" (that euphemistic homogenizing phrase) are sometimes frayed by contests over which group is most valued as Other in the white corporation.

In the new segregation, universities are becoming increasingly white while prisons are becoming increasingly black or brown as "racial preferences" follow the imagined desires of ethnic majorities. Students are not the only racialized performers under affirmative action. Nonstudents function as performers in the penal economy. Racial group preferences, although denounced in education and employment, are not equally condemned by conservatives and liberals. In regards to policing and incarceration, their political stances seem fairly similar.

In 1998 members of the Congressional Black Caucus satirized police patrol pullovers of motorists targeting African Americans as an infraction known as DWB—Driving While Black. The racist bias reflected in sentencing has created a society in which a black person is eight times more likely to be sentenced to prison for committing (or being convicted of) a similar offense as a white person. Defendants receive the same sentencing for the sale or possession of one unit of crack—considered a black or latino urban drug—as for one hundred units of powder cocaine—considered a white suburban indulgence. Although the majority of cocaine and crack offenders are whites, most of those sentenced to prison for drug use and sale are African American and Latino. Affirmative action for prisons does not seem to stir up the national American conscience, or inspire as much debate in media, academic, or political circles, as does affirmative action in education and employment.

The proliferation of prisons, described as the "prison industrial complex" by some human rights advocates, is enmeshed in both educational and racial policies. For instance, in 1997, California had the largest prison population (housing approximately 135,000 people); more of the state's general fund goes to prisons (9.4 percent) than to higher education (8.7 percent). California prisons house twice the number of African Americans than do its four-year universities as increasingly educational programs are banned for incarcerated peoples.<sup>15</sup>

In the postbellum era, racist rhetoric fueled the rise of lynchings and the convict lease system, both of which targeted African Americans. Following the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution codified slavery. While ostensibly abolishing it, that amendment in fact legalizes and demarcates prisons as the areas in which slavery, or "involuntary servitude," is permissible: Those duly convicted of a crime

in a court of law can be forced into involuntary labor. One of America's great intellectuals, W. E. B. Du Bois, notes in *Black Reconstruction* that, after the Civil War, southern planters who earlier had used slave labor began to rely solely on convict labor because of the profit margins, as African Americans were imprisoned for minor infractions of the law or for simply being "in the wrong place at the wrong time."<sup>16</sup> In the late nineteenth century, black women and men often labored yoked together in stockades, as labor exploitation and brutality that had existed under slavery created new gender parity within growing prison populations.

Today the economic incentives and profiteering around involuntary servitude or prison slavery rarely enter mainstream race rhetoric. Yet there are now nearly 2 million people behind bars in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers, three times the number documented for 1980. In 1995 African Americans comprised 12.5 percent of the U.S. general population and 50 percent of the U.S. prison population, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Sentencing Project. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "during the 12 months that ended June 1995, the number of prison inmates grew 89,707, to that date, the largest annual increase in U.S. history."<sup>17</sup> In 1995 the imprisoned population in the United States equaled or exceeded the populations of thirteen states and many major U.S. cities. Nearly one in every twenty-five adults in the country goes to jail each year.

Wackenhut Corrections Corporation and the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) are under contract to run ninety-three minimum- and medium-security facilities with more than 60,000 beds. In 1995 *Forbes* magazine cited Wackenhut as one of the "200 Best Small Companies" given its decade of growth. Currently, over one hundred private prisons exist. Common in the United States from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, private prisons were largely abolished in 1925, when newspaper exposés brought public attention to brutal beatings, malnourishment, and labor exploitation, coupled with complaints from labor and business about unfair competition. They reemerged decades later in 1984, when the federal government hired the Corrections Corporation of America, which also operates prisons in Britain and Australia, to run a detention center for immigrants in Houston, Texas.<sup>18</sup>

Since 1990, thirty states have made it legal to contract prison labor out to private companies. Sales from prison industries rose from \$393 million in 1980 to \$1.81 billion in 1995, according to a spokesperson at the Justice Department. U.S. Census Bureau data reported that nearly 600,000 full-time employees worked in corrections in 1995; the only Fortune 500 company with a larger workforce is General Motors. Ironically the estimated annual cost of corporate crime is between \$174 and \$231 billion, while the economic cost of "street crimes" (burglary and robbery) is estimated at \$3 to \$4 billion. States enforce laws that penalize poor and working-class people while virtually ignoring white-collar crimes.<sup>19</sup>

Prisons are self-perpetuating because reform campaigns assume that the prisons are the only effective strategy for countering crime. Consequently, prisons are proposed as remedies for reform's own failure according to human rights activist Angela Davis, who contends that "the failure of the prison combined with the inability to conceptualize penal strategies that [serve as an alternative] reflect the assumption that as brutal as prisons may appear, public order will always depend upon the existence of prisons, whether they are represented as places of rehabilitation, deterrence, or retribution."<sup>20</sup>

In October 1997 the state of Colorado held its first execution in thirty years. This became an opportunity for people statewide to reflect on the role of rehabilitation and deterrence in state punishment and killings. However, most public reflections and conversations did not adequately address the racist nature of U.S. policing. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, about 50 percent of those now on death row are people of color, from minority groups representing only 20 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly 40 percent of those executed since 1976 have been black; from 1977 to 1986, 90 percent of prisoners executed were convicted of killing whites, although the number of black victims was approximately equal.

In nearly every death penalty case, the race of the victim is white; in fact, a person is four times more likely to be sentenced to death for being convicted of killing a white person than for killing a black person. Of the 229 executions in the United States since the reinstatement of the death penalty, only 1 involved a white defendant for the murder

of a black person. The American Bar Association has called for a moratorium on executions given the racial bias in death sentences.<sup>21</sup> However, nationwide, from Colorado to Texas to Missouri, state-sanctioned killings are increasing. Perhaps the most eloquent spokesman on incarceration and state executions is Pennsylvania's death-row inmate and black political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. Abu-Jamal writes in *Live from Death Row*:

Mix in solitary confinement, around-the-clock lock-in, no-contact visits, no prison jobs, no educational programs by which to grow, psychiatric treatment facilities designed only to drug you into a coma; ladle in hostile, overtly racist prison guards and staff; add the weight of the falling away of family ties, and you have all the fixings for a stressful psychic stew designed to deteriorate, to erode one's humanity—designed, that is, by the state, with full knowledge of its effects.<sup>22</sup>

In the racialized democratic state, visceral forms of contemporary violence are exposed by "prison intellectuals" and prisoner rights advocates. The brilliance of Abu-Jamal's book is its dissection of the most violent places in U.S. society—prisons, which coincidentally are also administered by the state. In his foreword to Abu-Jamal's second book, *Death Blossoms*, and his Pacifica radio introductions to Abu-Jamal's commentaries taped at Pennsylvania's SCI Green and available on the CD, "All Things Censored," Cornel West notes that state-corporate policies are destroying poor/working-class and black communities and that exploited or unemployed people are being incarcerated in ever greater numbers.<sup>23</sup> Political leaders are aware that the death penalty is applied in a class- and race-biased manner: Most of those on death row are poor people and people of color.

Recent legislation in some seven states, including Pennsylvania and California, prohibits prisoners from granting interviews. Consequently, it is increasingly difficult for prisoners' voices to be heard. This is particularly true for the more than one hundred political prisoners that Amnesty International documents in the United States (a significant number of whom are incarcerated for militant organizing for black liberation). Consequently, some of the most controversial and incisive

analyses of political resistance and state dominance have disappeared from conventional American culture.

Like the written word, oral literature has had an impact on the incarceration politics that surround the "new" segregation that fosters not only racial but also political and ideological containment. Political testimonies from family members, lawyers, religious leaders, and journalists with access to the incarcerated contest the increasing censorship of prison intellectuals. However, such censorship has already become institutionalized. In 1996 National Public Radio canceled Abu-Jamal's commentaries after it was intimidated by the Fraternal Order of the Police and conservatives such as former Senator Bob Dole. In 1997 the president of Temple University barred the university radio station from airing "Democracy Now," produced by journalist Amy Goodman, because it featured Abu-Jamal's radio commentary taped from his prison cell. Community Radio, not Public Radio, airs controversial commentaries as Pacifica affiliates (WBAI in New York and KGNU in Boulder) bring to their listeners (or Web browsers) critical analyses censored from mainstream and noncommercial radio.

Most of the public attention on inequities and abuses in policing and sentencing focuses on males. Class and racial inequalities have created conditions where one of every three black males is tied to the criminal justice system (and, as a convicted felon, cannot vote). The most barbaric forms of inequitable and racialized treatment include prison beatings and torture as well as the reappearance of chain gangs. After progressives successfully brought lawsuits in 1997 and 1998 to ban chain gangs as cruel-and-unusual punishment, wardens devised outdoor hitching posts, where prisoners were tied all day, even in inclement weather, for offenses such as refusing to work (at times at hazardous labor or for wages as low as twenty cents an hour). The most repressive forms of segregation evoke America's antebellum punishments of enslaved Africans.

Discussions around human rights abuses within penal systems tend to overlook the conditions of women. Traditionally women have made up a small percentage of the prison population, yet recently their incarceration rates have increased over 300 percent as compared with a 214 percent increase for men. Between 1930 and 1950 two or three

prisons were built or established nationwide per decade for women; in the 1960s seven more were built; in the 1970s seventeen were created; in the 1980s thirty-four were opened to house women. In 1994 black women represented 82 percent of women sentenced for crack cocaine offenses; for drug offenses overall, they made up 50 percent.<sup>24</sup> Female offenders are mostly women who ran away from home; a quarter have attempted suicide; more than half have been abused physically, with 36 percent abused sexually.<sup>25</sup>

The Prison Activist Resource Center, based in Berkeley, California, notes significant facts about imprisoned U.S. women: The majority are incarcerated for economic, nonviolent crimes, such as check forgery or illegal credit card use. Eighty percent of women in prison report annual incomes of less than \$2,000 in the year prior to their arrest; 92 percent report incomes below \$10,000. Of the women incarcerated for violent crimes, most are convicted for defending themselves or their children from abuse. In 1997 California prisons incarcerated 600 women for killing their abusers in self-defense. (On average, prison terms are twice as long for killing husbands than for killing wives.)

Black women are twice as likely to be convicted of killing their abusive husbands as are white women. Fifty-four percent of women in prison are women of color. Ninety percent of incarcerated women are single mothers; there are 167,000 children in the United States who have been separated from their incarcerated mothers, and sometimes the loss of contact is permanent. The average age of women in prison is twenty-nine years old. Fifty-eight percent have not finished high school. Inequities in sentencing due to racism and economic discrimination linked to sexism are common. Black women, on average, receive longer jail time and higher fines than white women do for the same crimes.

Twenty-five percent of U.S. political prisoners are women. In 1997, approximately 138,000 women were incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons.<sup>26</sup> The dramatic increase in incarceration rates is partly due to working-class and poor women's worsening economic conditions and partly due to increased arrest rates in the wars on crime and drugs. Women prisoners spend an average of seventeen hours a day in their cells, with one hour outside for exercise; male prisoners spend on average of fifteen hours a day in their cells, with one and a half hours outdoors.

In the face of the isolation, exploitation, and abuse of incarcerated women and men that strain notions of conventional community, prisoners recreate new forms and meanings of "community." For example, former political prisoner and African American revolutionary Dhoruba Bin Wahad, lecturing after over nineteen years of incarceration due to COINTELPRO malfeasance, stated that prisons were black communities. The relationships of these black (and brown, red, yellow, and antiracist white) communities in the enslaved (as constructed by the Thirteenth Amendment) world with their counterparts in the "free" world are shaped by ideologies of connection, commitment, and struggle tied to understandings of transcendence.

### TRANSCENDENT COMMUNITY

Perhaps one of the most debated issues in American politics is the value of an independent African American political-cultural community. Not unique to, but nevertheless a strong characteristic of, black feminisms are expressions of responsibility and accountability that place community as a cornerstone in the lives and work of black females. Community in fact is understood as requiring and sustaining intergenerational responsibilities that foster the well-being of family, individuals, and a people, male and female. Even if the idea is discredited by the dominant culture, the knowledge that individual hope, sanity, and development come through relationship in community resonates in black politics.

Community is an American ideal and a frustrated endeavor. It is also a politically charged concept. Americans honor or disregard holidays thought to unify them as a nation with a common identity. The Fourth of July has significance for some as the "birthday" of a nation; for others, it is an opportunity to vacation and picnic. Columbus Day is a source of ethnic pride for Italian Americans who celebrate it and of consternation for Native and other Americans who condemn it. The commemoration of historical figures on President's Day has considerably less sway in the popular mind. For many Americans, holidays are apolitical. But African Americans have continuously politicized and problematized national holidays. For instance, abolitionist Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July

Oration delivered in Rochester, New York, in 1852 eloquently relates the sentiment of past *and present* radicals:

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, more bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.<sup>27</sup>

African Americans who resisted an uncritical acceptance of U.S. state and society not only censured American holidays and democratic pretensions, they also introduced their own memorial days to mark black political history and aspirations. For example, Kwanzaa was idealized and promoted by Maulana Karenga, former leader of Us (the cultural nationalist organization whose 1968 conflict with the Black Panther Party led to the tragic deaths of Panthers Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter and John Huggins). Juneteenth is celebrated nationwide on June 19 as the day on which, in 1865 in Texas, Union Major General Gordon Granger announced the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation.

In the spirit of Douglass, Juneteenth 1998 was honored with the first gathering of the antiracist, profeminist Black Radical Congress (BRC) in Chicago. The BRC Conference Call, for community and a congressional gathering, invokes the politicized spirit of collective struggle in African American life:

If you believe in the politics of Black liberation, join us. . . . If you hate what capitalism has done to our community—widespread joblessness, drugs, violence and poverty—come to the Congress. If you are fed up with the corruption of the two party system and want to develop a plan for real political change, come to the Congress. If you want to



struggle against class exploitation, racism, sexism, and homophobia, come to the Congress.<sup>28</sup>

Stating that the Black Radical Congress exists for “everyone ready to fight back,” the call urged participation by singling out its black fighters: “trade unionists and workers, youth and students, women, welfare recipients, lesbians and gays, public housing tenants and the homeless, the elderly and people on fixed incomes, veterans, cultural workers and immigrants. You!” The congress attracted nearly 2,000 participants, all seeking some form of black unity or community amid political battles.<sup>29</sup>

African Americans are likely more politically and historically-minded than most Americans regarding national figures and their oppositional place in contemporary culture and identity. For example, blacks who are indifferent or loath to celebrate George Washington (who owned slaves) or Abraham Lincoln (who sought to exile or “repatriate” blacks after the Civil War) will pay tribute to Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Many Americans follow liberating traditions that acknowledge their ancestors as a spiritual-political resource. For instance, European American culture honors ancestral spirits, often ones connected to cultural and racial quests for autonomy and racial supremacy. Confederate soldiers and slaveholders appear in the iconography of statues in public parks in Memphis, Jackson, or Birmingham to instruct or inspire devoted or casual attention. The fervor of canonical reverence in the battles over reading lists belies academic disdain for ancestral worship as primitivism. Popularized Euroamerican ancestors include “founding fathers” George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and the sanctified Elvis. These icons evince complex relationships often obscured by facile representations of white American freedom and “civilization” that fail to acknowledge its dependency on enslaved or exploited African Americans. Since the civil rights movements mainstreamed black icons, national American culture has jumbled the contradictory values of ancestors who promoted oppositional world-views: Holidays, coins, and postage stamps pay tribute to presidents who were enslavers, such as Washington and Jefferson (the white

abolitionist revolutionary John Brown, who organized the insurrection at Harper’s Ferry, is rarely memorialized) as well as antiracist activists Ida B. Wells, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Speech about the ancestors enables critical appraisals of historical oppression and also establishes communal ties to support and reflect political-spiritual, secular-sacred traditions and practices. Ancestors illuminate an avenue for liberation. Instructional, and often inspirational, calls to expansive community come from various sites that nevertheless point to commonalities based on shared values. In the 1980s activists fighting U.S.-funded contras in Nicaragua or death squads in El Salvador honored and resurrected their dead by calling “Presente!” after their names in roll calls for the deceased. (In November 1998, at protests at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, several thousand largely white, middle-class and religious demonstrators responded to the names of those slain under the direction of U.S.-trained death squad leaders with the same call.)

Strongly invested in their ancestors who served as liberators, African Americans’ attachments to historical figures such as Douglass, Tubman, Wells, Malcolm X, King, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker have deep political and emotional resonance and rootedness. Although the names of females are not mentioned as often, calls to the ancestral presence appear in African American religion, politics, art, in literary and oral culture. These evocations speak to desires for the well-being of community.

A theory of African ancestors in communal development exists as a cultural coda for black feminisms. African decolonization struggles and historical women’s rights and international black freedom movements influenced black women’s politics. The manifesto of the black feminist Combahee River Collective reflects the sensibility of transcendent community and duty toward organizing for liberation:

There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contempo-

rary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.<sup>30</sup>

Communal development rather than individualism was the marker of both nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "racial uplift," in which prominent blacks were to help elevate their less fortunate brethren. In fact, the status of the individual was tied to her or his role in race leadership and in the black community. Contemporary African American responses to black ancestral leaders, and the place of "ancestral mothers" in black women's stories, illustrate a basic philosophy guiding black feminism today. For instance, the African American women's cultural group Sweet Honey in the Rock honors the ancestors in song. Dedicated to Baker, their "Ella's Song" uses excerpts from Baker's civil rights speeches: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest, until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons." Introducing the song "Fannie Lou Hamer," Sweet Honey founder Bernice Johnson Reagon, a former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist, depicts a worldview: recognizing civil rights leader Hamer as a symbol of resistance. Reagon calls her name in the African tradition of offering libation to our forebears, "those who provide the ground we stand on."<sup>31</sup>

Traditional worldviews rooted in and influencing American culture are theoretically and practically lived by black men, women, and children. This leads some to argue that the schisms between political ideologies, gender, sex, class, language, ethnicity, and sexuality are bridged to some extent by shared cultural practices. It is assumed that these practices, in one sense of *shadow*, shelter blacks from danger or invasive observation. In the privacy and protection of a "subculture" that has Africanized the Americas, African Americans as observers or shouters participate in a community that intellectually and emotionally transports them considerable distances from the constraints of a racist society. Worldviews, based on resistance to enslavement and disenfranchisement and on African philosophies, are often in conflict with conventional culture. Part of the conflict stems from African Americans' political and cultural ties to African beliefs and struggles and to black radical or revolutionary politics.

The militancy of the Combahee River Collective statement resonates with the spirit of Amilcar Cabral found in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*. Like Combahee, Cabral offers a language that transcends spatial and temporal borders. As secretary-general of the African Party of the Independence of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands in the decolonization movement from Portugal, Cabral was considered a brilliant practitioner of liberation theories. His courage, revolutionary thought, and eloquence attracted men and women worldwide. In his "Second Address Before the United Nations," reprinted in *Return to the Source*, he states: "it is difficult to believe that responsible men exist who fundamentally oppose the legitimate aspirations of the African people to live in dignity, freedom, national independence and progress, because in the modern world, to support those who are suffering and fighting for their liberation, it is not necessary to be courageous; it is enough to be honest."<sup>32</sup>

A generation ago, amid "Third World" decolonization struggles, Cabral understood "African" to include blacks in the Diaspora and America. During his last visit to the United States in 1972, the Africa Information Service convened, at his request, a black political gathering in New York City, with over one hundred representatives from thirty organizations. In his presentation, "Connecting the Struggles: An Informal Talk with Black Americans," Cabral referred to those gathered as "African brothers and sisters" and asked for their assistance to the liberation movement in the following manner: "All you can do here [in the United States] to develop your own conditions in the sense of progress, in the sense of history and in the sense of the realization of your aspirations as human beings is a contribution for us. It is also a contribution for you to never forget that you are Africans."<sup>33</sup> Disavowing his expression of a shared "African" identity as "racist," Cabral counseled black Americans on how to fight white supremacy:

In combating racism we don't make progress if we combat the people themselves. We have to combat the causes of racism. If a bandit comes in my house and I have a gun I cannot shoot the shadow of this bandit. I have to shoot the bandit. Many people lose energy and effort, and

make sacrifices combating shadows. We have to combat the material reality that produces the shadow. If we cannot change the light that is one cause of the shadow, we can at least change the body. It is important to avoid confusion between the shadow and the body that projects the shadow. We are encouraged by the fact that each day more of our people, here and in Africa, realize this reality. This reinforces our confidence in our final victory.<sup>34</sup>

The possibility of victory, even if not perceived as “feminist,” was always understood as crossing gender lines. Victory was also never conceptualized outside of the political context of cultural worldviews. Assassinated by Portuguese agents on January 20, 1973, Cabral in spirit continues to appear to women and men who connect freedom and community to the legacies of slain visionaries. In some ways he remains connected by activists and “living thinkers” who realize, while expanding or detracting from, his legacies.

Congolese philosopher K. Kia Buseki Fu-Kiau writes in *The African Book Without Title*: “Mbungi a kanda va kati kwa nsi ye yulu: The Center [cavity] of the community is located between the above and the below world. The reality of the cultural heritage of a community, i.e., its knowledge, is the experience of that deepest reality found between the spiritualized ancestors and the physically living thinkers.”<sup>35</sup> In Kongo philosophy, “living thinkers” are initiates who channel between the metaphysical and the physical. The prominence of storytelling and activism in black feminism reflects traditional African cosmology, where thinkers in service to community travel full circle to realize metaphysical ideals in the physical realm. Political and politicizing, theorizing connects spiritual and material worlds to merge ideals—freedom, beauty, justice—with political action. (Practice merges theory with physical activity beyond the exercise of thought.) Defining theorizing as activist and communal repoliticizes rather than diminishes its intellectual content to serve nonelite interests. Theorizing is done from the standpoint of the individual in relationship to community. Therefore, where a person stands to theorize determines the theory’s beneficiaries. At the crossroads, the center within community, the horizon of family, friends, and people (nation) intersects with

the vertical climb and descent of ethics, ancestors, and progeny. The center within community offers a unique vantage point often revealed within the life stories of revolutionary leaders. Transcendent community reflects a theory of knowledge based on experience, reflection, judgment, and action. In this epistemology, the experiences of living thinkers produce reflections that incite judgments to inspire ethical action that renews the cycle—with new experiences, self-reflections, judging, and organizing.<sup>36</sup>

This worldview posits the nonduality of time and space to belie socially constructed dichotomies between the sacred and secular and the spiritual and political, the individual and community. Conventional divisions and distinctions within past, present, and future time—for instance, postbellum and postmodern liberation struggles—and geographical space—such as Africa and America—go largely unrecognized. Here new “old” meanings are established so that both time and space are seen to coexist and overlap.<sup>37</sup>

Theologian John Mbiti’s *Traditional African Religions and Philosophies* describes aspects of a cultural worldview that shadows America:

Most peoples . . . believe that the spirits are what remains of human beings when they die physically. This then becomes the ultimate status . . . the point of change or development beyond which [one] cannot go apart from a few national heroes who might become deified. . . . [Wo]Man does not, and need not, hope to become a spirit: [s]he is inevitably to become one, just as a child will automatically grow to become an adult.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than essentializing Africa, Mbiti’s work describes the diversity of religions throughout the continent. But he maintains that various organizing principles prevail despite ethnic and societal differences. The cosmology he documents rejects socially constructed dichotomies and resonates within American culture through people of African descent.

Recognizing the political place of African American cultural views that manifest and mutate through time and space does not construct these views as quintessential or universal to everyone of African descent. Some reject while others pursue transcendent community in order to

affirm African beliefs resonating throughout American culture as a form of political resistance to culture annihilation or assimilation.

Transcendent community is thought to extend through time and space, unbound by spatial or temporal limits; therefore, its "transcendence" includes the ancestors as well as the present collective and future unborn children. All comprise "community." The content and quality of communal relations is set by practice. (Consequently, a person's ability to consider community as encompassing those who do not live in the "free" world becomes in some ways a test of the limits of transcendence.) Here, relationships are determinant and shape the pursuit and construction of transcendent community. Here the collective supersedes individualism. Although articulated by individuals, knowledge and wisdom are acquired through a collective effort. When knowledge is "the experience of that deepest reality found between the spiritualized ancestors and the physically living thinkers," it can develop only in relationship, in transcendent community.

The conventional dismissal of these values and their contextual frameworks is traceable to European colonization on several continents. Historically European racial mythology mandated that physiology and ancestry designated whether a people could create theory and philosophy or merely ape superstition. The current dismissal of "discredited knowledge" stems from the historical disparagement of the African origins of these views. Fu-Kiau notes that European invasions of Africa were justified as necessary interventions "to civilize" African peoples; for Fu-Kiau, the consequence of this "civilization" is that "African people are still known as people without logic, people without systems, people without concepts. . . ." <sup>39</sup> In racialized societies, people whose traditional culture is "known" to be illogical, without complex belief systems, are generally suspect as contributors to intellectual life. Spoken and unspoken debates about epistemic "subcultures" meander amid a broad ideological spectrum. A by-product of these debates is that they mask commonalities of nonmainstream, noncommercial cultures.

Beliefs in the spiritual as inseparable from the mundane or secular, as nature as essential to humanity, the feminine and masculine as complementary, are not compatible with unidimensional foci. Nor are these beliefs exclusively "African." Native American worldviews share the

concept of community extending through time. In the indigenous view of "seven generations," actions are guided by concerns for future generations. <sup>40</sup> Lee Maracle's *Oratory: Coming to Theory* points to a Native American cosmology where theory and philosophy function as a "place of prayer, to persuade." Maracle writes:

We regard words as coming from original being—a sacred spiritual being. The orator is coming from a place of prayer and as such attempts to be persuasive. Words are not objects to be wasted. They represent the accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples. We believe the proof of a thing or idea is in the doing. Doing requires some form of social interaction and thus, story is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people. <sup>41</sup>

Here the Native American "orator" functions in a manner similar to the African American "living thinker."

Living thinkers mirror worldviews that present service and community as indispensable; knowledge and responsibility as intergenerational; and community as a changing and thorny tie. Such views offer nonconventional wisdom. In black feminist politics, progressive African American women have embraced this wisdom that has been discredited by conventional knowledge. For instance, Nobel laureate Toni Morrison offers a sketch of one form of community shadowing American society that illustrates this cultural embrace. <sup>42</sup> As the bard of black communal life that is shared by females and males (and the dead and the living), Morrison's cultural commitments obscure her status as a "feminist" for conventional thinkers yet reveal the worlds of black women seeking or fleeing community. <sup>43</sup> In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison writes:

There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout.

It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person.<sup>44</sup>

### CONCLUSION

For some, the greatest spiritual development is tied to service to the community; through such service a person eventually evolves to become an elder and later an ancestor, always with an eye to communal responsibilities. The global immiseration of the poor, "blacks," and females and children has pushed even the privileged toward an activism that seeks the legacy of past leaders.<sup>45</sup> Communal needs often are contextualized within crises: Worldwide, women and children of African descent are disproportionately represented among victims of violence, the incarcerated, the malnourished, illiterate, ill, and dying.

Pragmatism and "unorthodox" spirituality reflect the needs (and demands) for vision, language, and action that further survival and freedom. Transcendent community remains more often the ideal than the reality. In segregated states and societies, black women are subordinate Others. They exist as outsiders within not only American culture but also diasporic Africana or African American cultures. Desires to control or minimize this outsider status promote censorship and marginalization of the "outsider's outsiders"—the incarcerated or those who exist outside of the "free" world. To this population may be added other overlapping groups: prostitutes, lesbians/gays, bi- and transsexuals, the poor, immigrants, the disabled, and political radicals or revolutionaries. Existing in both the free world and its negation, they remain suspect. Not all are welcomed as peers in the transcendent community embattled by and located within the larger segregated state that resists the "Beloved Community" of Martin Luther King Jr. Yet historical or ancestral models for forging this community continue to challenge restricted notions of communal democracy.

### THREE

## Protofeminists and Liberation Limbos

The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors. . . .

—Maya Angelou

**L**imbos entail vulnerable backbreaking postures as well as isolated states. Rarely ladylike, limbos repudiate the gentleness of the cult of "true" womanhood, a bourgeois construct for civility that can weigh heavily on the outspoken and independent to censor black female militancy. Those who advocate civility as a precondition for transcending antiblack female stereotypes can depict the combativeness of rebels in "rude" opposition to racism, homophobia and sexism, corporate capitalism, and environmental pollution as a personal failing in deportment. In limbos, shadow boxers, particularly historical women or "protofeminists," who preshadowed contemporary black feminist radicalism, provided models and strategies for resistance that rejected strict black female adherence to middle-class norms.