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Radicalising feminism*

‘In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning – getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is, in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going.’

Ella Baker, *The Black woman in the Civil Rights struggle*¹

During the height of the black liberation and black power movements, veteran activist Ella Baker’s cogent assessment of the political contradictions of liberalism among black elites advocating civil rights distinguished between attempts to become ‘a part of the American scene’ and ‘the more radical struggle’ to transform society. According to Baker,

In...struggling to be accepted, there were certain goals, concepts, and values such as the drive for the ‘Talented Tenth’. That, of course, was the concept that proposed that through the process of education

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black people would be accepted in the American culture and they would be accorded their rights in proportion to the degree to which they qualified as being persons of learning and culture.²

For Baker, the common belief that ‘those who were trained were not trained to be part of the community, but to be leaders of the community’ implied ‘another false assumption that being a leader meant that you were separate and apart from the masses, and to a large extent people were to look up to you, and that your responsibility to the people was to represent them’. This precluded people from acquiring their own sense of values; but the 1960s, according to Baker, would usher in another view: ‘the concept of the right of the people to participate in the decisions that affected their lives’.³

Despite agitational movements, the concept of African Americans participating in political decisions has historically been translated through corporate, state or philanthropic channels. A century ago, the vision and resources of the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) allowed wealthy, white Christian missionaries to create the black elite Talented Tenth as a shadow of themselves as influential, liberal leaders, and to organise privileged black Americans to serve as a buffer zone between white America and a restive, disenfranchised black mass. Funding elite black colleges such as Spelman and Morehouse (named after white philanthropists) to produce aspirants suitable for the American ideal, the ABHMS encouraged the development of race managers rather than revolutionaries.⁴ To the extent that it followed and follows the founders’ mandate, the Talented Tenth was, and remains, anti-revolutionary.⁵ The formation of the Talented Tenth – supported by white influential liberals – historically included women. It therefore liberalised the proto-feminism of historical black female elites. Contemporary black feminist politics as pursued by elites evince an anti-revolutionary tendency reflective of the bourgeois ideology of ‘race uplift’. Vacillating between race management and revolutionary praxes, black feminisms are alternately integrated into, or suppressed within, corporate-consumer culture.

Yet, as Baker noted, the 1960s ushered in a more democratic, grassroots-driven form of leadership. The ‘new wave’ of black feminisms originating from the 1960s invariably connect with historical anti-racist struggles in the US. Black women created and continue to create feminism out of militant national liberation or anti-racist movements in which they often functioned as unrecognised organisers and leaders. Equally, their contributions to American feminism are inadequately noted, even among those who document the history of contemporary radical feminism. Emerging from black militant groups, Afra-Americans shaped feminist politics. A critical examination of these sites of emergent feminism and their embedded contradictions

reveals black feminisms' more radical dimensions. For instance, the Combahee River Collective traces its origins to political formations now generally considered as uniformly sexist:

Black feminist politics [has] an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.⁶

The Combahee River Collective took its name from the guerrilla foray led by the black revolutionary Harriet Tubman on 2 June 1863. This freed hundreds of enslaved people in South Carolina's Port Royal region, and was the first and only military campaign in the US planned and executed by a woman. During the Civil War, Tubman headed the intelligence service in the department of the South and was the first American woman to lead black and white troops in battle. Before making a name for herself as a military strategist and garnering the people's title of 'General Tubman', this formerly enslaved African woman had earlier proved herself 'a compelling and stirring orator in the councils of the abolitionists and the anti-slavers'.⁷ Tubman's distinct archetype for a black female warrior disputes conventional narratives that masculinise black history and resistance. Although males remain the icons for black rebellion embattled with white supremacy and enslavement, women engaged in radical struggles, including the strategy of armed self-defence. As fugitives with bounties on their heads, they rebelled, survived or became casualties of state and racial-sexual repression.

Despite being designated 'outlaws' and turned into outcasts because of their militancy, historical or ancestral black women such as Tubman have managed to survive in political memory. A few have been gradually (marginally) accepted into an American society that claims their resistance by incorporating or 'forgiving' their past revolutionary tactics. Tubman's antebellum, criminalised resistance to slavery, like Ida B. Wells's post-Reconstruction, anti-lynching call-to-arms, typifies a rebellion that later became legitimised through American reclamation acts. To recall or reclaim black women who bore arms to defend themselves and other African Americans and females against racial-sexual violence remains an idiosyncratic endeavour in a culture that condemns subaltern physical resistance to political dominance and violence, while supporting the use of weapons in the defence (or, in

some cases, the expansion) of the nation state, individual and family, home and private property.

Seeking explicitly to foster black female militancy in the 1970s, Combahee black feminists selected an Afro-American military strategist and guerrilla fighter as their archetype. Their choice of Tubman over her better known contemporary, Sojourner Truth, suggests an intent to radicalise feminism. Truth, not Tubman, is closely identified with feminism because of the former's work as a suffragette and associations with the prominent white feminists of her day. Tubman is identified with black people – men, women and children – and military insurrection against the US government. Her associations with white men are better known than those with white women; for instance, she allegedly planned to participate in John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, despite the warnings of the prominent abolitionist and pro-feminist, Frederick Douglass. With this African warrior and freedom-fighter as their feminist model, the Combahee River Collective emerged in 1977 to contest the liberalism of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) that preceded the Collective.

In its manifesto, the Collective expressed its 'serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus' and offered an activist alternative.⁸ The Collective, which included Gloria Hull and Margo Okasawa-Rey, later went on to organise against a series of murders targeting black girls and women in the Boston area. Combahee's black feminist manifesto emphasised radical activism rather than liberal politics:

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men... Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.⁹

Given the prevalence of anti-radical bias in American society, one must wade deeply into the mainstream to retrieve critiques such as the following, also issued by the Combahee River Collective:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.¹⁰

Ideology and feminist identity

How to maintain Combahee's integrative analyses – intersecting race, gender, sexuality and class – with more than rhetoric, that is, in viable political practice that organises in non-elite communities, became a major challenge for feminists. All anti-racist and anti-sexist politics, notwithstanding the rhetoric, are not equally ambitious or visionary in their demands and strategies for transforming society. The majority culture's desire or need to bring 'closure' or containment to the black revolutionary struggles that fuelled radical black feminism (such as Combahee) has filtered into black feminist ideology, altering its potential for transformation.¹¹ 'Closure' itself is, likely, either an illusory or a conservative pursuit, given the continuance of the repressive conditions (impoverishment, abrogation of rights, racial and sexual denigration) that engendered revolutionary struggle.

Although the greatest opponent to anti-racist and feminist revolutionary struggles has been the counter-revolutionary state (embodied in the twentieth century by the US¹²), black feminist writings have, by and large, paid insufficient attention to state repression and the conflictual ideologies and divergent practices found within black feminisms. This is partly because so much necessary energy has been focused on black feminisms' marginalisation in European-American and African-American culture (in addition, the impact of black feminisms on Latina, African, Asian, Arab and Native American women could be more fully addressed), and partly because of the anti-radical tendencies found within black feminisms, tendencies that are often obscured.

Liberal, radical and revolutionary black feminisms are often reductively presented as ideologically unified and uniformly 'progressive', while black feminisms are simultaneously viewed as having little impact beyond black women. Sorting out progressive politics within black feminisms, one may distinguish between ideological trajectories that reveal black feminisms' at times compliant, often ambiguous, and sometimes oppositional, relationships to state hegemony. Delineating ideology works to contextualise black feminist attitudes towards institutional and political power. In the blurred political spectrum of a progressivism that broadly includes 'liberal', 'radical', 'neoradical' and 'revolutionary' politics and their overlap, all of these camps change character or shape-shift to varying degrees with the political context and era. For instance, no metanarrative can map radical or 'revolutionary' black feminism, although the analyses of activist-intellectuals such as Ella Baker serve as cartography. Some reject, while others embrace, the self-proclaimed 'revolutionary' that manifests through rhetorical, literary, cultural or conference productions. 'Revolutionary' denotes dynamic movement, rather than fixed stasis, within a political praxis relevant to changing material conditions and social consciousness. With

a fluid rather than fixed appearance, the emergence of the revolutionary, remains episodic. As conditions change, what it means to be a 'revolutionary changes (therefore the articulation of a final destination for radical or revolutionary black feminisms remains more of a motivational ideal, and the pronouncement of an arrival at the final destination a depoliticising mirage).

Despite ideological fluidity and border crossings, one can make some valid or useful generalisations. Black feminisms that accept the political legitimacy of corporate state institutional and police power, but posit the need for humanistic reform, are considered liberal. Black feminisms that view (female and black) oppression as stemming from capitalism, neocolonialism and the corporate state that enforces both, are generally understood to be radical. Some black feminisms explicitly challenge state and corporate dominance and critique the privileged status of bourgeois elites among the 'Left': those that do so by connecting political theory for radical transformation with political acts to abolish corporate state and elite dominance are revolutionary.

Differentiating between liberalism and radicalism – or even more so between 'radical' and 'revolutionary' – to theorise black feminist liberation politics is extremely difficult but essential for understanding some limitations of 'left' politics and black feminisms. Part of the difficulty in delineating the 'Left' (of black feminisms) stems from the resurgence of the Right and its modification of liberal and progressive thought.

New terminology denotes the pervasive influence of conservatism as 'neo' becomes a standard political prefix for the era of post-Civil Rights and post-feminist movements. The efficacy of rightist conservatism has led to the coupling of reactionary with conservative politics to construct the rightist hybrid 'neoconservative'; the merger of conservative with liberal politics to create the right-leaning 'neoliberalism'; and the marriage of liberalism with radicalism to produce 'neoradicalism' as a more statist or corporate form of radical politics. Alongside 'neo-conservatism' and 'neoliberalism', one finds 'neoradicalism'. All denote a drift towards conservatism. This drift has engendered deradicalising trends that include the hegemony of bourgeois intellectuals within neoradicalism and the commodification of the 'revolutionary' as a performer who captures the attention and imagination of pre-radicalised masses, while serving as storyteller for the apolitical consumer. Responding to revolutionary struggles, the counter-revolutionary, anti-revolutionary and neoradical surface to confront and displace those inspired and sustained by vibrant rebellions.

Neoradicalism, like liberalism, denounces draconian measures against women, poor and racialised peoples, and, similarly, it also positions itself as 'loyal' opposition to the state. Therefore, what it denounces is not the state itself but its excesses – prison exploitation and

torture, punitive measures towards the poor, environmental degradation, counter-revolutionary violence and contra wars. Abolition movements directed by neoradicals rarely extend their rhetoric to call for the abolition of capitalism and the corporate state. When led or advocated by those representative of the disenfranchised, the deradicalising tendencies are muted by the appearance of the symbolic radical.

All black feminists, including those who follow conventional ideology to some degree, share an outsider status in a commercial culture. That marginalisation is not indicative of, but is often confused for, an intrinsic or inherent radicalism. Ideological differences among Afro-Americans belie the construction of (black) women or, even more significantly, black feminists as a 'class'. Refusing to essentialise black women or feminism, writers such as bell hooks have noted the conflictual political ideologies found among black women. In 1991, hooks's 'Must we call all women "sister"?' interrogated feminist championing of Anita Hill that made little mention of how this then Reaganite Republican had promoted anti-feminist, anti-gay/lesbian, anti-disabled and anti-civil rights policies at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) under the supervision of Clarence Thomas.¹³ The gender solidarity surrounding Hill obscured her support for ultra-conservative policies. Prior to her courageous testimony at the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings (which eventually confirmed Thomas as a Supreme Court justice), she had implemented reactionary attacks on the gains of the civil rights and women's movements (gains that had enabled non-activists such as Hill and her former supervisor to attend Yale Law School).

The consequences of African Americans' failure to distinguish and discuss political ideologies among black public figures has been noted by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw argues against a racial uniformity in black solidarity that includes reactionaries. In July 1998, at a C-SPAN televised gathering of black lawyers critical of the American Bar Association's invitation to Thomas to keynote its annual meeting, Crenshaw gave a scintillating critique of black support for Thomas. She contended that, because of his race, African Americans paid little attention to his right-wing politics and so failed to distinguish between 'conservative' and 'reactionary' ideologies. (Neo-nazi David Duke's endorsement of Thomas's appointment to the Court underscores the affinity right-wing ideologues felt for Thurgood Marshall's Republican replacement.¹⁴) According to Crenshaw, ideological distinctions eroded black opposition to former president George Bush's Supreme Court nominee, but, if black Americans had maintained and sharpened the distinction between conservative and reactionary positions, more would have actively opposed Thomas's appointment to the Court.

Crenshaw's argument has merit. Conservatism has some respectability among black women and men immured in the 'race uplift' of

Booker T. Washington's black capitalism (but not fully compliant with his prohibitions against competing with whites). Reactionary politics, however, hold no respectable public place among African Americans. Historically viewed as an extension of white supremacy and racial dominance, reactionaries have been considered anathema to black and female lives. Yet African Americans seem unwilling, publicly and critically, to discuss black reactionaries in service to the state and to distinguish their counter-revolutionary service from the anti-revolutionary disavowals of black liberals and neoradicals. (In similar fashion, maintaining distinctions between revolutionaries and radicals appears to be equally problematic for Americans.)

Just as blurring the lines between black reactionaries and conservatives politically accommodates reactionaries by reclassifying them as respectable 'conservatives', black feminists have erased the distinctions between liberalism and the radicalism that incited some of black feminisms' most dynamic, militant formations (like the Combahee River Collective). Given that liberalism has accrued the greatest material resources and social legitimacy, the coalition of liberals and radicals to foment neoradicalism means that respectability has been designated to dual beneficiaries. Liberal black feminism garners the image of being on the 'cutting edge' by appending itself to symbols of radicalism and hence increases its popularity as 'transformative'. Radicals are able to mainstream or maximise their visibility and the market for their rhetoric via legitimisation through association with liberalism. The terms for merger may be weighted towards liberalism, for liberalism – and its offshoot neoliberalism – wields more material resources and legitimacy than radicalism or neoradicalism. Liberalism also allows black feminisms to increase their compatibility with mainstream American politics, as well as mainstream African American political culture.

African Americans generally do not favour political 'extremism', as is attested by their strong fidelity to a Democratic Party that takes black voters for granted and that, under the Clinton presidency, increased police powers and punitive measures against the poor. Rather than rightist reactionary or leftist revolutionary politics, most black Americans support a progressive liberalism (left of centre) that has a greater social conscience and, therefore, moral content than that of the general society. This consequently places many African Americans outside the narrowly construed, conventional political spectrum. Due to a tendency to be more socially progressive and supportive of vigorous, sometimes outraged and sometimes outrageous, condemnations of white supremacy, African Americans are often portrayed as political 'extremists' or outsiders.

Given that centrism remains the dominant political stance, some black feminisms reconfigure radicalism to fit within liberal paradigms.

This enables an erasure of revolutionary politics and a rhetorical embrace of radicalism without material support for challenges to transform or abolish, rather than modify, state corporate authority. An analogy for black feminist erasures can be made with the framing of a painting. The mounting or mat establishes the official borders for the viewer. Often, matting crops off the original borders of the picture. If incorrectly done, the mat encroaches upon the image itself and the signature of the image-maker. In matting or framing black feminisms for public discourse and display, the extreme peripheries of the initial creation are often covered over. Placing a mat over the political vision of black feminism establishes newer (visually coordinated) borders that frequently blot out the fringes (revolutionaries and radical activists) to allow professional or bourgeois intellectuals and radicals to appear within borders as the only 'insurgents'. With layered or overlapping mats that position rhetoric as representative of revolutionary struggle, the resulting portrait will obscure radicals to portray liberals or neoradicals as gender and race 'rebels'.

Resisting and reshaping radicalism

Although a great impetus for the development of black feminism came from black revolutionary movements, anti-radicalism within American feminism (as well as masculinism among American radicals) obscured black female militancy. Anti-radical sentiment among some black feminists (which has led some black feminist writers to dismiss black women's ideological critiques of black feminist politics as 'sectarian') raises the issue of the place of revolutionary and anti-revolutionary thought within progressive black feminism.

Black feminist liberation ideology challenges state power by addressing class exploitation, racism, nationalism and sexual violence with critiques of, and activist confrontations with, corporate state policies. The 'radicalism' of feminism recognises racism, sexism, homophobia and patriarchy, but refuses to make 'men' or 'whites' or 'heterosexuals' the problem in lieu of confronting corporate power, state authority and policing. One reason to focus on the state, rather than on an essentialised male entity, is that the state wields considerable dominance over the lives of non-elite women. The government intrudes upon and regulates the lives of poor or incarcerated females more than bourgeois and non-imprisoned ones, determining their material well-being and physical mobility, and affecting their psychological and emotional health. Never the primary economic providers for black females, given the history and legacy of slavery, un- and under-employment and racialised incarceration, the majority of black men exert little economic control over female life, although they retain considerable physical, sexual and psychological dominance.

Radical black feminists' liberation theories address their nemesis: political violence, in both its private and public manifestations; counter-revolutionary state police repression, and a liberal anti-revolutionary discourse that seeks to contain radical black feminism by portraying it as an idealistic maverick. Radicalising potential based on incisive analyses; autonomy from mainstream and bourgeois feminism; independence from masculinist or patriarchal anti-racism; a (self) critique of neoradicalism, and, most importantly, activism (beyond 'speech acts') that connects with 'grassroots' and non-elite objectives and leadership – all mark a transformative black feminism. Yet, radicalism remains problematic for many.

Revolutionary praxis or the radical sentiments of the movement era (roughly 1955-75 to include the black civil rights struggle, the AIM, Chicano and *Puertoriqueno* insurrections and militant feminism) were not discarded solely because they became 'anachronistic'. These praxes proved to be dangerous and costly in the face of state and corporate opposition and co-optation. The attacks launched against militancy had to do with its effectiveness, its potential to effect radical change.

Today one finds in American politics in general, and black feminisms in particular, the 'mainstreaming' of radicalism as a form of resistance to radical politics in which formerly radical means, such as protest marches and demonstrations disrupting civic and economic affairs, are increasingly deployed for non-radical or liberal ends, such as the maintenance of affirmative action. Likewise, formerly radical causes – such as prisoners' rights activism and advocacy to abolish the prison industrial complex – are increasingly administered through conferences, research and social service centres financed by corporate philanthropy seeking to influence policy objectives.

In corporate culture, gender and race are filtered through class to juxtapose and contrast 'workers' and 'professionals'. To the extent that corporate culture has infiltrated US progressivism, the polarities of worker/manager resurface to foster a resistance to, or reshaping of, radicalism embodied in a 'corporate Left'. Those able to raise large sums of money through corporate largesse to institutionalise their political formations and identities as astute 'organisers', maintaining a political leadership that reflects the style of chief executives and mirrors state corporate sites (among which academia is included) would qualify as members of the corporate Left. Their status as sophisticated politicians goes unchallenged because of the material resources garnered. That these corporate sites and their corresponding political style are not known for their accountability to disenfranchised communities or democratic processes, but for funding alternative entities to diffuse radical movements, is viewed as irrelevant by some progressives. Joan Roelofs, however, argues that:

One reason capitalism doesn't collapse, despite its many weaknesses and valiant opposition movements, is because of the 'nonprofit sector'. Yet philanthropic capital, its investment and its distribution, are generally neglected by the critics of capitalism. . . . Some may see a galaxy of organizations doing good works – a million points of light – but the nonprofit world is also a system of power which is exercised in the interest of the corporate world.¹⁵

Whether through the academy, government agencies or private foundations, an emergent 'corporate Left' has helped to deradicalise feminism and anti-racism and so anti-racist feminism or feminist anti-racism. Distinguishing between the 'revolutionary' and the post-movement hybrid 'neoradical' places a finer point on analyses of progressive black feminist politics and their contradictions.

Questions of co-optation and integrity are audible to those who listen attentively for sounds of political independence from corporate (state) influence. The din can be confusing, given that conflictual allegiances abound in American politics and culture. For instance, the oxymoronic wit of PBS 'public service announcements' that validate corporate state funders, while broadcasting acquiescence to business elites, reappears in progressive projects funded by corporate entities and severed from non-elite, community leadership. Searching for political independents, one finds that liberalism competes with and censures radicalism, while radicalism competes with and censures revolutionary praxis. Both forms of censorship seem to be guided by an amorphous notion of what constitutes responsible 'Left' politics, delineated within a rapacious corporate world funding the political integration of 'radicals' on terms favouring the maintenance of stability and accumulation of capital as prime directives.

Corporate culture oils radicalism's slide into neoradicalism. According to consumer advocate Ralph Nader, being raised in American culture often means 'growing up corporate'. (For those raised 'black', growing up corporate in America means training for the Talented Tenth.) One need not be affluent to grow up corporate, one need only adopt a managerial style. When merged with radicalism, the managerial ethos produces a 'neoradicalism' that, as a form of commercial 'left' politics, emulates corporate structures and behaviour. As corporate funders finance 'radical' conferences and 'lecture movements', democratic power sharing diminishes. Radical rhetoricians supplant grass-roots organisers and political managers replace vanguard activists. Within this context, feminist 'radicals' are encouraged to forgo both effective oppositional politics to social and state dominance and organic links to non-elite communities. Instead, they are encouraged, as progressives, to produce a 'ludic feminism' which, according to Teresa Ebert, 'substitutes a politics of representation for radical social trans-

formation'.¹⁶ Ludic feminism has a curious relationship to black feminism because the latter has been shaped and contextualised by radical movements.

In the politics of 'sisterhood'

In the late 1960s, liberal bourgeois feminism among white women gradually expanded to include black women. This emergent multiracial 'sisterhood' transferred the nineteenth-century white missionary mandate (promoting an elite leadership to serve as interpreters of, and representatives for, the racialised and marginalised non-elite) to white bourgeois feminists. The result was a political paradox: on the one hand, black feminisms pushed white feminism (in its various ideologies) to repudiate ethnocentrism and racism and so, to some degree, 'radicalised' America's dominant feminism. On the other hand, the more financially-endowed white cultural feminism supported and 'mainstreamed' black feminism by rewarding liberal politics within it, and so, to some degree, deradicalised black feminist politics by normalising its liberalism. This logically follows the historical trajectory of white radical feminism in contemporary American politics.

Amid the political battles waged by white middle-class women in the movement era, Alice Echols's *Daring to be Bad: radical feminism in America, 1967-1975* notes three forms of activism.¹⁷ First emerged the 'politicos' who worked in civil rights organisations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), anti-war and radical youth groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and revolutionary or underground spin-offs, such as The Weathermen. Out of these formations emerged radical women who became disaffected because of the sexism of male-dominated organisations, and who subsequently developed, as 'radical feminists', organisations such as Redstockings that were opposed to the state's dehumanising domestic and foreign policies.

From the gains or concessions that radical feminists were able to wrest in the 1960s from the corporate military industrial complex arose 'cultural feminists' who benefited from the radicals' path-breaking work; according to Echols, cultural feminists, as liberal feminists, benefited from the militancy of radical feminists, whom they later excised in order to consolidate an image of respectability and to garner corporate support for hegemonic or mainstream feminism. Women such as Gloria Steinem, Robyn Morgan and other founders of *Ms.* came to represent the cultural feminism that, unlike its radical rivals, defined men, not the state, as the primary obstacle or 'enemy' of women. Radical feminists acknowledged that men needed to change sexist attitudes and behaviour, writes Echols, but emphasised structural critiques (of capitalism and the state). Radical feminists became

increasingly marginalised and eventually supplanted by cultural feminists who expressed politics less critical of, and so more compatible with, the state and its financial centres. In fact, *Ms.*'s early funders were white corporate males who, while categorised as women's 'oppressors', became the financiers of mainstream feminisms.¹⁸

Given their accommodationist politics and access to state and corporate resources, one could refer to such feminisms, whether conservative or liberal in ideology, as 'state feminism'. Echols' depiction of cultural feminism, or what is referred to here as state feminism, as supplanting radical feminism because of its compatibility with, or complementarity to, state hegemony resonates with the black liberation struggles of the time period she analyses.¹⁹ This raises important questions about the aspirations and dimensions of today's black cultural feminism and its relationship to black radical feminism. For instance, one might ask if a cultural form of black feminism (one that essentialises African women or women of colour) functions as a buffer against revolutionary (feminist) critiques that cite capitalism and the state as primary obstacles to black and, therefore, female advancement? Can cultural black feminism exist as a hybrid heavily invested in the political appearances of revolutionary symbolism and representations shaped by ludic feminism, rather than political organising with non-elites for revolutionary praxes?

If the answer to either or both of the questions above is 'yes' or even 'perhaps', then neither race, gender nor class is the radicalising impetus or deradicalising tendency influencing black feminisms. Political ideologies shape feminist aspirations. Given that it is more assimilable, liberal black feminism remains more likely to be promoted into the political mainstream as representative or normative among gender progressive Afra-Americans. Like the general society, mainstream feminism allows scant political space for revolutionary anti-racists, even if they are white feminists, whose militant critiques of state power contest the assumptions (and funding) of liberal feminism. Cultural or liberal black feminism wields more influence in bourgeois, European-American feminism than revolutionary white anti-racist feminism does. Compatible ideologies allow white liberal feminist politics transracial privileges that mask an alienation from, or antipathy towards, radical anti-racism. New forms of multiracial feminism allow dominant white feminists to 'privilege' black female political celebrities over white female political prisoners. Revolutionary, anti-racist white women, rarely referenced by feminists (or black militants and white anti-racists), are even more isolated than the white radical feminists and groups described by Echols.

The low visibility granted anti-racist revolutionary white women in mainstream feminism coexists with their marginalisation in discursive 'critical white studies' and 'abolition of whiteness' and 'race traitor'

movements, where whites challenge the existential (if not always material) benefits of white supremacy. There is little mention of whites who viewed racism, patriarchy and economic exploitation as embedded in state power and so who, as revolutionaries, resisted the state. Little is known among liberal feminists or anti-racists of Sylvia Baraldini, an Italian national convicted of aiding black revolutionary Assata Shakur to escape from prison, or white female revolutionaries Susan Rosenberg and Marilyn Buck, also convicted of assisting Shakur, who (along with black male revolutionaries) are serving between thirty- and seventy-year sentences. (Baraldini received an additional three years for refusing to testify before a Grand Jury investigating the Puerto Rican Independentista movement.²⁰) Likewise, the case of Judy Bari, the white feminist Earth Firster!, garners little attention in liberal feminism, black or white or multicultural, perhaps because it points to the continuance of COINTELPRO (under the guidance of FBI veteran Richard Held) in policing white female radical environmentalists.²¹ Bari, who died from breast cancer in March 1997, survived a May 1990 car bombing. A nonviolent activist, she offered analyses that made connections between the FBI repression of the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement and environmental radicals. The meeting and embrace between Bari and Ramona Afrika, who survived the 1985 bombing of the African organisation MOVE in Philadelphia in which eleven African Americans died, reflects radical forms of transracial 'sisterhood' and political solidarity.

Revolutionary feminist politics are more likely to note the political ramifications of radical alliances for 'sisterhood' and anti-racist feminist movements. Such politics are also more inclined to scrutinise coalitions between radical and liberal black feminisms and white radical and bourgeois feminisms. There has been considerable discussion about interracial conflict between black and white women; some focus on collaboration between the two groups, but greater analysis of the ramifications of cross-ideological alliances or coalitions between African- and European-American women is required.

Conclusion

The legacies of black female radicals and revolutionaries contest arguments that state repression and subaltern resistance are not 'black women's issues' or are too 'politicised' for 'feminism'. Such legacies also contradict contentions that feminism is inherently 'bourgeois' and therefore incapable of an organic revolutionary politics. Yet, even the 'revolutionary' is marketed in a corporate culture (where Revlon commercials once proclaimed that the corporation made 'revolutionary cosmetics for revolutionary women'). Revolutionary black feminism transgresses corporate culture in its focus on female independence,

community building/caretaking and resistance to state dominance, corporate exploitation, racism and sexism. Emphasising economic and political power rather than social service programmes for the disenfranchised, it challenges basic social tenets as expressed in 'law and order' campaigns, the respectability of political dissent channelled through lobbying and electoral politics, and in the acceptance of the corporate state as a viable vehicle for redressing disenfranchisement.

The blurred lines between revolutionary, anti-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary politics allow, in the US, for the normative political and discursive 'sisterhood' that embraces conservative and liberal women, yet rarely extends itself to radical or revolutionary women. Adherence to mainstream political ideology appears key in the normative appeal of anti-racism, feminism and anti-racist feminism. Because political marginalisation usually follows challenges to repressive state policies and critiques of female or feminist complicity in those practices, the revolutionary remains on the margin, more so than any other exponent of black feminism.

The symbiotic relationship between subaltern black feminists and the 'white' masculinist state contests any presumption of a unified politics. Seeking a viable community and society, anti-racist feminism can serve as either sedative or stimulant. Conflicting messages about the nature of political struggle and leadership can be found within black feminisms. Black feminisms function as a 'shadow', both in the negative aspects attributed to them and in their subordinate status on the American scene. Ever present, often ignored but completely inescapable, their plurality is stereotypically seen as monolithic and depicted as the antithesis of the 'robust American' body. Fending their shadows as American alter, political, egos, black women paint varied portraits of the shadow-boxer as radical; as lone warrior; successful corporate fund-raiser for, and beneficiary of, progressive issues; individual survivalist and community worker, disciplined to the leadership of non-elites in opposing state corporate dominance.

The predicament of progressive black feminisms remains the struggle to maintain radical politics despite black feminisms' conflictual persona. Yet this, after all, is the shadow-boxer's dilemma: to fight the authoritative body casting one off, while simultaneously struggling with internal conflict and contradictions.

References

- 1 Ella Baker, 'The Black woman in the Civil Rights struggle', in Joanne Grant, ed., *Ella Baker: freedom bound* (New York, John Wiley, 1998), p. 230.
- 2 Baker presented this speech in 1969 at the Institute for the Black World in Atlanta, Georgia. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 3 *Ibid.* Harvard historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham documents how white Christian philanthropists such as Henry Morehouse and other leaders within the

American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) in 1896 promoted the concept of the Talented Tenth as black elite race leaders. ABHMS funded the emergence of this elite to serve a population facing severe discrimination and persecution following the aborted Reconstruction. ABHMS explicitly created the Talented Tenth with a dual purpose, to function as a model showcase for whites (and blacks), a living demonstration that black intellectual and moral inferiority were myths, and to counter revolutionary and anarchistic tendencies among an increasingly disenfranchised black populace. (See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993)). In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois popularised the term in *The Souls of Black Folk* with his essay 'The Talented Tenth'. A century after white liberal missionaries coined the phrase, the idea of the Talented Tenth is being revitalised by Harvard's black intellectual elites, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr, whose *The Future of the Race*, co-authored with fellow Harvard professor Cornel West, and 1998 PBS/Frontline documentary *The Two Nations of Black America*, promote the formation of the Talented Tenth.

- 4 See *Righteous Discontent*, op.cit. Amnesty International documents over one hundred political prisoners currently in the US. Today, for US-based revolutionaries to exist as more than a cult of martyrs like the Gnostic Christians, the Talented Tenth, as 'buffer zone', would grant the preferential option to the poor, imprisoned and militant.
- 5 The anti-revolutionary politics of liberals or neoradicals are not synonymous with counter-revolutionary state destabilisation policies that include police repression, infiltration and co-optation. Whereas the anti-revolutionary can also be anti-reactionary or anti-right wing and seek a centrist or centre-left politics, the counter-revolutionary is reactionary. Anti-revolutionaries, though, may be incorporated into state or corporate counter-revolutionary initiatives.
- 6 The Combahee River Collective Statement, in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: a Black feminist anthology* (New York, Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 273.
- 7 Earl Conrad, 'I bring you General Tubman', *Black Scholar* (Vol. 1, no. 3-4, January-February 1970), p. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 279. The manifesto was first printed in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black women's studies* (New York, Feminist Press, 1982).
- 9 Combahee Collective Statement, op.cit., pp. 275-6.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 For an example, see Patricia Hill Collins' discussion of organising in *Black Feminist Thought*.
- 12 US counter-revolutionary initiatives have been extensive and costly in terms of human rights abuses. See Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Boston, South End Press, 1988).
- 13 bell hooks, 'Must we call all women "sister"?', *Z Magazine* (February 1992).
- 14 At a 1997 New York University forum on black women writers, on a panel shared with Angela Davis, Brown referred to Maulana Karenga as an American 'Buthelezi'; Kimberlé Crenshaw makes the same reference to Clarence Thomas in her July 1998 presentation.
- 15 Joan Roelofs, 'The third sector as a protective layer for capitalism', *Monthly Review* (Vol. 47, September 1995), pp. 16-7.
- 16 Teresa L. Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: postmodernism, desire, and labor in late capitalism* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 3.
- 17 Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: radical feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Echols' insightful text is somewhat limited by her failure fully to research and analyse the contributions of black feminist radicals such as Frances Beale, a founder of the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee's Black Women's Alliance, and Barbara Smith, a founder of the Combahee River Collective.

- 18 See Echols, *ibid.*, for documentation on the initial funding for *Ms*.
- 19 Echols' descriptions of the strife between radical and liberal feminists parallel to a certain extent the black liberation movement's conflictual relationship between revolutionary nationalism, as found in the Black Panther Party (the BPP advocated an end to imperialism, capitalism and racism, together with 'power to the people', not the police) and the cultural nationalism of Us (United slaves), with its emphasis on an 'African' life-style. There was overlap between the two; for instance, the New York Chapter of the BPP synthesised an African (American) aesthetic with critiques of capitalism, government corruption, and police violence.
- 20 Imprisoned since the mid-1980s (the US has denied the Italian government's request for extradition or leniency), Baraldini has spoken out from her jail cell in Danbury, Connecticut, on behalf of black death-row inmate and political prisoner, Mumia Abu-Jamal. An internationalist and student radical in the 1960s and 1970s, she protested the Vietnam War, demonstrated for women's rights, and campaigned against apartheid and colonialism in Africa. Organising to expose COINTELPRO, she was a member of the Committee to Free the Panther 21 (twenty-one defendants who were acquitted of all charges after years of harassment and incarceration in New York). Parole guidelines specify forty to fifty-two months incarceration for the crimes for which Baraldini was convicted; Baraldini has served over four times that amount. Baraldini, Rosenberg and Buck fall within the category of 'political prisoner' as defined by Amnesty International which documents over one hundred political prisoners or prisoners of conscience within the US. (Amnesty International has also declared US citizen Lori Berenson as a Peruvian political prisoner. The reporter and former MIT student went to Peru in 1994 to write about the Peruvian poor and the government's violations of their rights and welfare and was sentenced to life by a hooded military tribunal. See Rhoda Berenson's Mother's Day article about her daughter, 'A mother's story', *Vogue* (May 1997)).
- 21 See Judi Bari, *Timber Wars* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994). Notorious for its anti-Panther violence, today COINTELPRO largely focuses on white radical peace or environmental activists and members of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement. Currently, the majority of US political arrests stem from anti-nuclear weapons or anti-School of the Americas demonstrations, while Grand Juries are used to derail Puerto Rican Independence activism. For evaluations of the political use of grand juries and the policing of the environmental and Puerto Rican Independence movements, see Elihu Rosenblatt, ed., *Criminal Injustice* (Boston, South End Press, 1996).