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The Role of the Black Women in the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement and on to Transnational Feminism

As the title states I will be discussing the role that Black women in the USA have played in two major social movements in this century – the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. Their roles were critical and pertinent forces in both movements. Subsequently, I will discuss their vision regarding globalization and transnational feminism.

The sixties was a time of profound political upheaval within the USA. The Black Liberation Movement can be considered as the father and mother of a succession of social movements. It was considered the prototype for other liberation movements of the sixties, namely the Student Movement, the Gay and Lesbian Movement, the Women's Movement and the American Indian Movement. The Civil Rights Movement, or Black Power Movement, was basically a revolt on the part of Afro-Americans against America's racist doctrines. The decade of the sixties witnessed dramatic responses to the suffering and common fate of oppressed and exploited people: lack of decent education, legal lynchings, overrepresentation in the prison system – they were cannon fodder for America's imperialistic wars of aggression and racist laws being enacted with the support and encouragement of government agencies.

Accommodation and resistance are two strains that run through Black history and it is in the resistance category that Black women will be discussed. In the sixties as in world history, the Black woman was in the forefront of the struggle for civil rights and human dignity, yet very few people are familiar with the legion of courageous Black women. In more recent times, who can forget the spirit of Rosa Parks when she refused to move to the back of the bus, setting off the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Just this month, April 1999, at the age of 86, the U.S. Senate voted 86 to 0 to award her with Congress' highest civilian award, the Congressional Gold Medal. The bill authorizing the award states: „Her quiet dignity ignited the most significant social movement in the history of the United States.“ True or not, it was an extremely important movement.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56 is viewed by many scholars as the first major event in the Black freedom struggles of the '50s and '60s. It propelled Martin Luther King Jr. to national prominence. But for a boycott to be

successful, tremendous behind-the-scenes organizing and physical energy is required. In the years prior to the boycott the most active and assertive Black civic group in Montgomery had been the *Women's Political Council* (WPC) headed by Mrs. Jo-Ann Robinson, then a professor at Alabama State College. It was Mrs. Robinson, aided by friends and a number of *Women's Political Council* members, who were the heroines of the famed Montgomery Bus Boycott. These women took crucial actions in the hours immediately following Mrs. Parks' arrest to actually set a boycott in motion. Mrs. Robinson was the instigator of the boycott. She worked on the *Committee of One Hundred*, which refers to the women who organized and participated in the transportation of Montgomery residents during the boycott. The Black women did it!

Fannie Lou Hamer and Unita Blackwell are but two of the Mississippi women who braved attack and death in their fight to gain the right to vote. Long-time activist, Ella Baker was responsible for the founding of the SNCC (*Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee*). Thousands of Black women were involved on the Civil Rights Movement and played important roles in raising the consciousness of the whole nation to the existing racist conditions in the South.

Black women for the most part have been participants in daily labor outside of the home as well as having the responsibility for home and family life. Struggle was a way of life. In addition to racist struggles, Black women had to contend with the underlying macho philosophy of the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement. Being told to sit at home and to have babies for the revolution and not to become involved in political struggle did not have a place in organizations and groups serious about bringing an end to exploitation and oppression in the USA. This was not only theoretically unsound, it was even in direct contradiction to the reality of Black women's lives, both historically and at present.

As a result of demeaning experiences suffered in the movement, many Black women began to protest and eventually broke away. Older women in particular became peers and teachers to the young. In 1970, Toni Cade Bambara published an anthology, *The Black Woman*, in which 27 women writers expressed „the rising demand by women for liberation from their chattel-like roles in a male-dominated society.“ Significantly, most of the contributors had backgrounds in the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement.

I would like to make a few remarks about the Million Man March which is part of the history of Black struggle. It took place in October 1995 and was an event that astounded everyone and sparked spin-off marches among youth and women. It was organized by the *Nation of Islam* led by Minister Louis Farrakhan. There were many positive effects associated with the march, such as brother-

hood, solidarity, commitment to family and community and the massing of thousands of Black men. Basically I regard it, as Manning Marable states, and I quote from *Emerge* magazine: „In effect, the Million Man March was a deeply conservative and patriarchal approach to issues that impact Black families and communities. It was designed to avoid real mobilization and to move us away from struggle.“ The Million Man March was the largest public gathering of African-Americans in U.S. history, but it was a colossal lost opportunity. The nation's theory, their definition of family, is inherently a patriarchal one. It is dominated by a male patriarch and they define family relations in the context of the domination of women by men. There were no demands made on the government of the USA. You don't go to the master's house with no demands on the master. What was the social vision? What was the political Black agenda? Black Women were essentially excluded from this major event, the reason couched in terms of it being for the betterment of the Black race.

Black women can look back and recall that the Black Liberation Movement set millions of Black minds operating with a raised level of consciousness toward the goal of liberation from the oppressive forces of racism. However, as we look back over the years we see that all the tactics employed during the movement did not result in any truly permanent substantial changes in the social and economic welfare of Blacks and women. In 1981, when Jill Lewis and I wrote *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*, I spoke of the racist upsurge currently sweeping the U.S. as testimony to the fact that Black Women needed to be simultaneously engaged in both the Black Liberation struggle and Women's Liberation. I pointed out cases such as the kidnapping and murders of Black children, women and men in Atlanta, Boston, Roxbury and Buffalo, and the fact that the Ku-Klux-Klan openly ran a Klan leader for Congress on the Democratic party ticket and that the newly empowered Reagan regime was attempting to introduce measures that would set back Civil Rights accomplishments. And today, 1999, eighteen years later, the record is similar. A Black man was tied to the back of a truck and dragged to his death. Hate crimes against gays and lesbians have risen – the most notorious to date being Matthew Shepherd, the gay college student who was beaten and hung on a fence post and died. David Duke, former Klan Leader, ran for a Congressional seat. NYC police and those in other major cities are shooting Black men for little or no provocation, and in the Supreme Court, a President-Bush appointed, token Black man, Clarence Thomas, is one of the most conservative and racist judges on the Court. He has supported court decisions against Black Congressional Districts, urban school children, death row inmates, and minority contractors and affirmative action. Many of the key civil-rights cases were decided by a 5-4 vote, with Thomas voting against positions

adopted by Civil-Rights activists. That is what I mean when I say little has changed with the U.S. being racist.

Within the United States, the 1960s witnessed three currents within the feminist movement. Primarily, there was the Women's Rights Movement which emerged early in the 1960s, inheriting the legacy of the early suffragettes' and early women's rights campaigns of the 19th century. It was composed primarily by professional women who began putting pressure on the state to end discriminatory practices in the paid labor force. A second almost independent movement emerged from the New Left with strong ties to Marxism and a commitment to producing an account of women's oppression. The third wing was organized by Black women and women of color, who had been largely involved in Black and Chicano liberation movements and had raised, unsuccessfully, the question of sexual politics within those movements.

Black women's initial attitude toward the Women's Movement was one of distrust. The historical experiences of slavery left Black women with peculiar legacy of scars. The material conditions of the lives of masses of Black women determined their attitudes toward feminism. A specific Black feminist analysis and approach was necessary because the psychological dynamics that function among Black women and Black men in the context of existing economic conditions are qualitatively and culturally different from those of whites. The feminist question has never truly embraced Black women. Assuming that the feminist question is directed at the causes of sexual inequality between man and woman, and of male domination over women, it is important to note that sexual inequality between Black men and Black women has very different historical and cultural beginnings than the sexual inequality between white men and white women. Black women's participation in the labor force also has a very different history than that of white women. These are basic underlying factors which enter in the problem of Black women and their roles in the Women's Movement. They were never fully included in feminist theory because there was little analysis on the parts of the white leading feminists about the racial and cultural histories of Black women. This is not to say that the demands of the feminists were not progressive for their time, both during the 19th and early 20th century and today. The Feminist Movement has helped to create consciousness among women. Their struggle for political, social and economic rights – goals that all women strive for. As bell hooks said in her book from 1984, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*.

Racism allows white women to construct feminist theory and praxis in such a way that it is far removed from anything resembling radical struggle. Racist socialization teaches bourgeois white women to think they are necessarily more capable of leading masses of women than any other group of women. The inability and/or refusal of white women in the leadership of the most recent feminist movement was

their unwillingness to confront racism and their arrogant assumption that their call for Sisterhood was a non-racist gesture.

In addition to Black women's battles with white feminist theory and practices, they simultaneously had to contend with the belligerent and negative attitudes of a large segment of Black male academics and leaders. The so-called male scholars expressed their feelings forcefully that the Women's Movement was an attempt to divide the Black race and, in so doing, destroy the Black family. They further said that it had no place in Black women's lives. So the Black women had to struggle against Black male retrograde attitudes and white female cultural arrogance and intellectual imperialism.

Fighting on both fronts did not deter the Afro-American woman in her struggle for human rights. Perhaps it served as a spur. I shall focus on several of the many Black women's organizations that were formed in the seventies. There was the *Coalition of Labor Union Women* (CLUW) which was an ambitious attempt to establish a national frame work for the struggles of women workers. It had its problems largely due to its close ties with established union leadership, but the women's efforts were admirable. The *National Black Feminist Organization* (NBFO) was one of the first and more important of the formal feminist organizations that emerged in the seventies. It opened chapters on the East Coast and in major cities throughout the country. The purpose of the NBFO was to address the specific needs of the Black female who is forced to live in a society that is both sexist and racist. The NBFO failed as a viable Black feminist organization because it could not address or support the women of the Black community in any visible, concrete manner.

Black women were also active in the campaign for Wages for Housework. Its shortcoming was that it did not seek to concretely transform the relationships between capital, work, production, consumption and the distribution and accumulation of income. Black lesbians also began establishing their own groups, notably the *Combahee River Collective*. All in all, Black women recognized the profound need for Black feminist theory and analysis and that they had to be at the core of this initiative. Hence they created their own organizations. They engaged in transforming the historical and cultural conditions in which they found themselves. Progressive minds saw the need to move in a direction that represented women of color from all classes and from all sectors of the world.

Transnational feminism

Globalization has played a major part in transnational feminism. With globalization, I am referring to the rule of markets, money and multinationals. Market economy is now free from borders and customs, having conquered the last corners on earth via e-mail and the internet. The world market integration, with

the ever deepening intertwining of markets, media and multis, makes it for a growing dependency of countries on one another. And what does this mean for countries with less highly developed technology? What does it mean to the role of women? There is no sex neutrality nor gender neutrality on the global markets. Globalization has also meant the extension of work done at home. Women in India work out of their homes making lace for sale on the global market. Women in Yorkshire, Britain and in Asia are engaged in similar types of work at home. In India, women who work as laborers for this international market are not defined as workers or laborers, but as housewives and their work defined as leisure-time activity. While women who work in the Silicon Valley in California in the electronics industries, primarily immigrant women, are defined as mothers, wives and supplementary workers. The effect is that they help to neutralize the kind of work that women do, making it possible for corporations to cheapen women's labor while making it appear as if women were born to work more cheaply, for lower wages than their male counterparts. It is these women, Third World women in their countries of origin and primarily Third World immigrant women in the metropolis, as well as white working class women who make our consumption, our very survival, possible. We eat bananas, use salt to flavor our food, drink coffee, use tires on the cars we drive, depend on computers, we wear clothes on which tags tell us that they are largely manufactured in Third World countries. There is a dialectical relationship between our ability to consume and the exploitative conditions under which these women produce. All these things we rely upon in the First World that are used as indices of being civilized, these things are produced by women in the Third World, and yet at times we continue to insist upon the separateness between the First and the Third World!

Transnational feminism is accompanied by other kinds of transnationalizations which have a disproportionate effect on women. I am referring here to a new kind of political economic practices, new kinds of imperial structures that have been called the new world order. There is something specific about this contemporary movement because of the way in which it is drawing women into these global processes and the speed with which it has developed new technologies developing products that can be produced anywhere and sold everywhere, by spreading credit around the world and by connecting global channels of communication. Women are drawn into these processes in large numbers in the following categories:

1. Export processing zones of the new transnational factories operating on the African Continent, Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean, the Pacific and in Europe;

2. The employment of nannies and domestic workers; I am speaking primarily of the exportation of Philippine, Thai, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Mexican and Caribbean women as domestic workers to East Asian, Middle Eastern and First World destinations;
3. The mail-order bride trade where the bride-to-be is usually Caucasian, mainly American, Australian or Canadian, producing a new economics of romance in which a brisk industry has emerged to sell lists of and instructional guides for prospective brides;
4. The women who work as prostitutes in their countries of origin or in those areas that are heavily linked to the tourist industry, travelling between the red-light-districts of nations, North and South.
5. Domestics: Those women who provide a kind of service as maids. These women are drawn into these processes of globalization as ideological anchors for the operation of multinational corporations.

In contrast to the speed of technology, millions of women are still living in conditions of dirt-poor poverty as the multinationals prosper. In South Africa, since the election of Nelson Mandela, thousands still live in shacks in shanty towns with no electricity, no plumbing, and few schooling opportunities, while Bill Gates, the young millionaire, opens up shop in rural Africa. How is that going to help the inhabitants in shanty town? In Algeria, women are systematically being murdered by Islamic fundamentalists. Almost 60 percent of Algerian Women cannot read or write. In Afghanistan the Taliban has virtually made women non-persons. In the Philippines, the government has given mining rights to foreign construction firms which will destroy large areas of land that had been used for agriculture. The government has also agreed to foreign rice import which will ruin the market for those working in the rice fields. The technology being used today allows the multinationals to continue to exploit with greater efficiency.

To say that feminism is transnational is not to say that feminist analyses and forms of political organizing cross borders in a transhistorical or ahistorical way, but it is to say that there are particularities of the ways in which masculinity and femininity are understood and constructed and particularities of the ways in which sexual politics operate as a whole.

To talk about feminist praxis in global contexts involves shifting the unit of analysis from local to regional and from national culture to relations across cultures. There is a drastic need for an exchange of experiences, ideas and strategies from all strata of women within each country.

In the same way that the Women's Movement in the USA did not consider the cultural and historical condition of Black women in their theoretical analysis of sexism and feminist theory, emerging transnational feminism must not

make the same mistake. The historical and cultural experiences of women from every country must be addressed in formulating transnational feminist theory. It is a massive task, but sexism is a massive force. Afro-American women have played critical and pivotal roles in both the Afro-American Black Liberation struggle and the Women's Liberation Movement. The successes of these movements, and there have been successes, did not significantly alter the quality of life for women in general. Afro-American women saw the need to do something for the 'self', and 'self' included women of colour, non-white women, and poor white women world-wide. Globalization shifted the focus of feminism, and of feminist theory to a global level. All of us, if we don't pay attention to these forces of globalization, will concede the operation of these processes to multinational corporations, who not only are involved in the business of apparel making, electronic manufacturing, and so forth, but also into making education and knowledge production a business – THEIR business.

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