



Establishing Black Feminism

Barbara Smith

More than twenty years after some of the work in *Home Girls* was written, the primary question I want to examine is how effective have Black women been in establishing Black feminism. The answer depends on where one looks. Black feminism has probably been most successful in its impact on the academy, in its opening a space for courses, research, and publications about Black women. Although Black women's studies continues to be challenged by racism, misogyny, and general disrespect, scholarship in the field has flourished in the decades since *Home Girls* was published.

Not only is it possible to teach both graduate and undergraduate courses focusing on Black and other women of color, but it is also possible to write dissertations in a variety of disciplines that focus on Black women. Academic conferences about Black and other women of color regularly occur all over the country, and sessions about Black women are also presented at annual meetings of professional organizations. Hundreds if not thousands of books have been published that doc-

ument Black women's experience using the methodologies of history, the social sciences, and psychology. In the academy, at least, Black women are not nearly as invisible as we were when *Home Girls* first appeared. It is important to keep in mind, however, that discrimination continues to affect Black women academics' salaries, opportunities for promotion, and daily working conditions.

When we search for Black feminism outside the academy and ask how successful have we been in building a visible Black feminist movement, the answer is not as clear. In reading my original introduction, I was struck by how many examples of organizing by women of color I could cite. When *Home Girls* was published in 1983 the feminist movement as a whole was still vital and widespread. Although the media loved to announce that feminism was dead, they had not yet concocted the 1990s myth of a "postfeminist" era in which all women's demands have supposedly been met and an organized movement is irrelevant. Reaganism was only a few years old, and it had not yet, in collaboration

Establishing Black Feminism

with an ever more powerful right wing, turned back the clock to eradicate many of the gains that had been made in the 1960s and 1970s toward racial, sexual, and economic justice. Now, much as in the beginning of this century, the end of the twentieth century is a time of lynchings, whether motivated by racism as in Jasper, Texas; by homophobia as in Laramie, Wyoming; by misogyny as in Yosemite, California; or by a lethal mix of hatreds as in Oklahoma City and Littleton, Colorado. Twenty years of conservative federal administrations and the U.S. populace's increasing move to the right have been detrimental to all progressive and leftist organizing, including the building of Black feminism.

There are specific factors that make Black feminist organizing even more difficult to accomplish than activism focused on other political concerns. Raising issues of oppression within already oppressed communities is as likely to be met with attacks and ostracism as with comprehension and readiness to change. To this day most Black women are unwilling to jeopardize their racial credibility (as defined by Black men) to address the reality of sexism. Even fewer are willing to bring up homophobia and heterosexism, which are of course inextricably linked to gender oppression.

Black feminist author Jill Nelson pointedly challenges the Black community's reluctance to deal with sexual politics in her book *Straight, No Chaser: How I Became a Grown-up Black Woman*. She writes:

As a group, Black men and, heartbreakingly, many Black women, refuse to acknowledge and confront violence toward women, or, truth be told, any other issue that specifically affects Black women. To be concerned with any gender issue is, by and large, still dismissed as a "white woman's thing," as if Black men in America, or anywhere else in

the world, for that matter, have managed to avoid the contempt for women that is a fundamental element of living in a patriarchy. Even when lip service is given to sexism as a valid concern, it is at best a secondary issue. First and foremost is racism and the ways in which it impacts Black men. It is the naïve belief that once racism is eradicated, sexism, and its unnatural outgrowth, violence toward women, will miraculously melt away, as if the abuse of women is solely an outgrowth of racism and racial oppression.²

Since *Home Girls* was published there has actually been an increase of overt sexism in some Black circles as manifested by responses to the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas Senate Hearings, Mike Tyson's record of violence against women (and men), the O. J. Simpson trial, and the Million Man March. Some regressive elements of Black popular culture are blatantly misogynist. Both Black men and women have used the term "endangered species" to describe Black men because of the verifiable rise in racism over the last two decades; yet despite simultaneous attacks on women, including Black women who are also subjected to racism, Black women are often portrayed as being virtually exempt from oppression and much better off than their male counterparts. It is mistaken to view Black feminism as Black "male bashing" or as a battle between Black women and men for victim status, but as Nelson points out it has been extremely difficult to convince most in the Black community to take Black women's oppression seriously.

Twenty years ago I would have expected there to be at least a handful of nationally visible Black feminist organizations and institutions by now. The cutbacks, right-wing repression, and virulent racism of this period have been devastating for the growth of our movement, but we must also look at our own practice. What if more of us had decided to

build multi-issued grass-roots organizations in our own communities that dealt with Black women's basic survival issues and at the same time did not back away from raising issues of sexual politics? Some of the things I think of today as Black feminist issues are universal access to quality health care; universal accessibility for people with disabilities; quality public education for all; a humane and nonpunitive system of support for poor women and children, i.e., genuine welfare reform; job training and placement in real jobs that have a future; decent, affordable housing; and the eradication of violence of all kinds including police brutality. Of course, violence against women; reproductive freedom; equal employment opportunity; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender liberation still belong on any Black feminist agenda.

Since the 1980s few groups have been willing to do the kind of Black feminist organizing that the Combahee River Collective took on in Boston in the 1970s, which was to carry out an antiracist, feminist *practice* with a radical, anticapitalist analysis. It is not surprising that Black feminism has seemed to be

sic bread-and-butter issues which affect women of *all* economic groups. It is a mistake to characterize Black feminism as only relevant to middle-class, educated women, simply because Black women who are currently middle class have been committed to building the contemporary movement. From my own organizing experience I know that there are working-class and poor Black women who not only relate to the basic principles of Black feminism but who live them. I believe our movement will be very much stronger when we develop a variety of ways to bring Black feminism home to the Black communities from which it comes.³

In the present women of color of all races, nationalities, and ethnicity's are leaders in labor organizing, immigration struggles, dismantling the prison industrial complex, challenging environmental racism, sovereignty struggles, and opposition to militarism and imperialism. Black feminists mobilized a remarkable national response to the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas Senate Hearings in 1991. Naming their effort "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves," they gathered more than sixteen hundred signatures for

It is mistaken to view Black feminism as Black "male bashing" or as a battle between Black women and men for victim status, but as Nelson points out it has been extremely difficult to convince most in the Black community to take Black women's oppression seriously.

more successful in the more hospitable environment on campuses than on the streets of Black communities, where besides all the other challenges, we would also need to deal with the class difference among us. To me Black feminism has always encompassed ba-

an incisive statement that appeared in the *New York Times* and in a number of Black newspapers shortly after the hearings occurred.

Black feminists were centrally involved in organizing the highly successful Black Radi-



Barbara Smith with panel members. Photo by John Smock.

cal Congress (BRC) which took place in Chicago in June 1998. This gathering of two thousand activists marked the first time in the history of the African American liberation movement that Black feminist and Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues were on the agenda from the outset. A Black feminist caucus formed within the BRC before last June's meeting and is continuing its work.

Black feminists have also been active in the international struggle to free the political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is currently on death row in Pennsylvania. The Millions for Mumia mobilization, which took place in Philadelphia on April 24, 1999, included a huge Rainbow Flags for Mumia contingent. This effort marked a first for significant, planned participation by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community in a militant antiracist campaign. This participation in both the Black Radical Congress and the Millions for Mumia March did not occur without struggle. Not all the participants were on the

same page in recognizing the necessity to challenge sexism and homophobia, and some did not even understand these to be critical political issues. But twenty years ago we most likely would not have been present, let alone part of the leadership of these two events. The success of these coalitions and others also indicates that there are some Black men who work as committed allies to Black feminists.

Within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement itself Black lesbian feminists have been extremely active in the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process, the grassroots group that has successfully questioned the undemocratic, corporate, and tokenistic tactics of the proposed gay millennium rally in Washington in 2000. The Ad Hoc Committee has also been instrumental in initiating a dynamic national dialogue about the direction of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement, whose national leadership has distanced itself more and more from a commitment to economic and social justice.

To me Black feminism has always encompassed basic broad-and-butter issues which affect women of all economic groups. It is a mistake to characterize Black feminism as only relevant to middle-class, educated women, simply because Black women who are currently middle class have been committed to building the contemporary movement.

Although the Black feminist movement is not where I envisioned it might be during those first exciting days, it is obvious that our work has made a difference. Radical political change most often happens by increments rather than through dramatically swift events. Indeed, dramatic changes are made possible by the daily, unpublicized work of countless activists working on the ground. The fact that there is an audience for the writing in this collection, as a new century begins, indicates that *Home Girls* has made a difference as well, and that in itself is a sign of progress and hope.

Notes

1. Reprint of the preface for the second edition of Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983, 2000), pp. xiii-xvii. Smith read excerpts from this preface at the Black Feminism Symposium.

2. Jill Nelson, *Straight, No Chaser: How I Became a Grown-up Black Woman* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1997), p. 156.

3. A new anthology, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism*, edited by Kimberly Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1999), provides an excellent overview of Black women's activism since the Civil Rights era.