UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

In Search of the Fullest Freedom:
Contemporary Black Internationalist Feminist Writing

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requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

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2016
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2016
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother. You taught me how to be a strong black woman. Without your love and support, I would never have gotten here.

I would also like to thank my committee members: Professor John Blanco, Professor Sara Johnson, Professor Denis Childs, Professor Luis Martin-Cabrera, and Professor Daniel Widener. I cannot express my gratitude enough for your support and guidance over these past several years. Your mentorship has gone above and beyond what is required. You have had a profound impact on me as a scholar, teacher and, most importantly, as a person.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page........................................................................................................... iii  
Dedication ................................................................................................................... iv  
Table of Contents....................................................................................................... v  
Acknowledgements..................................................................................................... vi  
Vita ............................................................................................................................. vii  
Abstract of the Dissertation....................................................................................... viii  

Introduction  
In Search of Contemporary Black Internationalist Feminism.................................1  

Chapter 1  
When the State is the Terrorist:  
The Autobiography and Activism of Assata Shakur.................................................. 34  

Chapter 2  
Writing Within the Revolution:  
Black Internationalist Feminism in the Poetry of Georgina Herrera ...................... 79  

Chapter 3  
Embodying Black Internationalist Feminism:  
Grace Nichols’ Long Memoried, Fat Black Woman.................................................. 123  

Chapter 4  
A Twenty-First Century Alternative to Beyoncé Feminism:  
Black Internationalist Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah ..............161 

Conclusion  
The Place of Black Internationalist Feminist Writing Today.................................... 194  

Works Consulted ....................................................................................................... 199
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

In Search of the Fullest Freedom:
Contemporary Black Internationalist Feminist Writing

by

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This dissertation examines the life, work and writing of four radical black feminists throughout the Cold War period and into the twenty-first century. Specifically, I look at the way these women engage the state, how they theorize and practice black nationalism and internationalism, and how writing functions as a form of praxis for all four women. My methodology involves close readings of poetry, autobiography, popular media and novels, as well as analyzing the links between cultural production, historical context, political movements and ideologies. Through
my analysis I have found that despite the growing dominance of black liberalism, black internationalist feminists have not abandoned their radical politics, but rather they have adapted them in accordance with the changing socio-political context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. While these changes have meant the decline of overt participation in radical organizations, they have also meant the emergence of new ways of thinking about radical black collectivism and the mediums through which it is practiced today.

Chapter one examines Assata Shakur’s representation of Western capitalist state power and racial violence, as well as the way she is labeled as a “domestic terrorist” by the FBI and a misunderstood activist by the liberal media. These attempts to control her narrative reflect a greater fear; that Shakur’s brand of radical black feminism is a threat to Western hegemony today. Chapter two looks at the context of Cuba as an example of what radical black feminist practices look like within the context of a Third World socialist nation-state. Through my analysis of Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera’s work, I argue that this particular black feminist formation prioritizes the needs and experiences of working class black women as central to any and all revolutionary practices. Chapter three examines the poetry of British Guyanese author Grace Nichols. Her focus on the politics of tourism and black women’s bodies emphasizes the need to direct anti-imperialist politics toward the state, while also theorizing new mediums for practicing radical black feminism. Finally, in chapter four I examine Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work as a counter to liberal black feminism. Instead of encouraging individualism and capitalist materialism, Adichie theorizes the role hair and cyberspace play in fostering a twenty-first century black international community. I argue that the way these writers utilize their work is particularly relevant to the black community today.
Introduction

In Search of Contemporary Black Internationalist Feminism

In 1977 the Combahee River Collective declared that “the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of [black women’s] identity” and that “a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and an antiracist revolution will [not] guarantee [black women’s] liberation” (264-265). This proclamation represents the essence of radical black feminist thought, that a struggle rooted in the experiences of working-class black women will ultimately result in the fullest freedom for the greatest number of people. I started this project in search of the methodologies and practices of this political formation as they relate to our contemporary moment. However, I was also driven by the contradiction I see between the Combahee River Collective’s statement and their rejection of black nationalist and internationalist organizations for being too patriarchal. While I agree with the collective’s call for political organizations that challenge sexism within black liberation movements, as well as racism within women’s liberation movements, I disagree that this necessitates a complete separation from these traditions. As such, I turn to black internationalist feminism as a radical political formation that is simultaneously engaged in black Marxist, nationalist and internationalist practices.¹ I begin my project in the 1970s because, as the Combahee River Collective statement demonstrates, this era marks an important turning point for black feminist organization. In addition, this is also a period marked by anti-communism and black political repression. I am interested in framing the story of black internationalist feminism as one that continues forward to today, rather than ends during this Cold War era. I am equally interested in extending studies of this radical black feminist formation beyond the U.S. alone. Although the
U.S. plays a central role in my project, due to its current position as a Western imperial power, I also examine other state contexts, such as post-1959 Cuba. I accomplish my goal of locating the methods and practices of black internationalist feminism by analyzing the lives and writing of four figures; Assata Shakur, Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera, British Guyanese poet Grace Nichols and Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Although each of these authors is alive and politically active today, I examine their work in specific moments as it correlates to the changing way radical black feminists engage with, theorize about and practice black national politics across various socio-political contexts. Through my analysis I argue that a direct, dynamic engagement of the state is central to the practice of black internationalist feminism. The nature of this engagement depends on the particular politics of the state, such as whether the state is a Third World socialist one like Cuba or a conservative one like Thatcher era England. However, the state is always at the center of radical black feminist political practice due to its historical role in exercising racialized, gendered and class based violence. In addition to their engagement of the state, each of the four figures I examine theorizes the role of the body as a site of political redress. Finally, by selecting four radical black feminist figures who are all authors, I emphasize the role writing plays as a methodology of activism that foments political consciousness and facilitates cultural and ideological change.

This project is largely driven by the increasingly blurred line between liberal black feminism and radical black feminism. According to theorist Joy James, liberal black feminism focuses on humanistic reform rather than issues of state and institutional power. Furthermore, “[l]iberal 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” (James, “Radicalizing Feminism
In terms of cultural production, liberal black feminism “essentializes African women or women of color” and “functions as a buffer against revolutionary (feminist) critiques that site capitalism and the state as primary obstacles to black and, therefore, female advancement” (James, “Radicalizing Feminism 253). Unlike their radical counterparts, cultural feminists substitute their criticism of state capitalism with that of men and male patriarchy. In contrast, radical black feminism posits that racial, gender, and sexual inequality stems from capitalist state power. At the turn of the twenty-first century, James asked if such a black feminist formation could “exist as a hybrid heavily invested in the political appearances of revolutionary symbolism and representations shaped by ludic feminism, rather than political organizing with non-elites for revolutionary praxes” (“Radicalizing Feminism” 253). Over fifteen years later, I argue that liberal black feminism has done exactly that. It is this divergence from the practices of radical black feminism that concerns me and drives my search for contemporary reflections of radical black feminism, particularly in the form of cultural production.

The importance of distinguishing between liberal and radical black feminism cannot be understated. While the former ultimately reinforces Western hegemony by providing a controlled outlet for counter-cultural formations, the latter produces anxiety for both the state and the social elite by moving beyond a focus on black women's cultural marginalization and towards a clear antagonism of state power.

The failure to distinguish between liberal and radical black feminism reflects a much larger issue that is at the heart of this investigation; the rise of black liberalism and its erosion of radical black collectivism. Generally speaking, black liberalism is a political ideology that claims Western democracy as the surest path towards equity for black people. However, at its root, black liberalism is also the ideology that economic
accumulation and individual merit will result in a status of exception from the rigidity of U.S. racial hierarchy, allowing a select few black people to ascend from the lower echelons of society. What differentiates contemporary black liberalism from its historical counterpart is its focus on individualism as a viable means of achieving social equality. For example, even early black liberals like Booker T. Washington were concerned with the collective destiny of African Americans. Before the late-twentieth century, the questions at stake in black political debates were: are we speaking to the community or for the community? Are we concerned with fomenting black consciousness or white consciousness? Are we pursuing equality through gradual change and white appeasement, or radical and revolutionary means? Contemporary black liberalism stands in stark contrast to this tradition. Never before has there been such a widespread black political ideology based on the concept that individual merit and class mobility will result in a state of exception from blackness — in terms of its derogatory racialization — and the individual realization of equality. The dominance of black liberalism is central to this project because its rise coincides with the decline of black internationalist and revolutionary black feminist politics.

In addition to defining radical black feminism in terms of its engagement with the state and challenge to black liberalism, political activist Claudia Jones serves as an important foundational figure in defining this formation’s engagement with internationalism. Jones’ participation in black Marxist, nationalist and internationalist politics reflects the characteristics that distinguish black internationalist feminism from other radical black feminist formations. In 1949, Claudia Jones proclaimed that “the Negro question in the United States is prior to, and not equal to, the woman question” (An End To The Neglect 15). While her statement marks an important turning point in both black internationalist and black
feminist history, it also represents a unique dynamic of black internationalist feminist thought. In addition to advocating a Marxist-Leninist view of nationalism, Jones also deconstructed the notion that black nationalism was reducible to separation.\(^3\) Despite her affirmation of black nationalism, Jones also recognized that the choice to separate was not a real one given the status of black people in the U.S. As a result, Jones reconceived nationalism. Black nationalism became the immediate pursuit of self-determination through land, enfranchisement, political representation, and social and economic equality.

In addition to her engagement with black nationalism, Claudia Jones is significant to this project because of her explicitly Marxist politics. Like Jones, many black radical feminists, specifically those aligned with nationalist and internationalist politics, emerged from either the communist party, or communist affiliated parties.\(^4\) Although she is rarely discussed in terms of her communist affiliation, Alice Childress was one of the primary advocates for communist politics within black left and black feminist circles. In an interview about the black delegation’s visit to the U.S.S.R., Childress concluded that just as Soviet communism provided equal rights and “special rights” for Muslim women in Uzbekistan, such as childcare for example, it would do the same for black women and their children.\(^5\) According to Childress, Soviet communism would facilitate economic and political self-determination for black women. Childress’ vocal support for communist politics is especially significant given that her comments were made in the 1970s.

Black freedom struggles throughout the early twentieth century adopted a global perspective on domestic civil rights struggles, particularly during the interwar period. Even organizations that were not remotely socialist understood that the political fate of black people in North America was linked to that of other people of
color around the globe. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, however, this broad sense of black internationalism was fractured by several events. First, the rise of anti-communism in the U.S. meant that black political organizations that were not explicitly communist distanced themselves from any and all things socialist. McCarthyism, interrogations by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and other means of blacklisting and deporting black communists greatly reduced black communist political organization. Second, internal division within the communist party effectively divided black Marxists between competing political organizations. The Soviet departure from Marxist-Leninism, specifically their abandonment of black nationalism, led figures like Harry Haywood to leave the CPUSA and form other organizations. Similarly, the Soviet denunciation of the Black Panther Party and Malcolm X increased the divide between orthodox communist internationalism and black nationalist-internationalism.

In 1971, when Alice Childress announced that Soviet communism holds the key to black women’s liberation, most of these shifts in the landscape of black internationalist politics occurred. Arguably, Childress’ comments reveal much more about her allegiance to communism than to the Soviet Union. The fact that these comments are made at a time when many black radicals had already broken ties with Soviet communism represents just one of the many ways that black internationalist feminists have continued to renegotiate and re-theorize nationalist and internationalist politics within the shifting socio-political context of the late twentieth and twenty-first century. Like Claudia Jones, Childress illustrates the way black feminists negotiate their relationships and participation in other radical traditions.

This negotiation between nationalist, internationalist, and feminist politics is one of the defining characteristics of black internationalist feminism, as the name
suggests. In her book of the same name, Cheryl Higashida defines black internationalist feminism as that which challenges heteronormative and masculinist articulations of nationalism while maintaining the importance, even centrality, of national liberation movements for achieving Black women’s social, political, and economic rights. As a corollary of the Communist Party’s Black Belt Nation Thesis, which prioritized African American struggles for equality, justice, and self-determination, women of the Black Left asserted that Black women had special problems that could not be deferred or subsumed within the rubrics of working-class Black oppression and that in fact were integral to the universal struggle for human rights and economic freedom. (2-3)7

In addition to Higashida’s definition, black internationalist feminism is characterized by its understanding of heteropatriarchy as a form of oppression linked to repressive nationalist and imperialist forms of oppression. Even if some of the black women writers I discuss may not necessarily label themselves in this way, their work and activism reflect the ideologies and politics connoted by such a term.

In contrast to black internationalist feminism, second-wave black feminism has largely been understood and discussed in opposition to ethnic nationalism. Even the radical Combahee River Collective defines itself as emerging from second-wave feminism and 1960s black liberation movements, rather than from the earlier black internationalist feminism of figures like Claudia Jones.8 Similar narratives continue to permeate scholarship on second-wave black feminism.9 Nevertheless, there has been some attempt to counter this narrative. Still, black feminism is largely understood in terms of its opposition to predominantly white second-wave feminism and hetero-masculinist black nationalism. As such, it is credited as the ideological springboard for post-nationalist feminism and queer of color critique.10

The overwhelming view of black feminism as antagonist to ethnic nationalism is due in part to the singular way nationalism is often defined. Even among scholars of
critical race, gender and sexuality studies, there is a tendency to overlook the difference between repressive and emancipatory, or reactionary and revolutionary nationalisms. Furthermore, these scholars often fail to acknowledge the role that scale plays with regard to nationalist politics. Nationalism exercised at the level of the nation-state is not always synonymous with other manifestations of counter-hegemonic nationalism.

The failure to acknowledge the nuanced ways that nationalism operates means that political formations like black internationalist feminism are often overlooked. Not only does this serve to collapse black left feminisms, but it also overlooks the significant interventions black internationalist feminists made into the discourse surrounding nationalism. By the 1970s, the black communist left was divided in its allegiance to Soviet communism. Despite the fact that both the Soviet Union and the CPUSA had disavowed U.S. black nationalism, black radicals continued to theorize about the role of nationalism within revolutionary freedom struggles. These political leaders and intellectuals understood that the unique history of African Americans, as a people who struggled against slavery, Jim Crow segregation, white supremacist violence, unjust incarceration and many other forms of systematic oppression, meant that their experience was more complex than the Soviet label of black proletariat conveyed. This political formation is the basis for what Cheryl Higashida calls a postwar, black nationalist- internationalism. During this period specifically, black feminists from the communist left continued to negotiate the relationship between nationalism and internationalism through their participation in black nationalist and/or communist political organizations. Like other black internationalists, these black feminists distinguished between revolutionary and reformatory nationalisms.
However, they also transformed revolutionary national politics in a way that acknowledged the links between heteropatriarchy and racial and class hierarchies.

Frances Beal constitutes a primary example of how black internationalist feminists engaged with black nationalist and internationalist politics in comparison with other black feminists on the left. Unlike Michele Wallace’s criticism of black nationalism in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Beal provides a materialist analysis of black nationalism that does not negate the possibility of a liberatory black nationalism, but rather warns against its alternative - a nationalism in which black women must be subjugated in order for black men to gain power. More importantly, Beal articulates that sexism within black nationalism is the product of heteropatriarchal capitalist formations. Thus, she situates anti-sexism as a necessary element of revolutionary nationalist politics. Beal frames black internationalist feminist politics by arguing that “the main emphasis of Black women must be to combat the capitalist, racist exploitation of Black people,” and while the fight against heteropatriarchy must also be central to black women’s political practices, “one must always look for the main enemy—the fundamental cause of the female condition” (120).

Arguably, the framing of black internationalist feminist politics, as articulated by figures like Claudia Jones and Frances Beal, is precisely why nationalist black feminism has received such harsh criticism. One could easily conclude from their work that black feminists aligned with nationalism consider issues of sexism less important than issues of racial and class inequality. However, such an assumption greatly underestimates the fluidity and strategic practice of black internationalist feminism. Furthermore, such criticisms conflate the notion of priority with that of importance. Black internationalist feminism theorizes that capitalist hegemony
produces inequality with regard to race, gender, class, and sexuality. However, it also theorizes that addressing such hegemony requires fluid and strategic political practices. Just as the history of black participation in the Communist International was one of strategic alliance, so too can the history of black feminist participation in nationalist-internationalist movements be understood. Black alliance with Soviet communism did not preclude independent thought about the relationship between capitalism and white supremacy. Likewise, the relationship between black feminists and nationalist revolutionaries does not preclude black women’s autonomous political organization against heteropatriarchy. In fact, I argue that the dynamics of such an alliance are precisely the conditions that produce the fullest liberation for the greatest number of people. As Frances Beal puts it, “the exploitation of Black people and women works to everyone’s disadvantage and that the liberation of these two groups is a stepping-stone to the liberation of all oppressed people in this country and the world” (Beal 116).

Claudia Jones’ understanding of black nationalism represents one of the narrative through lines of my project. For Jones, the immediate needs of the community were more important than the delineation between abstract political ideologies. In the decades since Jones published *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman*, black internationalist feminists have continued to theorize about not only the nature of their relationships with black nationalist politics, but also the ways in which such politics may be strategically utilized in black feminist and black Marxist freedom struggles. For the four radical black feminist figures I examine, national separation was not always an option. Yet, just as Jones did, these women continued to theorize and re-theorize the function of black nationalist politics within their specific socio-political contexts. As such, they represent the fruit of a
specific radical black feminist formation, at the core of which is Claudia Jones. As Carole Boyce Davies describes it in her study of Jones, this is a tradition that exists “left of Karl Marx,” meaning it not only challenges white supremacy and Western capitalist imperialism, but it also pushes the boundaries of socialist politics by placing issues of racial and gender equality on an equal level with class.

Over the last decade, scholarship has emerged that addresses the unique history, intellectual contributions, and political activism of the black internationalist feminist tradition. In addition to academic articles, Dayo Gore, Cheryl Higashida and Eric McDuffie each published books on the subject in 2011. Their work opens up important conversations about the particular ways radical black feminists transform Marxist, internationalist and nationalist politics. Furthermore, each of these texts establishes black radicalism of the 1960s as a significant link between the Old Left and New Left. Additionally, these works challenge the delineation between so-called reform movements, like that of Civil Rights, and the radical activism of the Black Power movement. Instead of perpetuating the myth that these freedom struggles existed in contradiction to one another, the work done by Gore, Higashida and McDuffie reflects the fluidity of radical politics as they are practiced on the ground.

Another shared aspect of this scholarship is its attention to Claudia Jones’ *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro woman* as a preeminent articulation of intersectionality. I am equally interested in Jones’ expression of intersectionality, but more as a framework for a particular black feminist politics than as a means of theorizing identity or matrices of oppression. This is not to say that the latter are unimportant, but that what is most interesting about Claudia Jones as a black feminist figure is the particular way she envisions herself simultaneously as a black feminist, black nationalist, black Marxist and black internationalist. It is in this regard
that Claudia Jones, and her practice of black internationalist feminism, functions as the cornerstone of this investigation.

Amongst the scholarship that exists on black internationalist feminism, Higashida's work serves as a point of departure for my own project due not only to her attention to literature, but also her emphasis on the relationship between black nationalist and black feminist politics. This link is vital in challenging the contemporary perception of women of color feminism as post and/or anti-nationalist. Likewise, Higashida is the only author to project these politics into our contemporary moment. Her willingness to argue that Audre Lorde became a black nationalist after the invasion of Grenada illustrates an understanding of black internationalist feminism as an unique formation that exists outside of, yet often works in conjunction with, other traditions. Higashida articulates this understanding best when she states, "I see my study not as the final word on Black feminist radicalism, but as part of a broader conversation that must continue to excavate but also look beyond the Communist Party" (178). In many ways, my project answers her call by looking at black internationalist feminist figures who are not all members of communist, or communist affiliated parties. This is not to say that these women do not each exhibit a form of socialist politics, but that their devotion to radical black feminism and black internationalism supersedes any party affiliation. Assata Shakur, for example, participated in the Black Panther party while simultaneously criticizing their rejection of internationalism (Shakur, *Assata* 204). Likewise, her autobiography is full of criticism of communists and socialists who, she felt, perpetuated white supremacy (Shakur, *Assata* 191-192). Similarly, Georgina Herrera lives in and supports the Cuban socialist state. However, her commitment to Cuban socialism does not negate her participation in grassroots activism that critiques state practices of anti-blackness.
Grace Nichols, after living through Guyana’s tumultuous attempt at establishing a socialist government, moved to Thatcher era England. Finally, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would scarcely call herself a communist. This fact is likely due not only to her being born after the hegemonic victory of Western capitalism over Soviet communism, but also the perceived corruption of regimes like that of Stalin. Still, regardless of their complex relationships with, or rejections of, communism, these four women still pertain to a black Marxist tradition. Their politics are explicitly socialist, radically black feminist and internationalist in nature. The work and writing illustrates that they proceed from a tradition borne from the work of Claudia Jones, rather than that of liberal black feminism.

Rethinking the boundaries of black internationalism allows for a new understanding of this radical formation with greater applicability to our contemporary moment. By framing these women’s work in terms of the history of black Marxist, feminist, nationalist and internationalist activism, I illustrate the way black internationalist feminism has existed and continues to exist as its own unique political formation. I am less concerned with black internationalist feminists’ communist affiliations as I am with their pursuit of self-determination and equity. I argue that this particular black feminist formation is unmatched in its potential to pursue such liberation. Black internationalist feminists refuse to disengage complex factors like the existence of the state, patriarchy within black nationalist and internationalist organizations, and anti-nationalism amongst feminists. Their clear understanding of what they are fighting against makes it easier to engage with a number of politics that are at times competing and/or contradictory. As such, they are willing and able to face the complex realities of their political identities in order to pursue the fullest liberation for all people. In our contemporary moment, such
political formations are necessary if we are to oppose the hegemonic stronghold of Western liberalism and racial capitalism. In addition to rethinking the category of black internationalist feminism, my project diverges from previous studies by focusing on writing as a black internationalist feminist praxis with contemporary relevance. With the exception of Higashida, who examines the role literature plays in black internationalist feminist theory, the existing scholarship on black internationalist feminism largely fails to address the role of cultural production as praxis of these politics. For example, Gore and McDuffie both discuss autobiography, however their work focuses primarily on the histories of these women’s activism. Furthermore, their work ends with the Cold War period. In contrast, Higashida’s book traces the use of writing as a form of articulating black internationalist feminist theory and facilitating political alliances into the late twentieth century. For example, Higashida examines the way certain mediums, such as Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology, *The Black Woman*, and the magazine *Freedomways* facilitated links between Old and New Left black feminism. While I agree with Higashida that writing is an important medium through which radical black feminists foster community and theorize their politics, it also accomplishes a great deal more. When utilized in the right way, writing itself becomes a method of activism.

In keeping with the spirit of Claudia Jones’ work, cultural production as a form of activism is a central concept in this project. In one of Jones’ most well-known booklets, she proclaimed that a “people’s art is the genesis of their freedom” (qtd. in C.B. Davies, *Left of Karl Marx* 176). Referring to the celebration of Carnival in Thatcher era England, Jones argued that the event was “a testament to the role of the arts in bringing people together for common aims, and to its fusing of the cultural,
spiritual, as well as the political and economic interests” of the people (qtd. in C.B. Davies, *Left of Karl Marx* 176). Like Jones, the four writers I examine illustrate that cultural production is indeed a form of praxis that foments cultural consciousness, promotes collectivism and community, and challenges hegemonic cultural and ideological formations.

While my particular understanding of black women’s writing is informed by Barbara Christian’s proclamation that “people of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...often in narrative forms,” I also argue that black women’s writing is more than a theoretical method. It is an actual practice of theory and politics (12). Literary and cultural production are fundamental parts of constructing social and cultural narratives. Contesting and reshaping these narratives is a large part of what makes writing such a significant medium. It is important to note that these acts are not always in response to external communities, such as white America, but that literary and cultural production is also an important means of facilitating intra-communal debate. For black women writers, the practice of writing is not just about self-empowerment, but also communal empowerment.

In addition to operating as a medium through which black women theorize their identities, politics and culture, literary production is also about power. Issues such as access to publication, the control of distribution, and economic and scholarly valorization all reflect the way power is exercised through literary production. These factors frame the issue of literary and cultural production in terms of who gets to express what, as well as what the conditions of production are. As such, they direct readers to the material conditions of the authors and communities linked to a text. This connection is significant because it illustrates the way black feminist writing
operates as a radical praxis that does not seek to replace organizational activism, but rather to inspire it. Writing as a method of activism works in conjunction with other methods, not as a substitute.

Within the use of writing as a black feminist praxis, poetry plays a particular role. Audre Lorde claimed, “poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence...within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into to language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (37). Lorde’s now famous proclamation about poetry helps explain the particular role it plays in the tradition of black women’s writing. Poetry is an accessible medium that fosters the movement from thought to action.

In addition to its accessibility, poetry is a medium connected to other black traditions, such as oral histories. Poetry, especially in its oral form, can exist and reproduce itself wholly outside of the bounds of paper and pen. Yet, when captured in the written form it still carries immense power and significance. Thus, whether in written or oral form, poetry is a constantly developing text. It modifies with each reading, emerges from changing communities, and is read or heard by ever changing audiences. While this can be said of many genres, poetry is unique in its participatory nature. It is a genre that exceeds all other genres, perhaps with the exception of music and the performing arts, in its ability to engage with multiple voices in both its creation and its articulation. As such, it forms an important part of my investigation into black internationalist feminist methodologies. The first three chapters of this project analyze radical black feminist poetry. Although chapter four focuses on a novel, the author I examine is also a poet.
Key Concepts

Just as the realities of racial slavery and industrial capitalism were global in scope, so too were the black movements that arose to resist them. Because of this, there is often confusion regarding different languages of global politics. As a result, it is important to note the meaningful distinctions between terms like transnational, global and international. While each of these terms broadly refers to the transcendence of national boundaries, I refer to black internationalism throughout this project as a specifically Marxist, anti-imperialist political formation. In their comprehensive study of the subject, West, Martin and Wilkins define black internationalism as a tradition founded in the eighteenth century, the Age of Revolution, characterized by a unified opposition to racial slavery. While resistance to slavery predates that period, an organized international resistance to slavery was cemented during this era (West, Martin and Wilkins 5). Understanding this early formation of black internationalism is important to my definition because it illustrates the historical resistance to white supremacy, Western imperialism and slavery.

I agree that it is important to think about black internationalism as a formation that existed before communism, however I also argue that the international black response to Western imperialism during the interwar period represents a definitive moment for black internationalism as a decidedly Marxist formation. For West, Martin and Wilkins, the major difference between black internationalism before and after this period is a shift from "ideological coherence to actual political organization" (8). While I agree that international organization, particularly around the issue of anti-imperialism, increased during this period, I disagree that it did not
exist in previous eras. The Haitian Revolution, and its relationship to other practices of resistance throughout the globe, illustrates how black resistance to white supremacy, Western imperialism and racial slavery resulted in political organization reaching all the way to the level of the nation-state. Rather than framing black internationalism in the interwar period in terms of political organization, I argue that this period reflects a greater articulation of black Marxist, often communist, politics. It was during this period that black internationalists re-theorized the purely class based theory of Marxism by challenging the supposed universal identity of Marx’s white proletariat. For example, in his analysis of Marx’s *Capital*, W.E.B. Du Bois argued that the “Negro is exploited to a degree that means poverty, crime, delinquency and indigence. And that exploitation comes not from a black capitalistic class but from the white capitalists and the white proletariat” (12). Through his re-theorization of Marx, Du Bois demonstrates the way black Marxists have created a tradition of their own. Likewise, black feminists challenged the masculinization of the proletariat.

West, Martin and Wilkins argue that the black internationalism of the 1960s sought to complete the unfinished work of the previous two centuries (22). In many ways, I agree with them. However, where they see an increasing lack of organizational coherence (but increasing ideological coherence), I see the expansion of black internationalist autonomy. During the Cold War era, black internationalism underwent another significant shift, which coincided with the rise of black anti-colonial movements and freedom struggles. Whereas black internationalism during the interwar period was characterized by its engagement with communism, black internationalism during the Cold War is marked by its emphasis on black self-determination, whether that be through armed resistance to Western imperialism, or
ideological resistance to Soviet communism. Continuing the work of the previous eras, black internationalism in this period simultaneously pushed the boundaries of leftist political ideologies and activism, while also confronting the hegemony of Western imperialism and racial capitalism.

While I affirm that black internationalism can be traced back to the Age of Revolution, I also argue that black internationalism today is an explicitly Marxist tradition. West, Martin and Wilkins define black internationalism as a formation that encompasses a range of movements, from Garveyism and Pan Africanism to Black Bolshevism. In contrast, my definition of black internationalism is a little more stringent. The Marxist understanding of internationalism is the "fraternisation of nations" based on the proletariat’s shared interest, struggle and common enemy (Bottomore 260). The purpose of such internationalism is to bring about worldwide socialist revolution. This Marxist perspective is an important part of black internationalist politics. Even those black internationalists who were not communist, or working in communist affiliated organizations, were at the very least socialist. Likewise, while black internationalists varied in their understanding of nationalism, they agreed that internationalism was a key element in addressing the conditions of black oppression under globalized racial capitalism. As Minkah Makalani puts it in his book, *In The Cause of Freedom*, black internationalists have historically been “convinced that whether humanity enjoyed greater freedom or suffered even harsher colonial regimes hinged on the struggles that peoples of African descent in the United States, Caribbean, and Africa would wage against racism, colonialism, and capitalism and on their ability to link these struggles with similar movements in Asia, Latin America, and Europe” (4). I agree with Makalani’s claim, but I also want to affirm an important aspect of West, Martin and Wilkins’ definition. While its Marxist
orientation is what distinguishes black internationalism from other global black movements, it is also important to recognize that communism is not the source of black internationalism. Although its embrace of Marxist politics may have come during the second wave of black internationalism, its existence and the manifestation of what we might contemporarily call socialist politics precedes this era.

As I mentioned, nationalism became an increasingly important concept for black internationalists, especially in their fight against Western imperialism. Black internationalists embraced a Marxist-Leninist theory of nationalism. For Lenin, globalized capitalism resulted in the existence of “oppressor nations,” who held the majority of the world’s capital and armed forces, and “oppressed nations,” who were the subjects of violence and exploitation. As such, the oppressed nations’ demand for self-determination was an important step in the struggle against globalized capitalism (Lenin). Lenin differentiated between bourgeois and anti-imperialist nationalisms, citing the latter as an important part of achieving communist internationalism.17

Stalin’s Marxism and the National Question (1913) re-conceptualized nationalism. Stalin critiqued the way nationalism had been used as a tool by the ruling class to quell the proletarian dissent. Rather than emphasize racial or ethnic criteria, he defined the nation as “a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin). For Stalin, however, nations lived a temporary existence. They emerged under capitalism and served a purpose in international communist struggle, but, as the antagonist of globalized capitalism, socialism would eventually lead to the abolition of nationalism.

Using a Marxist-Leninist framework, black communists, such as Cyril Briggs, Claude McKay and Harry Haywood, all advocated for a Marxist-Leninist
understanding of black nationalism. In 1928, at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, members of the CPUSA used the Stalinist-Leninist position on nationalism as a point of departure for addressing the “Negro Question” in the U.S. The new focus on anti-imperial struggle caused the CPUSA to look at African Americans as an oppressed “nation within a nation.” In the words of Harry Haywood, the “struggle of the Negroes for liberation [becomes] a phase of the class struggle of the American working class against imperialism, or in other words, as a class struggle which assumes a national form” (“Theoretical Defenders” 39).

Although later disavowed by Soviet communists and black activists like Huey Newton, the Leninist theory of emancipatory nationalism remained a fundamental part of black nationalist formations and illustrated the autonomy of the black Marxist tradition (Kelley 49). Even black activists who did not identity as communist articulated a similar understanding of nationalism as a counter-hegemonic political formation. Rather than focus on obtaining a physical nation-state, they organized around the need for self-determination. For example, much like Claudia Jones, Malcolm X defined black nationalism in terms of political and economic self-determination, rather than state separation.

The issue of nationalism helps to frame another important concept to this project, the role of the state. One of the reasons that the state plays such a central role in my project is that its function as an antagonist is largely what differentiates black internationalist feminism from other black feminist formations. In “Radicalizing Feminism,” Joy James explains what the exact role of the state is in such feminist formations:

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 recognizes 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. (248)

James' explanation of the role of the state in radical formations like black internationalist feminism reflects an emphasis on material conditions over the need for clearly delineated abstract ideologies. The emphasis on the state as the source of inequality reflects a black Marxist understanding of how class, race, gender and sexuality are linked.

Black internationalist feminists are committed to engaging the state through nationalism, whether that state is an imperial power or a Third World socialist nation. In the case of Western imperialist nations, black nationalism is an important counter-hegemonic formation that advocates black self-determination and challenges Western liberal conceptions of nationalism. In the case of Third World socialist states, black nationalism represents a specific intervention in Marxism, which challenges any racialization of the proletariat that would overlook the specificities of the black experience. In both of these cases, the black feminists I examine insert a gendered critique of heteropatriarchy that pushes black Marxist and black nationalist formations further to the political left. In this way, they represent the legacy of Claudia Jones’ black feminist politics.

Black internationalist feminism is also distinct from the broader category of second-wave black feminism due to its emphasis on the importance of nationalist-internationalism. The term nationalist-internationalist was originally coined by Neil Lazarus in his analysis of Frantz Fanon’s commitment to both international socialist revolution and national liberation. Nationalist-internationalism represents an investment in self-determination for oppressed nations for the purposes of
bringing about international socialist revolution. The term is reapplied by Cheryl Higashida in *Black Internationalist Feminism* to explain how some black feminists are simultaneously invested in black nationalism, socialist internationalism, and leftist feminism.

Within this project, the concept of **blackness** as a political identity lends itself to internationalist politics. While I am not suggesting that scholars cease to interrogate or renegotiate the term “black,” I argue that as a category of social, political and economic resistance, the term black holds international significance. Despite the varying racial categories that existed in each colonial system, and later in post-colonial nations, people of African descent throughout the world share similar experiences of racial oppression due to the fact that the hegemony of white supremacy has never been limited by the boundaries of colonial empire or nation-states. To suggest that the differences between each colonial/national racial hierarchy supersede the overwhelming reach of white imperialism, and later globalized capitalism, is to greatly underestimate the power of Western hegemony.²²

While racial capitalism has resulted in the global oppression of people of African descent, it has also served as the fertile ground for anti-imperialist and internationalist formations. This use of blackness as an internationalist political category is perhaps best exemplified by Julia Sudbury’s study of black feminist organizations in postwar Britain. In her introduction to the study, Angela Davis eloquently summarizes Sudbury’s project, which traces how:

women of Asian and African descent consciously took on a ‘black’ political identity. Blackness, within this organizing context, was hardly a simplistic notion of nonwhiteness summoned forth as opposition to the prevailing racism. For African, Caribbean, Asian and Middle Eastern women who were concerned with police brutality, reproductive politics, the welfare system, education, immigration and other issues, black political identity accomplished a number of
strategic goals. It allowed women to link histories of colonialism and repression that were both similar and different, as well as histories of resistance to both racism and sexism. And precisely because they were compelled to build this identity consciously, they were able to develop a consciousness of their own political agency.” (Sudbury x-xi)

As Davis acknowledges, projects like Sudbury’s reveal the way blackness itself can be practiced as an internationalist political category. The implications of this understanding are that blackness holds significance for a wide range of political struggles. It is largely based on this understanding of blackness that I established the temporal and geographical scope of my project. Most of the scholarship that has emerged about black internationalist feminism is either heavily U.S. centric, or limited to the interwar and Cold War eras. In defining blackness as a category of resistance that responds to the expanding scope of Western imperialism, capitalist hegemony and white supremacy, I am able to expand the study of black internationalist feminist politics to include a heterogeneous group of practices and socio-political contexts.

In addition to focusing on the state and blackness as a political category, the issue of black futurity is at the heart of this project. While futurity can broadly be defined as the promise of future existence, black futurity as much about the conditions of existence as it is about its continuation. If, as I have argued, blackness can be defined as a political category of resistance to white supremacy, racial capitalism and Western imperialism, then black futurity means having the conditions to either continue this resistance or surpass it by achieved economic, social and political liberation for all black people around the world.

Discussions of black futurity are inevitably tied to ones of reproduction, especially where black feminists are concerned. While Shakur and the women I look at discuss black reproduction as a radical act against the racial violence of Western
imperialism, this view has been actively criticized by many black feminists. For example, despite her investment in revolutionary nationalism, black feminist Pat Parker was a vocal critic of the way black nationalists emphasized the nuclear family. Parker argued that “The nuclear family is the basic unit of capitalism and in order for us to move to revolution it has to be destroyed. And I mean destroyed. The male left has duped too many women with cries of genocide into believing it is revolutionary to be bound to babies” (242). Similarly, Toni Cade Bambara argued that such an emphasis, especially the condemnation of birth control and abortion, reproduced white patriarchal views of women’s rights over their own bodies. While the concerns expressed by Parker and Bambara are important, they also reduce the issue of black reproduction to one of heterosexual relations. This framework fails to account for the historical violence exercised against black families, as well as the political stakes of their existence. Orlando Patterson theorizes in Slavery and Social Death that natal alienation and living death were the conditions of black existence under slavery (5). Black feminist scholars, such as Hortense Spillers and Hazel Carby, have argued that black motherhood itself became a mode of production that perpetuated racial capitalism. Despite this, some black radical feminists, including Claudia Jones, have argued that black motherhood can exist as a political identity. In fact, Jones argued that it was the black woman: “[a]s mother, as Negro, and as worker, [that] fights against the wiping out of the Negro family, against the Jim-Crow ghetto existence which destroys the health, morale, and very life of millions of her sisters, brothers, and children” (3-4). Jones’ point is significant because she offers a materialist reading of black motherhood that speaks to the living conditions and needs of the black community today.
I bring up the issue of black reproduction because it illustrates one of the characteristics of black internationalist feminism that differentiates it from other black feminist formations. Assata Shakur argues that it is the conditions of black life, especially when those conditions involve the violence of white supremacy and poverty, that produce a black radical consciousness (Shakur, Assata 52-53). With the increasing reach of black liberalism, which promotes individualism rooted in the hope of escaping these conditions through class elevation, the kind of radical black collectivity imagined by Shakur is under threat. In response to this phenomenon, I seek to examine the way black internationalist feminists are thinking about black futurity in opposition to racialized state violence, as well as Western liberal capitalist hegemony.

Organization

*In Search of the Fullest Freedom: Contemporary Black Internationalist Feminist Writing* is organized into four chapters that examine the progression of black internationalist feminist politics and writing from the Cold War period to the twenty-first century. My methodology involves close readings of poetry, autobiography, popular media and novels, as well as analyzing the links between cultural production, historical context, political movements and ideologies. I am specifically interested in the intersections of black feminist, nationalist, internationalist and Marxist thought. In the following chapters, I exam the life, writing and popular imaginations that surround four black internationalist feminist figures, each from different socio-political contexts. Although these four figures may not identify themselves as black internationalist feminists, I argue that their work illustrates key tenants of this political formation, as well as the heterogeneous nature
of this label. For example, their commitment to and participation in black radical organizations varies greatly. While Assata Shakur was a member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, and Georgina Herrera is a citizen and supporter of a Third World socialist nation-state, Grace Nichols and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are not members of any radical organizations. The decline of such explicit involvement in black radical organizations over time speaks to a central issue I address in this project; the negative effect of black liberalism on collective political practice and the various ways this effect is negated through cultural production. Thus, while the radicalism of the authors and writing I examine becomes less explicit over time, I argue that it has not ceased to exist altogether. Rather, its survival and existence in various forms reflects the grave effect of black liberalism, as well as the ways radical black feminism has adapted within the context of increasing globalized racial capitalism.

The first chapter of my project focuses on the political activism and autobiography of black internationalist feminist Assata Shakur. Shakur’s autobiography, *Assata*, theorizes the connections between plantation paternalism under slavery and state paternalism today. Her discussion of state paternalism is focused primarily on the contemporary legal existence of slavery in U.S. prison systems. By tracing the continuities between pre and post Thirteenth Amendment slavery, Shakur affirms the importance of black nationalist politics in a nation where practices of racial violence have merely changed hands, from the plantation owner to the state. I suggest that Shakur’s particular way of analyzing such practices, through the lens of paternalism, reflects a black internationalist feminist perspective.

Shakur’s discussion of state paternalism extends beyond the physical confines of the prison system. She also discusses the ideological means through which black
people are inscribed into such a system, namely through the production of black capitalist desire and black liberal ideologies. In the 2011 documentary, *The Black Power Mixtape*, Bobby Seale reflects on the process of fostering capitalist desire in the black community as a means of counter-insurgency. In the film, Seale states point blank that Nixon’s black capitalism is a threat to collective political organization. At the root of Seale’s comment is the idea that black political power was not defeated by the rise of anti-communism, or the activities of COINTELPRO alone, but by the ideological and political fragmentation of the black community through the cultivation of capitalist desire. Black liberalism has also contributed to this fragmentation as an ideology that encourages compliance with the dominant social hierarchy. I conclude that Shakur’s warnings against black liberalism and capitalist desire reflect their correlation to the decline of black radicalism and speak to issues of collective black futurity.

In addition to analyzing her autobiography, I also devote part of chapter one to the role Shakur plays in the U.S. public imaginary. In her own writing, Shakur has discussed her representation in the media as it relates to her political beliefs. Recently, Shakur has been at the center of various media stories, from her addition to the FBI’s most wanted list to her depiction on a popular television show. I suggest that these multiple, competing representations of Shakur reflect an anxiety surrounding her politics and their continued relevance today.

While chapter one focuses on the political ideologies and practices of black internationalist feminism in the radical era of the 1960s and 1970s, chapters two and three examine the two possible routes such politics take in a post-Cold War context. In chapter two, for example, I examine the writing and activism of black feminist poet Georgina Herrera within the context of post-1959 Cuba. Cuba is significant to this
project for a number of reasons. Many black activists in the mid-twentieth century looked to Cuba as an example of the potential of Third World socialist nationalism. Not only has Cuba served as a place of refuge for black radicals, including Assata Shakur, but it actively supported black anti-colonial struggles throughout the globe.

Despite Cuba’s significance to global black radicalism, it fails to occupy a central place in scholarly studies of black nationalist-internationalism. As one of the few Third World countries to sustain a socialist nation-state, Cuba represents the ideal case for studying the relationship between black nationalist and socialist nationalist politics. As such, I look to Afro Cuban poet and activist Georgina Herrera as an example of a black woman writer engaged in negotiating the relationship between black nationalist, feminist and socialist politics. In this chapter, I pay specific attention to Herrera’s writing and activism during the 1980s and 1990s, as it correlates to both the resurgence of economic disparities along racial lines in Cuba, as well as the racialized participation of Cubans in the tourism based sex work industry.

Through a combination of personal interviews and close readings of her work, I analyze the particular way Herrera theorizes the role of black nationalist politics in Cuba. For example, Herrera diverges from the work of many other writers by asserting the primacy of black histories of resistance. Challenging the dominant narrative that the Cuban revolution alone brought agency to black people, Herrera points to its successes, failures and limitations regarding racial and gender equality. Overall, Herrera’s work represents the complex, shifting relationships between blackness, black womanhood, and Cuban socialism, and advocates for the centrality of black feminist nationalism in revolutionary politics.

In contrast to chapter two, in the third chapter I focus on the way black internationalist feminist politics are altered and reproduced within the context of late
Thatcher era England. As the Cold War came to an end, and capitalism emerged as the dominant global political ideology, black internationalist feminists were forced to reconsider the possible manifestations of their politics. To examine one of the ways in which this is done, I turn to the work of Guyanese poet Grace Nichols.

Despite the fact that Nichols is living in Britain after the decline of British black nationalism, her work continues to reflect black feminist and black nationalist-internationalist themes. Like Cuban poet Georgina Herrera, Nichols advocates for the centrality of black histories of resistance. However, rather than focusing on black self-determination at the level of the nation-state, Nichols utilizes the titular figure of her collection, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, to theorize the possibilities of embodying black feminist nationalist politics. Here, the Fat Black woman performs her resistance to Western imperialism, white supremacy and patriarchy. In doing so, she positions the body as a possible site for political redress.

Finally, in chapter four I examine the contemporary manifestations of black internationalist feminist politics in the work of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Here, I suggest that Adichie’s representation of black feminist politics in her most recent novel, *Americanah*, offers an important alternative to the dominance of “Beyoncé feminism.” Broadly speaking, Beyoncé feminism is a black feminist formation that echoes second wave feminist claims about gender inequality and the need for sexual empowerment. However, this formation largely fails to utilize an intersectional framework. Instead of acknowledging the role class and race play in women’s experiences, Beyoncé feminism focuses on empowerment through economic success and sexual appeal. What is particularly dangerous about Beyoncé feminism is the way it synthesizes the ideologies of black liberalism, capitalist desire and racial exceptionalism.
Despite the fact that she is often discussed in conjunction with Beyoncé, and even represented in one of the artist’s performances, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work represents an important alternative. Rather than promote black women’s empowerment through financial success and individual merit, Adichie’s most recent novel, *Americanah*, advocates for a new understanding of black collectivism in the twenty-first century. Adichie constructs a contemporary understanding of blackness that acknowledges its nuanced intersections with gender, class and nationality, while also prioritizing black collectivism. Furthermore, she illustrates the possibility of practicing such politics today through the construction of cyber communities and the embodiment of feminist politics through black women’s hair.

My analysis of how these four black women writers theorize the relationship between black nationalism, internationalism and feminism is as much about understanding the continued significance of black nationalist politics as it is about defining the unique role black internationalist feminism plays in our society. In contrast to liberal black feminism, black internationalist feminism is a set of ideologies and practices that holds globalized capitalism, and the distinctly racialized and gendered economic disparities that result from it, as its primary antagonist. Through their engagement of the state, assertion of black women’s bodies as a site of redress and use of writing as a methodology of activism, these four figures demonstrate that black internationalist feminism is uniquely qualified to address contemporary concerns over how black people live today.

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1. Black internationalist feminism is a term coined by Cheryl Higashida that signifies a feminist contour of black nationalistic and internationalist political formations.
4. These figures include Vicki Garvin, Ida B. Wells, Alice Childress, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur.
5. See Tynes, “Black Delegation Visits the U.S.S.R.”
Furthermore, black capitalism generates compliance with current conditions, as people are unwilling to desire for black capitalists than as an actual economic and political system. It is this desire to become a black capitalist that sustains and propagates black liberalism as a dominant political formation.

If there are black capitalists, they are few. As such, black capitalism operates more as an ideology and desire for black capitalists than as an actual economic and political system. It is this desire to become a black capitalist that sustains and propagates black liberalism as a dominant political formation. Furthermore, black capitalism generates compliance with current conditions, as people are unwilling to...
risk their potential individual assent into the upper echelons of society for the sake of the collective needs of the black community.

Chapter 1

When the State is the Terrorist:

The Autobiography and Activism of Assata Shakur

“I am only one woman. I own no TV stations or radio stations or newspapers. But I believe that people need to be educated as to what is going on and to understand the connection between the news media and the instruments of repression in America. All I have are my voice, my spirit and the will to tell the truth.” - Assata Shakur, In Her Own Words

“She’s a domestic terrorist who wrapped her criminality and her abhorrent anti-social behavior in a cause to try to disguise her disgust for America in this make believe 1960s radicalism” - Dave Jones, President of the New Jersey State Troopers Fraternal Association OR “This is a cop killer. This is a woman who gunned down, along with two other accomplices, a woman who is a member of the Black Liberation Army” - Bill O’Reilly

On July 4th, 1973, an injured and malnourished Assata Shakur released an audio statement titled “To My People.” The tape was broadcast during Shakur’s imprisonment and forced isolation at Middlesex County jail in New Jersey. Despite the brutalities inflicted upon her, Shakur mustered up enough strength to issue one of the most powerful statements of twentieth-century black feminist radicalism. Rather than frame her imprisonment in personal terms, Shakur identifies racialized state terror and a fear of black radicalism as the root cause of her incarceration:

Black brothers, Black sisters...My name is Assata Shakur...and i am a revolutionary. A Black revolutionary. By that i mean that i have declared war on all forces that have raped our women, castrated our men, and kept our babies empty-bellied...I am a Black revolutionary, and, as such, i am a victim of all the wrath, hatred, and slander that amerika is capable of. Like all other Black revolutionaries, amerika is trying to lynch me. (Shakur, Assata 49-50)

Shakur’s identity as a black revolutionary woman, which she reiterates six times throughout the statement, reaffirms her status as a public intellectual and activist. Broadcast on various radio stations, Shakur’s words were a declaration of political
dissidence, rather than a mere plea for public support. The nature of her statement becomes clear when the content shifts from the injustice of her trial to Shakur’s distress over the threatened existence of revolutionaries like herself. Through programs like COINTEPRO, black radicals and revolutionary nationalists were being killed, imprisoned, and publicly discredited at an alarming rate.

In addition to U.S. repression, black Marxists like Shakur could scarcely depend upon support from Western communist organizations, or the Soviet Union. The growth and autonomy of black nationalism, along with the Sino-Soviet split, created tension between so-call First and Third world socialisms, a tension that manifested in very real, material consequences for activists like Shakur.¹ For example, after the Soviet Union and CPUSA disavowed black nationalism as divisive, many black Marxists formally cut ties with communist organizations. While black Marxism continued to thrive politically, it did so without the powerful political and financial support formerly provided by U.S. and Soviet organizations.

With these shifting dynamics in mind, the final lines of “To My People” become a critical conveyance of what is truly at stake for Shakur.

Every time a Black Freedom Fighter is murdered or captured, the pigs try to create the impression that they have quashed the movement...That is absurd. Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. We are being manufactured in droves...We must fight on. (Shakur, Assata 52-53)

This passage clearly illustrates that “To My People” is not just a plea for support. Rather, it is Shakur’s affirmation of her political struggle and challenge to fellow activists and participants in the black radical tradition to continue this struggle. Shakur is cognizant of the moment she is in, and tries to project an oppositional
future in which black revolutionaries continue to thrive, despite political oppression and internal division.

Forty years after this statement was made, Shakur’s pleas regarding the futurity of black revolutionary nationalism are especially haunting. Today, Assata Shakur is widely understood as an icon of the Black Power movement, or American’s most wanted “domestic terrorist.” It is significant that as a radical black activist, Assata Shakur is often spoken about or written about in past tense. Yet, as a so-called domestic terrorist, she continues to surface in contemporary popular and political discourses. The disconnect between these two representations of Shakur reflects a tendency to discount and minimize her contributions to black radical scholarship and activism by focusing on sensationalist narratives that characterize Shakur as a threat to American democracy. As a member of the former Black Liberation Army (BLA), Shakur is widely depicted as a violent, anti-American criminal. Similarly, her participation the BLA and the Black Panther Party, along with her overall embrace of black nationalism, is seen as evidence of a flawed black feminist politics.

I begin this project by looking at someone like Assata Shakur for multiple reasons. First, despite the way she is written about, Assata Shakur remains an important figure in U.S. culture and politics. From her representation in a recent popular television show, to her centrality in discussions about U.S.-Cuba relations, Shakur remains a significant figure in the U.S. public imaginary. Second, Shakur’s own writing and activism lend themselves to a definition of black internationalist feminism as a heterogeneous body of practices that is united by a common commitment to black nationalist, Marxist and radical feminist politics. Her autobiography, for example, provides a complex and nuanced analysis of U.S. state
power, as well as a means of theorizing revolutionary politics from a decidedly black feminist perspective.

Rather than relegate someone like Assata Shakur to the past, or analyze her merely as a member of the Black Panther Party, I am interested in the unique ways Shakur has, and continues to, negotiate the relationship between black Marxist, nationalist and internationalist politics in order to critique white supremacist and heteropatriarchal state power. I suggest that it is precisely the tendency to overlook black internationalist feminism as a tradition that has led to Shakur's marginalization within the academy. Rather than attentively analyzing the way Shakur negotiates the relationship between black nationalism, internationalism and feminism, her political practices have been erroneously understood as a monolithic allegiance to black nationalism. This is particularly troubling considering the unique insights Shakur’s internal critiques of the Black Panther Party provide for discussions on black radical political organization. My analysis of Shakur, both as she is represented, as well as how she represents herself, is an attempt to rectify such mistakes by reading her through the lens of black internationalist feminism.

Born in New York City in 1947, Assata Olugbala Shakur (JoAnne Chesimard) spent her childhood with her grandparents in Wilmington, North Carolina. It was there that she experienced the harsh realities of Jim Crow segregation. As a teenager, Shakur returned to Queens, New York, where she eventually moved in with her aunt, Evelyn Williams. After years of frustration with public school systems that disparaged her, Shakur eventually found her educational niche while attending the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC). It was at BMCC that Shakur got involved with black student organizations, such as the Republic of New Afrika. It was also at this time that Shakur began reading works by members of the Black Arts Movement,
such as Sonia Sanchez, works she credits for fostering the growth of her racial consciousness.

Upon graduating from BMCC, Shakur joined the Harlem branch of the Black Panther Party (BPP), where she coordinated a school breakfast program, among other duties. Eventually, Shakur left the BPP and joined the Black Liberation Army (BLA). It was as a member of the BLA that Shakur was arrested in 1973 and forced to endure solitary confinement for the majority of the four years that she spent on trial for various crimes. After being falsely convicted for the murder of New Jersey state trooper Werner Foerester in 1977, Shakur was imprisoned at the New Jersey Clinton Correctional Facility until she escaped in 1979 and eventually fled to Cuba in 1984. Today, Shakur continues her activism by utilizing her website and relationships to black collectives to get her message out. In addition to releasing political statements and a book, Shakur worked with Afro-Cuban film director Gloria Rolando to create documentary of her life, titled *Eyes of the Rainbow*.

As a public figure, Assata Shakur is largely understood in terms of her participation in the BPP and the BLA. Although her membership in these groups was undoubtedly an important part of her work as an activist, to confine her to these identities is to greatly underestimate the span and significance of her contribution to black internationalist and black radical thought. I argue that Shakur’s own narration of her participation in, exile from and negotiation with the political boundaries of these groups represents a unique, feminist and Third World Marxist intervention into black political formations. These interventions are not merely criticisms of various black nationalisms, as black feminist critiques are often labeled. Instead, they represent the construction of a specifically black internationalist feminist politics, with its own methodology rooted in Shakur’s lived experiences.
To analyze these interventions and methodologies, I primarily focus on Shakur’s autobiography, *Assata*. There are multiple reasons for my focus on Shakur’s autobiography. First, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown are the only women activists of the Black Power movement to publish book-length autobiographies. Despite being published in 1987, Shakur’s autobiography is a direct manifestation of her activism and writing during the 1960s. Second, Shakur’s autobiography is an example of how black internationalist feminists construct their politics and identity. The text itself is a well-crafted dual narrative, which alternates between the life of a young JoAnne Chesimard who grew up under segregation, and the life of Assata Shakur, black activist and political prisoner. Even the way Shakur (the author) crafts the protagonist (whom I strictly refer to as Assata), is deliberate. Also deliberate, is Shakur’s use of the lowercase “i,” to signify the priority of collective identity within the typically individualized genre of the autobiography. Likewise, the text makes calculated use of the letter “k,” to represent the pervasive presence of white supremacy in U.S. institutions. Finally, Shakur’s autobiography transcends the boundaries of genre, by interweaving poetry throughout the text.

Shakur’s use of poetry links the experiences depicted in her autobiography to her own political and social theories, as well as the tradition of black feminist poetry. In many ways, the poems present throughout her autobiography are an ode to the aesthetics and importance of black cultural nationalism, particularly the black arts movement. Whereas the prose represents the brutalities of U.S. racism experienced through her childhood and imprisonment, her poems are an almost prophetic narrative that project the possibility of black liberation. As such, in form and content, her poems synthesize the politics of black revolutionary nationalism and black cultural nationalism.
My analysis of Shakur’s autobiography, poetry and activism, illustrate the way black internationalist feminists are directly engaged with the issue of state power. In particular, Shakur provides a feminist intervention into black nationalist and internationalist politics by theorizing the dangers of state power through the frame of paternalism. Furthermore, she uses her writing to make important links between systemic mass incarceration and the ideologies of black consumerism and black liberalism. Her writing demonstrates how each of these operate as a technology of rule that maintains racial hierarchy and upholds the logic of the capitalist nation-state. Finally, in addition to analyzing her engagement with state power, I am also interested in how Shakur envisions black motherhood as a radical investment in black futurity.

From the Plantation to the State: Violence, Paternalism and Imprisonment

Analyzing the way Assata Shakur understands and criticizes U.S. imperial power is a fundamental part of framing her interventions into both black feminist and black nationalist – internationalist discourses. The fact that I describe U.S. power and hegemony as imperial, reflects the specific ways that Shakur theorizes the relationship between the U.S.’s pursuit of its global interests through militarized, economic, and cultural interventions, as well as its domestic practices of class warfare. Like other black internationalist feminists before her, Shakur utilizes black Marxist, feminist, and nationalist frameworks to confront the specifically racialized and gendered practices of U.S. hegemony.

One of the primary examples of how Shakur makes such criticisms is through her representation of state power in her autobiography. Unlike traditional
autobiographies, Shakur's narrative encompasses a number of genres. For example, alternating chapters narrate her childhood, as well as her activism, arrest, and imprisonment. These dual narratives serve as a Bildungsroman that culminates in her full-time commitment to political activism, as well as a neo-slave narrative that addresses issues of police brutality and mass incarceration.

Despite the multiple genres represented in the text, the opening scene frames both the political stakes and narrative focus of the text. Because this text is autobiographical, one may expect it to open with the protagonist’s birth. Instead, readers are confronted with a shocking and horrific scene involving police brutality and murder. The first line of the text, “[t]here were lights and sirens,” immerses the reader in a scene overwhelmed by police presence and conveys a sense of urgency and crisis (Shakur, Assata 3). Even more jarring, the second line, “Zayd was dead,” conveys the violent effects of police brutality through the lens of the protagonist’s personal loss (Shakur, Assata 3). This singular line solicits empathy and curiosity, leaving the reader wondering, who is Zayd and why was his life taken?

The rest of the opening scene unfolds with equally graphic imagery, depicting the physical and psychological trauma involved in an event that informs the rest of the text. Shakur describes her own inhumane treatment and the violent way she is criminalized and interrogated, despite the fact that she was barely clinging to life. By opening with this scene, the text sets the stage for Shakur’s autobiographical explanation of the circumstances and material conditions that inform her theory and praxis as a black revolutionary feminist. Furthermore, because what is represented in this scene is not exceptional, but rather part of the regular practice of policing black and brown people, it connects the protagonist and her autobiographical experiences
to the rest of her community. Thus, Shakur grounds her work in a tangible communal experience, rather than an individual one.

In addition to framing her autobiography in terms of collective experience, this scene also situates her critique of U.S. power as one distinctly focused on racialized state violence, practiced in this case by the police. The topic of state violence is addressed repeatedly in the text through Shakur’s recollections of her various trials and imprisonment. As a black revolutionary figure, Shakur’s autobiographical account of her time in prison represents a key feminist intervention into a predominantly male tradition. From Malcolm X to George Jackson to Mumia Abu-Jamal, the discourse surrounding black radical imprisonment is overwhelmingly masculine. As a self-described twentieth-century escaped slave, Shakur not only intervenes into this discourse, but also challenges its traditional trajectory towards mainstream reconciliation. As Joy James points out in her analysis of Shakur’s life and activism, “[w]hile Angela Davis’s 1972 acquittal proves to some liberals that the ‘system’ works (and, conversely, for some conservatives, that it is dangerously flawed), Assata Shakur’s political life reworks the neo-slave narrative to invert its deradicalizing tendencies with the testimony of an unreconstructed... unrepentant insurrectionist and ‘slave’ fugitive” (Shadowboxing 144).

Unlike Davis, Shakur was not exonerated by the society she challenged. In fact, she vehemently refused to seek any such exoneration. Rather, from beginning to end, her account of her trial assumes that no such outcome is possible within a racist, sexist and classist political system. Additionally, Shakur’s continued presence as a black radical figure thwarts any attempt to appropriate her story. From the moment of her arrest until now, Shakur’s writing and speeches have actively opposed the dominant rewriting of radical narratives as repentant.
All of these factors make Shakur’s analysis of the prison system significant in a number of ways. First, as a black feminist, Shakur discusses the specific, gendered conditions of black women’s imprisonment. This analysis is made clear in one of her more recent writings, titled “Women in Prison: How It Is With Us.” This particular piece represents a significant intervention into the discourse surrounding race and incarceration, because it emphasizes the specific experiences of black women, while also situating these experiences within the wider framework of mass incarceration and recognizing the disproportionate way in which it targets black men. One of the key issues that Shakur addresses is the lack of political development among imprisoned women of color. She laments that a “striking difference between women and men prisoners at Riker’s Island is the absence of revolutionary rhetoric among the women” (Shakur, In Her Own Words 60-61). In contrast to male prisons, there is a clear lack of study groups and political solidarity among the women. This seemingly simple observation represents an attempt to utilize the political power of Shakur’s story to solicit the same sense of political identity and solidarity amongst imprisoned women of color seen in many of their male counterparts. From The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), to Soul on Ice (1968) and Soledad Brother (1970), the political identities constructed around imprisoned black radical men would have been well known by Shakur. Positioning herself much in the same way, Shakur uses her story as an attempt to create a similar community of radical women political prisoners.

One of the ways Shakur accomplishes this task is by analyzing the gendered nature of black women’s criminalization. Speaking about her first experiences at Riker’s, Shakur puzzles over how women from different backgrounds, accused of different crimes, end up imprisoned in the same space. The only common factor among the women she meets is the fact that they are black or brown and mostly poor.
As she reflects on this phenomena, Shakur states, “[t]here are no criminals here at Riker’s Island Correctional Institution for Women...only victims. Most of the women (over 95%) are black and Puerto Rican. Many were abused children. Most have been abused by men and all have been abused by ‘the system’” (Shakur, *In Her Own Words* 55). Similarly, in her autobiography she observes that “many are charged as accessories to crimes committed by men... [they] see stealing or hustling as necessary for the survival of themselves or their children” (Shakur, *Assata* 95-96).

Shakur’s observations reveal an important difference between imprisoned men of color and imprisoned women of color. The women’s imprisonment is often defined by their relationship to men. Following Shakur, the problem with such a definition is that it negates the women’s agency and defines them as male accessories rather than subjects with the potential for political consciousness. Like many imprisoned men of color, Shakur observes that these women were mostly caught by a system that criminalizes any attempt to circumvent or “hustle” a way out of their oppression. Yet, these women are also faced with forms of gendered violence. By using intersectionality, Shakur theorizes that overlapping matrices of domination produce the social conditions that funnel poor women of color into the prison system, much in the same way it does men of color. However, she also illustrates the dangerous effects of gendering imprisoned black women’s actions as dependent upon a male counterpart. If women of color are understood in terms of their relationship to black men, then the potential to construct a political consciousness around their imprisonment is minimized. Furthermore, framing these women’s imprisonment primarily in terms of romantic relationships, negates the socio-economic conditions that facilitate their disproportionate imprisonment. By deconstructing the myth that women of color are nothing more criminal accessories, Shakur encourages a black
feminist formation of prison activism, starting with her own autobiographical example.

Equally of interest, and perhaps most pertinent to my reading of Shakur’s autobiography as a black internationalist feminist text, is her attention to penal paternalism as a form of state generated oppression. In her recounting of her time at Riker’s, Shakur theorizes that the imprisoned women are not only subject to cultural and institutional domination, but also psychological and ideological rule. This point is illustrated as she describes the way that everything, from the prison decor to the guards, reinforces a sense of fated belonging and benevolence among the imprisoned women. She describes how the bright doors at Rikers, painted with “optimistic colors,” the gym, cafeteria and other facilities give “the impression, when first coming to Riker’s Island that the architects conceived of it as a prison modeled after a juvenile center” (Shakur, In Her Own Words 56).

This impression is confirmed by the way the guards interact with the women. Whereas the guards call the inmates by their first names, the women are required to use titles like “Officer” or “Miss”. Some are even addressed by nicknames, like “Aunt Louise”. These guards interact with the women in a motherly fashion, constantly telling them to “act like ladies” or “good girls” and “behave”. This patronizing behavior even extends to threats of “spanking” the women. “Frequently, when a woman returns to Riker’s she will make the rounds, gleefully embracing her favorite guard: the prodigal daughter returns” (Shakur, In Her Own Words 57). The combination of “juvenile” decor, top-down, pseudo-familial relationships, and parental punishment represent the various ways that paternalism manifests itself as an ideological component of the prison industrial complex. I specifically use the term paternalism here because, while the guards exercising power are female, they do so in
the name of a masculine state power. In this way, the state acts as the patriarch, while the female guards are operating under their own paternalist constraints.

The connections between racial and class hierarchies and this benevolently disguised paternalism are not lost on Shakur. She explains:

beneath that motherly veneer, the reality of guard life is ever present. Most of the guards are black, usually from the working class, upward bound, civil service oriented backgrounds. They identify with the middle class, have middle class values and are extremely materialistic...To them, the women in prison are ‘losers’ who don’t have enough sense to stay out of jail. (Shakur, In Her Own Words 57)

The counterpart to the paternalism described earlier, is an affirmation that certain women of color, such as the guards, can “pick themselves up by their bootstraps” if only they work hard enough. Thus, the power differential between the guards, who are mostly women of color, and the women of color they police simultaneously reinforces racial hierarchy and the belief in meritocracy.

Finally, another means by which the system of mass incarceration is maintained, according to Shakur, is through “escapist culture.” Drugs, both legal and illegal, prison love affairs, television, games all serve as “pleasant distractions” from the women’s current situation. This escapist culture is dangerous because it prevents the women from gaining legal expertise, or pursuing any means of fighting their imprisonment. Furthermore, the guards exercise psychological power by constantly reminding the women of how good they have it, likening Riker’s to “a country club” in contrast to other prisons. The effect of these statements is an internalized belief in the women’s inferiority and dependence on their “benevolent” caretakers. By indoctrinating and convincing the women that they cannot survive on their own outside of prison, or that they are somehow “getting over” by living inside these prisons, the guards construct a false sense of belonging which correlates to dominant
forms of racialization (Shakur, *In Her Own Words* 56). Shakur’s observations illustrate how these psychological practices of dominance, compounded with the lack of economic and political opportunity available to these women, represent the large-scale operation of mass incarceration. By operating on these various levels of domination, structural, cultural, ideological and psychological, the system of mass incarceration ensures its own growth and perpetuity. According to Shakur, nearly twenty five years after her arrest, the circumstances of black imprisonment have worsened. Mass incarceration serves two main purposes, to “neutralize and contain huge segments of potentially rebellious sectors of the population” and to “sustain a system of super-exploitation, where mainly black and Latino captives are imprisoned in white, rural overseer communities” (Shakur, *In Her Own Words* 90).

This last comment about “white, rural overseer communities” is not merely a literal reference to the mostly white figures who patrol the prisons. It is also a means of signaling the continuity between slavery and mass incarceration. Shakur’s observation that “[p]risons are profitable business...[and] a way of legally perpetuating slavery” is especially significant given the way scholars like Michel Foucault discuss contemporary state policing and imprisonment (Shakur, *Assata* 65). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that contemporary Western “mechanisms of power,” such as policing and imprisonment, are used to govern “abnormal individuals” (199-200). Ironically, his body politic analysis of contemporary state policing power fails to address the specificity of the body. As Joy James points out in *Resisting State Violence*, Foucault’s analysis erases racial and sexual violence by universalizing the body of the white, Western male. Moreover, by focusing on nonconformity as an action, Foucault overlooks the way specific bodies have historically been racialized and gendered as nonconforming. As James puts it, “[i]n
racialized societies such as the United States, the plague of criminality, deviancy, immorality, and corruption is embodied in the black because both sexual and social pathology are branded by skin color (as well as by gender and sexual orientation” (Resisting State Violence 26). As both history and recent events have made clear, black bodies are expected to act differently under police gaze than their white counterparts. Furthermore, the consequences of nonconformity for black people is almost always a matter of life and death. Here, I am speaking not only of physical death, but also of civil and social death. This last point is one Shakur addresses in her autobiography, not only by representing the ways her life was physically threatened, but also the after effects of experiencing social death. For example, after escaping prison, Shakur describes herself as one who is becoming undead, rather than one who is returning to life. Shakur narrates:

I submerged myself in patterns and textures, sucking in smells and sounds as if each day was my last. I felt like a voyeur...Suddenly, I was flooded with the horrors of prison and every disgusting experience that somehow I had been able to minimize while inside. I had developed the ability to be patient, calculating, and completely self-controlled. For the most part, I had been incapable of crying. I felt rigid, as though chunks of steel and concrete had worked themselves into my body. I was cold. I strained to touch my softness. I was afraid prison had made me ugly. (Shakur, Assata 266)

“Cold,” “rigid,” and unable to cry, Shakur finds herself desperately “sucking in” all of the life that surrounds her. The language and imagery used in this passage draw the reader’s attention to the drastic effects of the prison system on one’s ability to live. Through this description, Shakur suggests that the very process of being subjected to social death lingers far beyond the confines of the prison, making it one of the most dangerous practices of state violence.

The failure to address the racial specificity of Western criminality, especially in the U.S., can be explained in part by a disregard for the significance of the Thirteenth
Amendment to contemporary practices of policing and imprisonment. The mass incarceration of black Americans as a source of labor can be traced back to the 1860s. In fact, it is precisely the era of so-called emancipation that resulted in a dramatic increase of racialized incarcerations, mostly for the purpose of supplementing free labor that was made illegal by the Thirteenth Amendment. At the same moment that slaves were freed from antebellum slavery, they were also condemned to slavery under state power. In stating that slavery was illegal, “except as a punishment for crime,” the Thirteenth Amendment effectively transferred official slaveholding power from wealthy white plantation owners to the state. Through mechanisms like the Black Codes and Pig laws, black life itself was criminalized. The result was that the prison system became the de jure practice of slavery after 1865.

The paradox of the Thirteenth Amendment reflects the way mass incarceration operates as a form of neo-slavery that not only continues a legacy of white supremacist rule, but also fulfills the economic dependency on forced labor. However, in addition to understanding mass incarceration as a continuation of slavery, scholars like Angela Davis, Joy James, and Dennis Childs have argued that slavery itself must be understood as one of the earliest forms of modern imprisonment. The implications of this analysis are profound. First, these scholars suggest that imprisonment has always been, and continues to be, the primary technology of rule applied to black people in America. Second, their work suggests that just as black bodies were exploited for the advancement of fields like medicine, agriculture, etc., their exploitation has been a major component in the development of modern systems of rule. This analysis explains, at least in part, the connections between plantation and penal forms of governance. Joy James names some of these shared practices, which include “sexual terror and domination, beatings,
regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, healthcare, and housing, forced migration, isolation in “lockdown” for punishment and control, denial of birth family and kin” (New Abolitionists xxiii). What these shared practices illustrate is that the tools of so-called modern punishment and policing are, in fact, centuries-old practices that have been perfected through their continued application against black Americans.

What is particularly interesting about the way Shakur addresses this issue, is her focus on paternalism. The forced, top-down familial relationships between guards and inmates, their so-called benevolence, and the encouragement of escapist culture, can all be understood as a continued practice of paternalism. Where plantation paternalism once perpetuated the myth of black inferiority and dependence upon white, male power, state paternalism has now taken its place. Instead of propagating the image of a benevolent white, male master, state paternalism espouses the myth of a representative government, capable and willing to address the concerns of poor black people. By linking state paternalism to penal paternalism, Shakur highlights the connections between these ideologies and the practice of racialized and gendered state violence.

The Ideological Violence of Paternalism

The connections Shakur makes between plantation paternalism and penal paternalism lend themselves to a greater understanding of how integral paternalism is to U.S. power and hegemony. The practice of state paternalism beyond the physical boundaries of the prison is illustrated in Shakur’s autobiography by the proclamation that “[t]he only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just
like the guards patrol here. I don’t have the faintest idea how it feels to be free” (Shakur, *Assata* 60). This comment made to Assata by a fellow inmate reflects a critical awareness of how policing is a practice of control that operates on psychological, cultural and ideological levels, as well as physical and institutional ones.

Anthony Bogue’s concept of American society as an “empire of liberty” is particularly useful for understanding the way state paternalism relates to concepts of civil inclusion, ideological compliance and materialist desire. Coined by Edmund Burke and later employed by Thomas Jefferson, empire of liberty is a term for the unique form of U.S. imperialism that employs a technology of rule, or governmentality, that necessitates the creation of new subjectivities. It does this through specific “thoughts and practices that define and create our human world as well as modes of belonging to a society” (Bogues 16). Moving beyond an analysis of empire that concentrates on physical force and obligation, Bogues points to the desires that power seeks to touch and the subjects it seeks to create around those desires.

Bogues’ discussion of belonging is particularly important when we consider the historic relationship between black and brown populations and governing U.S. powers. The concept of American Exceptionalism has served to reinforce the strength of U.S. imperialism by fomenting a desire among its colonial subjects to fit into the U.S. master narrative. Historically, American Exceptionalism has been used to convert African Americans into compliant subjects. For example, the legal recognition of African Americans as U.S. citizens worked within the discourse of American Exceptionalism by manipulating a desire to share in the U.S.’s promise of liberty, a desire that was created and nurtured by lack and exclusion.
Like Bogues, Shakur uses her autobiography to discuss the U.S. as an empire that exercises its power over black and Third World peoples living inside and outside its borders. Writing during the aftermath of World War II and within the context of the U.S.'s quest for the exclusive position of singular world power, Shakur's analysis of the way U.S. governmentality operates with regard to black Americans signals towards the relationship between black liberalism, black consumerism and state paternalism. Whereas the “innocent amusements” and so-called privilege held by certain slaves served as support for the mythological benevolence of slavery, so too does the image of the black liberal consumer support narratives of state benevolence and meritocracy. However, as Shakur’s autobiography illustrates, in reality black liberalism and consumerism function as a means of policing the black community by manufacturing desires that encourage compliance with Western capitalist hegemony.

Within her autobiography, Shakur represents the dangers of black consumerism and black liberalism through her encounters with her grandparents, as well as a character called Mr. Wonderful. The latter character appears early on in the autobiography as an example of the contrast between Assata’s developing radical consciousness and that of her friends and acquaintances. This disparity is exemplified in one particular scene where, reflecting on a passage from a James Baldwin novel, Assata is unable to reconcile the materialist ambitions of her friends with the book’s imagery of the ghetto. In contrast to her friend’s consumerism, “[a]nghished voices scream and moan from the pages. Compressed ghettos threaten to explode. Poverty and fire and brimstone boil over into a deadly stew, but the ‘beautiful’ people refuse to let me read in peace” (Shakur, Assata 135).

The contrast between this apocalyptic world, which demands immediate attention and action, and the vanity and ignorant bliss of the “beautiful people”
around her is not one altogether unfamiliar to readers today. Take, for instances, one of the “beautiful people”, Mr. Wonderful. Shakur describes Mr. Wonderful as “kool from his reel-to-reel taping to his color TV...He drinks Remy Martin cognac and Harvey’s Bristol Cream, and uses a cologne I can’t pronounce” (Shakur, Assata 135). With the numerous name brands and materialistic associations, Mr. Wonderful not only represents the desirable capitalistic consumer, but, as a black man, his status is racialized as the epitome of what is “cool”.

The juxtaposition of Mr. Wonderful’s description with Baldwin’s apocalyptic description of black and working-class oppression, reinforces the idea that this “coolness” also functions as a figurative sedative that keeps the people, in this case black people, compliant. This analysis fits all too well into a contemporary discussion of black culture as “cool” and the subsequent consequences of that culture being hyper-capitalist. Take, for example, recent debates over the appropriation of “twerking,” or the hyper-capitalist rhetoric of rappers like Jay-Z who have made a living from selling what is “cool” to a largely white, middle-class public.

The most interesting characteristic about Mr. Wonderful’s description, however, is not his consumerist lifestyle, but the fact that Shakur uses the word “kool” with a “k”. Throughout Shakur’s Autobiography, “k” exists as signifier for intricate structural and ideological relationship between white supremacy, capitalism and racism. This use of “k” is typically applied to U.S. institutions, such as the court system or police forces, but Shakur also uses the signifier to describe Mr. Wonderful. Identifying Mr. Wonderful’s version of “coolness” with U.S. imperialism suggests that this highly materialistic, highly racialized version of coolness does nothing more than reinforce the subordinate position of black people. For this reason, Assata concludes, “Me and James Baldwin are communicating. His fiction is more real than this reality”
In light of these and present day realities, Shakur’s analysis requires a reconceptualization of the commodification of blackness as “kool,” rather than “cool.”

Within the Capital-Nation-State triad, characters like Mr. Wonderful represent the way imperial desire works among the black community. The way desire operates as a form of imperial governmentality is best described by Franz Fanon when he states:

The gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist’s sector is a look of lust, a look of envy. Dreams of possession. Every type of possession...The colonized man is an envious man. The colonist is aware of it as he catches the furtive glance, and constantly on his guard, realizes bitterly that: “They want to take our place.” And it’s true there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the pace of the colonist. (5)

Fanon’s observations are significant in at least two ways. First, the colonial subject’s envy can be understood as evidence of a desire to either be like, or replace the colonizer. The first case demonstrates the successful establishment of an inferiority complex. The second demonstrates a growing desire to overthrow and replace the colonizer, to possess all that the colonizer possesses. This desire for possession brings us to the second significance. Fanon contextualizes desire by explaining the disparate material conditions of the colonized, thus he cites structural inequality as the source of colonial envy, providing a critical link between psychoanalysis and Marxist materialism.

The implications of Fanon’s analysis are numerous. However, I will focus here on its insights into black liberal desire. Following Fanon, the reproduction of capitalist desire among members of the black community inherently upholds and perpetuates the structures of dominance that maintain racial hierarchy. This
particular desire, as well as the cyclical links between nation, state and capitalism, is 
the foundation of contemporary black liberalism.

This understanding of black liberalism is personified in the text by Assata’s grandparents. In the chapters that narrate the protagonist’s childhood, her grandparents represent members of the black community who condemn racism without necessarily condemning the structures that uphold it. This particular view plays out in the text with regard to Assata’s education. Despite the fact that her grandparents contest the moral validity of segregation, they continually instruct Assata to demonstrate her equality via social mobility and education. Shakur recounts:

All of my family tried to instill in me a sense of personal dignity, but my grandmother and my grandfather were really fanatic about it....when it came to dealing with white people in the segregated South, my grandmother would tell me, menacingly, “Don't you respect nobody that don’t respect you, you hear me?” “Don't you let nobody mistreat you, you hear?” ...But a lot of times, for my grandparents, pride and dignity were hooked up to things like position and money. (Shakur, Assata 19)

The passage above demonstrates that Shakur’s grandparents are aware of their racial oppression, yet they relegate it to a strictly moral sphere (Shakur, Assata 19-20). Instead of challenging the structures responsible for subjugation, her grandparents emphasize the need to maintain personal dignity and seek out “position and money”. This approach to confronting racism is reflective of black liberalism because it de-contextualizes race to the point of focusing on individual action and merit.

In contrast, even as a youth, Assata recognizes the fallacies inherent to black liberalism, specifically that education serves as an equalizer among the races. Within the text, a young Assata complicates her grandparents’ views by analyzing the effects of educational systems that rely on Eurocentric epistemologies. She explains:
A lot of people don’t know how many ways racism can manifest itself and in how many ways people fight against it. When I think of how racist, how Eurocentric our so-called education in amerika is, it staggers my mind. And when I think back to some of those kids who were labeled ‘troublemakers’ and ‘problem students,’ I realize that many of them were unsung heroes who fought to maintain some sense of dignity and self-worth. (Shakur, Assata 136)

In the passage above, students who challenge the Eurocentric epistemology are labeled “trouble makers” and “problem students”. Assata explains their refusal to fall in as “good students” an act of non-compliance. The relationship presented illustrates on a micro level the way compliance and criminality operate in relation to one another, specifically with regard to the way black people are cast as well-behaved citizens or criminal troublemakers.

Shakur’s narrative not only reveals the nature of black liberalism, but also its role as a mechanism of government, as well as its connections to the policing and imprisonment of black Americans. In fact, Shakur suggests that it is precisely the black youth who “have been inculcated with and are reproducing values of this decadent capitalist system” who are being imprisoned for pursuing materialism through extralegal means (Shakur, In Her Own Words 91). She laments that “[m]any of us watch helplessly as our children imitate and internalize the greedy, ostentatious, culture of conspicuous consumption, practiced by those who oppress us” (Shakur, In Her Own Words 91).

It is significant that Shakur’s articulation of state power is not only focused on its practices of white supremacy or patriarchy, but that she also addresses a specifically racialized practice of paternalism. The connections between U.S. state paternalism and plantation paternalism, exemplified by the transfer of slaveholding power to the state under the Thirteenth Amendment, illustrate that this practice has both economic as well as ideological implications. Furthermore, the seeming inability
to create a society in which black people are no longer the primary group bound by
prisons and poverty reflects the contradictions of a modern world built upon the
commodification of black human beings. Shakur is obviously not the first, nor the
only, person to use the concept of state paternalism. However, the fact that she
focuses on this aspect of state power as the central component of her anti-imperialist
critique represents a critical intervention into black nationalist, internationalist, and
feminist discourses. Her critique of racialized state paternalism functions as a
theoretical frame for linking the U.S.’s practices of racial, gender, class exploitation
together. Additionally, Shakur’s focus on state paternalism illustrates that the
widespread criminalization of black people cannot be understood as separate from the
propagation of ideologies like black liberalism and black consumerism. Rather, both
practices represent elements of an overall attempt to control and police black
populations physically, economically and ideologically.

“The Streets Are a Prison” But “We Are a Conspiracy”: Revolutionary
Black Motherhood

If, as Shakur suggests, “the streets are a prison” where black Americans are
subject to a paternalistic and life threatening policing power, then what possibilities
of resistance exist? As a black feminist and revolutionary nationalist, Shakur does not
leave this question unanswered. Rather, she suggests that black motherhood is one
such possibility. This topic is addressed specifically in Shakur’s autobiography as she
narrates the circumstances of her own pregnancy. Within the text, Assata does not
immediately embrace the concept of black motherhood. Rather, she articulates her
concerns about giving birth while she is literally and politically imprisoned.
As she begins a romantic relationship with fellow Black Liberation Army member and co-defendant Kamau, Assata contemplates the consequences of entering a romantic relationship that may possibly result in her becoming pregnant. Unlike Shakur, Kamau believes that “struggling is the only guarantee our children will ever have for a future,” yet for him this is not reason enough to avoid having children (Shakur, Assata 92). As Assata considers Kamau’s words, she reflects:

My mind was screaming...I thought about what Simba had said about our children being our hope for the future. I had never wanted children...i had always said that the world was too horrible to bring another human being into. And a Black child. We see our children frustrated at best. Noses pressed against windows, looking in. And, at worst, we see them die from drugs or oppression, shot down by police, or wasted away in jail...“I’m a revolutionary,” i had said. “I don’t have time to sit at home and make no babies.” (Shakur, Assata 92-93)

Her resistance to Kamau is significant in framing the way the text theorizes black reproduction. Here, her personal desire is in opposition to the normative practice of family building. The “frustrated” lives that await black children are enough to prevent her from becoming a mother for personal reasons. Yet, when Kamau responds to her thoughts by asking, “[d]o you think that you’re a machine?...Do you think you were put on this earth to fight and nothing else?” She concludes, “I am about life...I’m gonna live as hard as i can and as full as i can until i die. And i’m not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my own mind, before they are even born. I’m going to live and i’m going to love...and, if a child comes from that union, i’m going to rejoice. Because our children are our futures and i believe in the future and the rightness of our struggle” (Shakur, Assata 93).

The way Shakur frames the narrative of her pregnancy provides important theoretical insights into the political stakes of black motherhood, as well as a potential understanding of black motherhood as a radical investment in black futurity. Black
feminists and queer scholars have criticized attempts to frame motherhood as revolutionary or counter-hegemonic by arguing that such framing is too heteronormative. Shakur’s autobiography provides an important counter to this discourse. The conditions of her motherhood, specifically her imprisonment and separation from her child, are not exceptional. Both through aesthetics and form, Shakur signals the fact that such circumstances correspond to a collective experience. Here, the stylistic choice of using a lowercase “i” reminds the reader that this narrative is not singular. Likewise, conversations with other imprisoned women demonstrate that these grotesque circumstances are actually routine practices within the penal system. Furthermore, as the conversation between Assata and Kamau illustrates, these conditions are not unique to the penal system. Instead, they correspond to the historical practice of natal alienation that has been a fundamental element of anti-black racism since at least the seventeenth century.

In contrast to Shakur, it is precisely because of these repressive conditions that Assata’s friend, Simba, believes that black motherhood is important. Discussing her own pregnancy, Simba, who is also imprisoned at Rikers, suggests that giving birth is an act of resistance. She tells Assata, “[t]hese people can lock us up, but they can’t stop life, just like they can’t stop freedom. This baby was meant to be born, to carry on. They murdered Homey, and so this baby, like all our children, is going to be our hope for the future” (Shakur, Assata 88).

Simba’s articulation of the specific structures that oppose black reproduction and livelihood act as an important reminder that there are unique political stakes involved in black reproduction. From historical practices of natal alienation, to early modern eugenics, black women’s motherhood has been systematically thwarted. Likewise, the contemporary murder of black youth at the hands of police represents
yet another instance in which the state participates in black genocide. In light of these practices, black women’s reproduction cannot merely be reduced to an affirmation of heteronormative family structures. Instead, as the character Simba suggests, black motherhood is a revolutionary investment in black futurity and familial bonds that stands in opposition to centuries of life threatening anti-black practices.

Shakur fleshes out the concept of black motherhood as a revolutionary act by theorizing that its power comes from an affirmation of a positive black futurity that can and will one day exist. In this way the act of black reproduction becomes a prophetic investment in black futurity. This idea is theorized specifically through two poems. The first is titled “Love” and follows the narrative of Shakur’s daughter’s conception:

Love

Love is contraband in Hell,  
cause love is an acid  
that eats away at the bars.

But you, me, and tomorrow  
hold hands and make vows  
that struggle will multiply.

That hacksaw has two blades.  
That shotgun has two barrels.

We are pregnant with freedom.  
We are a conspiracy. (Shakur, Assata 130)

This short poem challenges conventional understandings of motherhood by positing the potential for black motherhood to serve as a subversive act of resistance. As Shakur states in “To My People,” rather than contribute to dominant ideologies concerning heteronormative family structures, black reproduction contributes to the community of potential revolutionaries and political dissidents. In this way, the
collective we becomes “a conspiracy” to overthrow the structures that have historically sought to thwart black existence within white civil spaces.

Shakur’s representation of motherhood is in no way normative. As Joy James points out, Shakur manages to live most of her life as an activist without being defined by her heterosexual relationships (“Framing the Panther” 140). Furthermore, it is not until after she is incarcerated, and labeled a revolutionary threat, that Shakur conceives and gives birth to a daughter. Even after her daughter is taken away from her, Shakur’s *Autobiography* positions her existence as a radical contrast to the deathly environment of incarceration. Shakur articulates as much in her poem “Leftovers—What is Left” (Shakur, *Assata* 146-147). The poem attempts to reconcile the painful psychological trauma of having her child taken away with Assata’s earlier commitment to create black life as a revolutionary act. This pain is reflected throughout the majority of the poem as each stanza ends with the repeated question, “what is left?”

```
After the bars and the gates
and the degradation,
What is left?

....

I mean, after the chains that get entangled
in the grey of one’s matter
After the bars that get stuck
in the hearts of men and women,
What is left?

After the tears and disappointments,
After the lonely isolation,
After the cut wrist and the heavy noose,
What is left?

In the first four stanzas of the poem, the speaker narrates the trauma of imprisonment. In addition to describing the physical nature of imprisonment, the
speaker discusses the psychological means through which “one's grey matter” is policed and controlled. These practices go beyond the physical, inflicting emotional and psychological violence. This reality is further emphasized when the speaker brings up “lonely isolation,” “cut wrist[s],” and the “heavy noose.” This imagery alludes to the loneliness, depression and suicide that such psychological violence often produces. Furthermore, it illustrates one of many links between civil, social and physical death.

Further along in the poem, in the eighth stanza, the poem addresses the effects of living death:

Like, after you know that god
can’t be trusted,
After you know that the shrink
is a pusher,
that the word is a whip
and the badge is a bullet,
What is left?

After you know that the dead
are still walking,
After you realize that silence
is talking,
that outside and inside
are just an illusion,
What is left?

Here, when the speaker states that the “dead are still walking” and “the silence is talking,” she suggests that despite going through processes of civil and social death, those who are imprisoned are still capable of exercising agency. In this way, she challenges the death that is being forced upon her. Likewise, the speaker continues:

... The foot on my neck is part
of a body.
The song that i sing is part
of an echo.
What is left?
I mean, like, love is specific.
Is my mind a machine gun?
Is my heart a hacksaw?
Can i make freedom real? Yeah!
What is left? (Shakur, Assata 146-147)

In this final stanza, the repetition of the word “part,” as well as its placement at the end of the line signals to power of social systems and collective politics. While the “foot” on her neck that is “part of a body” serves as a metaphor for the way the police, judges and guards are part of the larger, systematic practice of state violence, she herself is also one part of a larger whole. She is a “song” that is “part of an echo,” a movement of resistance that cannot be unheard. Likewise, the declaration that “love is specific” corresponds to Shakur’s understanding of black love and relationships as specifically revolutionary. Given the history of practices like natal alienations, forced sterilization, and economic oppression, which were used to thwart black survival and reproduction, Shakur theorizes that black love is a significant part of revolutionary praxis.

In the final lines, the poem ends with the lines “Love is my sword/and truth is my compass/What is left?” (Shakur, Assata 147) In the last time, the repeated question “what is left” is made rhetorical and the speaker answers that “love” and “truth” are the only things that can be left. However cliché this may appear, the act of proclaiming her right to love and truth is radical. To love and to seek truth are acts that are attributed to civil and social life. Thus, in staking her right to them, she challenges the state’s power to impose such a death upon her.
Assata Shakur in the Media: Terrorist, Victim or Black Feminist Revolutionary?

Throughout her life Shakur has remained highly aware of the way the media has been used as a tool against her. In her autobiography, Shakur narrates the way Robert Daley, the former director of publicity and public relations for the New York Police Department, calls her the “mother hen” of the BLA. Likewise, her media image is continually referenced by Assata and others within the text as a "bigger, blacker, and uglier" version of the activist (Shakur, Assata 87). In a recent statement she pleads for progressive and black media outlets to diverge from this tendency and participate in the production of counter-hegemonic narratives, including her own (Shakur, In Her Own Words 75).

In the forty years that have passed since Shakur’s arrest, her depiction in the U.S. media has changed very little. Assata Shakur’s contemporary representation in the media is significant because it provides insight as to why her politics and activism are regularly oversimplified and relegated to the past. Both conservative and progressive media further such narratives by either depicting her as a violent caricature of black nationalist activists, or the female victim of past-racial prejudice. In both cases, these representations downplay the agency, significance and contemporary relevance of Shakur’s life and work.

Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of such representations is the conservative fueled controversy surrounding hip hop artist Common’s performance at the White House. In 2011, the Chicago born performer became the center of conservative harassment when he was invited to participate in a White House poetry event. The source of the controversy was Common’s authorship of “Song for Assata” in 2000. Although the song itself had little to do with the actual White House
performance, its mere existence served as the rationale behind the artist being labeled as “misogynist,” “a thug,” and “offensive to the American people” (Hannity).

A close examination of the language used by conservative media personalities like Karl Rove and Bill O’Reilly signals to the larger issue at the center of the conflict. The explicit attempt to not only racialize Common as a violent, urban thug, but, by extension, to discredit the Obama Administration for extending an invitation to the artist, illustrates the perceived threat that “Song for Assata” poses as a counter-narrative. The song itself was condemned by conservatives as “vitriolic nonsense” (Tapper). However, the lyrics themselves serve mostly as a counter-narrative to the official account of events. Situating her within the black radical tradition, Common characterizes Shakur as a state target and contests the official story of her case:

```
Handcuffed tight to the bed, through her skin it bit
Put guns to her head, every word she got hit
“How shot the trooper?” they asked her...
Hurt mixed wit anger-survival was a reflex...
Assata had been convicted of a murder she couldn’a done
Medical evidence shown she couldn’a shot the gun
```

Common’s lyrics tell of how coercion and torture were used to in an attempt to make Shakur comply with the troopers’ version of events. In addition to the above, the song also addresses the brutality of state violence within the song:

```
There were lights and sirens, gunshots firin
Cover your eyes as I describe a scene so violent
Seemed like a bad dream, she laid in a blood puddle...
Shot twice wit her hands up
Police questioned but shot before she answered...
Scandalous the police were as they kicked and beat her...
Cause federal and state was built for a Black fate
Her emptiness was filled with beatings and court dates (Common).
```

The symbolism of sirens and gunshots extends far beyond the topic of police brutality. By connecting this scene with the “federal and state,” Common explores the
systematic way in which the police and prison systems work towards systematic state violence and censorship.

Overall, the song’s narrative challenges the authority of the state, as well as private media outlets, by deconstructing the version of events that maintains Shakur’s categorization as a “domestic terrorist.” In addition, the song’s narrative confirms Shakur’s own statements that the “FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public’s perceptions of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through ‘friendly’ news contacts” (Shakur, *In Her Own Words* 21). In its opposition to racialized state violence, Common’s “Song for Assata” may indeed be perceived as “vitriolic.” This twenty-first century song represents not only an oppositional narrative of Shakur’s arrest and imprisonment, but also an attempt to tap into a black radical tradition that has been largely discredited and replaced by dominant narratives of racial progress.

Rather than debate the issues of police brutality, racial profiling and mass incarceration, conservative media personalities attempted to reshape the narrative as one about law, order and patriotism. In doing so, Common was attacked because he supposedly “openly sympathized with two convicted cop killers, including the notorious JoAnne Chesimard (Assata Shakur)” (O’Reilly). The conservative narrative in which Shakur is a “notorious” criminal is exemplified by O’Reilly’s accusation that “[t]his is a cop killer. This is a woman who gunned down, along with two other accomplices, a woman who is a member of the Black Liberation Army...and this guy thinks she’s great” (O’Reilly).

The media attack on Common was largely an occasion to reassert the myth that Shakur is a violent threat to American democracy. This became abundantly clear when New Jersey State Trooper Dave Jones entered the public debate about
Common’s White House performance by stating that Shakur was nothing more than “a domestic terrorist who wrapped her criminality and her abhorrent anti-social behavior in a cause to try and disguise her disgust for America in this make believe 1960’s radicalism” (Tapper). After this initial statement, Jones continued to vilify Shakur, stating that after she shot and killed a state trooper, she “kicked him in the head to the point that hours later after she was picked up, his brain was still part of the remnants on her shoe” (Tapper). This grotesque imagery largely served to discredit Shakur’s legacy and relevance as a black radical activist.

Throughout their attacks on Common and Shakur, the conservative media not only depicted Shakur as a terrorist, but also suggested that Common’s admiration and defense of her represent an inherent threat of violence that resides within any and every black political dissident. The perceived transgression at the center of this media controversy, a black American president inviting a black American performer who supports Shakur’s politics, reflects the larger threat Shakur represents. As Angela Davis argues, Shakur’s categorization as a so-called domestic terrorist has more to do with her anti-capitalist politics than any of her actual actions (Shakur, Assata ix). Furthermore, Shakur was arrested as a leader of the Black Liberation Army. As a result, her image as an icon is undoubtedly militarized. The significance of her transition from the BPP to the BLA lies in the nature of her participation. Whereas she acted as a subordinate member of the BPP, operating within the gendered spheres of domestic and family affairs, Shakur’s leadership in the BLA challenges traditional gender formations. As a specifically militarized organization, the BLA is inherently seen as masculine. Yet, it is Shakur, a woman, who becomes the target of state scrutiny during her arrest and trial. Despite the fact that she is describes as a “mother hen” by Robert Daley, the space she occupies as the face of BLA “terrorism”
represents an important transgression against dominant gender formation. Not only does Shakur constitute an anti-racist, anti-capitalist icon, but she also threatens to destabilize heteropatriarchal claims to power. Thus, rather than allow the complexity of Shakur’s politics and activism to take center stage, conservative media outlets have worked vigorously to maintain a monolithic depiction of Shakur as a violent domestic terrorist.

The perceived threat posed by Assata Shakur has been dealt with equally, albeit differently, by liberal media outlets. Most recently, CBS drama Madam Secretary took on Shakur’s narrative by focusing on the question of Shakur’s status under improving U.S.-Cuban relations. The show itself follows the political and personal life of Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord, who bears a great deal of resemblance to Hillary Clinton in both appearance and policy. The episode in question depicts a black radical activist from Chicago named Afeni Rahim, who was arrested as a member of the Black Action Army, but escaped courthouse jail and fled to Cuba. It also includes caricatures of Third World socialists, such as that of the Cuban Vice President who, referring to the embargo, asks the Secretary of State what it will take to "remove the American boot from the throat of the Cuban people" (“You Say You Want A Revolution”). Despite the change in name and location, and the gratuitous depictions of Third World revolutionaries, the allusion to Shakur and her exile in Cuba is abundantly clear.

The episode opens with Afeni Rahim’s arrest, and while it does leave the issue of who is at fault ambiguous, it also fails to depict the violence done to Rahim/Shakur. Furthermore, there is no mention of why Rahim and her companions were stopped, whether the explanation be general racial profiling or the specific profiling of black radicals. The audience does hear her telling her friends to play it cool and eventually
crying out upon realizing that her friend is dead. However, there is no image of Rahim/Shakur “being dragged by the feet across the pavement...[her] chest...on fire. [Her] blouse purple with blood” (Shakur, Assata 3). This omission is significant because it completely de-contextualizes the violent warfare waged against activists like Shakur. Interestingly, the incident is actually represented as the result of impetuous male actions, something that supports the show’s white feminist themes. Rather than framing the incident with regard to police brutality and profiling, the audience is shown the quick draw of the trooper, followed by a black male companion’s reach for the glove compartment, and the resulting deaths of both men. For the first third of the episode, this scene remains de-contextualized, as the audience is left to question the relationship between these events and U.S.-Cuban relations.

About one third of the way into the episode, after the main character has both successfully created and garnered support for a bill that will end the trade embargo against Cuba, the Secretary of State is informed that the final obstacle to the bill is the extradition of Afeni Rahim. When the Cuban Vice President refuses to hand Rahim over, another official happily takes the Secretary of State to a small paladar owned by Afeni Rahim, where she may ask the revolutionary to return to the U.S. voluntarily. Once there, the Secretary of State offers Rahim a deal where she would serve time in minimum security prison and get parole in 3 years. However, Rahim refuses and states that she and her companions were the ones attacked, evidence was planted, and that their arrest was part of a pattern of attack against black activists. This intervention is perhaps the one moment in the episode where Shakur’s narrative is validated. Interestingly, the Secretary’s black female press coordinator interjects that, unlike the 1970s, Rahim would never be treated the way she once was when she was
convicted by an all white jury. Once again, Rahim’s character provides an important counter when she retorts that although they may have poor internet in Cuba, she has heard about Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Ferguson and Charleston. She asks rhetorically, "was it any different" in those situations?

This scene is cut short when the camera quickly flashes to another scene, where the Secretary’s Chief of Staff is seen obtaining records of Rahim’s arrest, trial and imprisonment. Soon after, the audience is shown the Secretary’s press coordinator advising that Rahim wants "nothing more than a soapbox" and that if the Secretary reminds her of her role as a revolutionary, she will have no choice but to agree to return the United States.

When Rahim makes her second appearance, Secretary McCord triumphantly proclaims that she has COINTELPRO files proving that her legal defense team was wire tapped and that the files that proved she did not shoot the gun were suppressed. The Secretary then offers Rahim a new trial and puts the responsibility on Rahim to come back and change the unjust U.S. legal system as part of her revolutionary duty.

It is important to note that, in its depiction of Shakur as a small restaurant owner hiding in Cuba, the show fails to reflect the many statements and interviews she has given over the past forty years as part of her continued activism. Essentially, the Secretary of State and her black female press coordinator are credited with pushing Rahim to take up her revolutionary mantel in the U.S., this time in the service of U.S. liberalism. Of course, in this hollywood version of events, Rahim graciously agrees and returns for a new trial. Immediately after, the Secretary of State is shown making an inspiring speech where she announces the end of the trade embargo and the beginning of favorable U.S.-Cuban relations. She also praises the successful extension of the "promise of American ideals," symbolized by the raising of the U.S. flag in
Cuba, ideals such as "freedom from oppression, freedom of expression, and the hope of a bright future" ("You Say You Want A Revolution"). After this rousing proclamation, a multi-racial group of U.S. marines, originally stationed in Cuba before the revolution, salute the flag before it is successfully raised over the re-opened U.S. embassy.

The next and final scene with Afeni Rahim shows her being taken into custody, where she is conveniently allowed to make a statement to the public. She is pictured with "Black Lives Matter" and "Free Afeni" signs behind her. However, just as she is about to make her statement, the camera quickly cuts away to an image of the waving American flag. Without a doubt, the depiction of Shakur's story in Madam Secretary and its imagined euphoric ending constitute an attempt to co-opt her narrative and use it in the service of American liberalism and social progress. The unjust arrest and federal surveillance depicted in the show are juxtaposed with the promise of a fair retrial and a future free from racial oppression. Not only does the show attempt to reconcile Shakur's past politics with a contemporary narrative of progress, but it also credits any future activism to the ingenuity of a white, feminist Secretary of State and her black liberal press aid.

Although not the violent attacks of the right wing media, this depiction of Shakur equally represents the anxieties surrounding her revolutionary politics occupying space in the contemporary moment. On one hand the right wing media attacks and labels Shakur a domestic terrorist and threat to U.S. law and order. On the other, the liberal media, acutely aware of the improving relations between the U.S. and Cuba, is attempting to co-opt Shakur's story and turn it into one of American exceptionalism/support for U.S. liberal democracy, not unlike the way Angela Davis's case has been treated. Both media representations reflect the discomfort with
Shakur's presence as a revolutionary black feminist radical whose criticisms of U.S. white supremacy and heteropatriarchy undermine narratives of Western social progress.

Unfortunately, the academic treatment of Assata Shakur as a black feminist figure has largely failed to move beyond the pitfalls seen in her media representations. Even in scholarly texts that discuss Shakur, she is primarily referenced as a member of the Black Panther Party.\textsuperscript{14} However, as Shakur makes clear in her autobiography and other writing, political insights extend far beyond her participation in the BPP.

The failure to view Shakur outside of these bounds not only underestimates her significant contributions to the black feminist and black radical traditions, but also overlooks her critiques of how black revolutionary politics were practiced by organizations like the BPP. For example, Shakur’s autobiography narrates her criticism of elitist practices that have resulted in many black organizations becoming inaccessible to the public. Furthermore, they often reproduce heterosexist hierarchies. Initially, it was precisely because the BPP did not fall into this category that Shakur joined the party. In fact, her early reflections state:

\begin{quote}
Panther’s didn’t try to sound all intellectual, talking about the national bourgeoisie, the military industrial complex, the reactionary ruling class. They simply called a pig a pig. They didn’t refer to the repressive domestic army or the state repressive apparatus. They called the racist police pigs and racist dogs. One of the most important things the Party did was to make it clear who the enemy was: not the white people, but the capitalistic, imperialistic oppressors. They took Black liberation struggle out of a national context and put it in an international context. The Party supported revolutionary struggles and governments all over the world and insisted the U.S. get out of Africa, out of Asia, out of Latin America, and out of the ghetto too. (Shakur, \textit{Assata} 203)
\end{quote}

One of the most important elements of the BPP’s strategies was the ability to overcome the barriers that prevent social action and facilitate compliance. Earlier in the text, Shakur spends a great deal of time discussing the role of the master
narrative, the U.S. education system, and cultural structures that isolate the black community from social awareness. Each of these structures contribute to the compliance of black communities with their own subjugation. Rather than belittle people in the community or attempt to convert them with scholarly rhetoric, the BPP initially succeeded in communicating these realities in an accessible way. For all of her later issues with the party, Shakur highlights one of their greatest successes and suggests that it is a fundamental element to any black political movement. Rather than growing a political movement of oppressed masses that follow the leadership of a few select intellectuals, Shakur’s text suggests that the most successful movement is built upon a large intellectual public.

Nevertheless, Shakur’s own experiences with the BPP reveal that these earlier successes were not necessarily representative of the party’s overall practices. Although Shakur identifies with the political ideologies and strategies of the BPP, she struggles to join the party due to what she perceives as a flaw in their interpersonal relations. While in Oakland, she laments “the way spokesmen for the Party talked to people, that their attitude had often been arrogant, flippant, and disrespectful” (Shakur, Assata 204). Once she finally joins the party, Shakur has a similar conflict with one of the leaders. After mistakenly leaving some flyers out on her first day, Shakur is belittled and expelled by party leader Robert Bey. Rather than accept her expulsion, Shakur confronts Bey and is eventually reinstated in the party. Once again, she comments on the arrogance she encounters in the party. “I hate arrogance whether is white or purple or Black...The only great people i have met have been modest and humble. You can’t claim that you love people when you don’t respect them, and you can’t call for political unity unless you practice it in your relationships.
And that doesn’t happen out of nowhere. That’s something that has got to be put into practice everyday” (Shakur, Assata 218).

The theme of arrogance and internal hierarchy as a threat to black internationalism is one that is present throughout Shakur’s autobiography. For example, this theme recurs in her various encounters with white Marxists and the New Left, which can be read as a feminist commentary on the various facets of oppression that black women like Assata are forced to confront. In response, Shakur looks to the interpersonal as a remedy. This practice can be seen in the way Assata interacts with the children at the BPP breakfast programs. Whereas some “Panthers wanted them to learn the ten-point program and platform and others wanted to teach them Panther songs,” Assata “preferred talking to them, sitting down with them and exchanging ideas” (Shakur, Assata 220). While this scene may appear trivial, it represents an extreme divergence from the belief that only certain activities are political.

This theme continues as Shakur discusses the need for re-education in the BPP. Although, as she states, the “Party had some of the most politically conscious sisters and brothers as members...in some ways it failed to spread that consciousness to the cadre in general.” The result of this, was that “many Panthers fell into a roboton bag. They repeated slogans and phrases without understanding their complete meaning, often resulting in dogmatic and shortsighted practice” (Shakur, Assata 222). The imagery of a “roboton bag” serves as a poignant critique of the way political ideology without personalization fails to take root among the people.

In addition to theorizing about the practices of public intellectualism and activism, Shakur also negotiates the relationship between black nationalism and Third World internationalism. A prime example of how this plays out within her
autobiography is when an African leader working in the anti-colonial movement brings a calendar to the BPP office that Shakur is working in. However, the next day when Shakur returns to work the calendar, which is titled “International support for African liberation,” is gone. When she enquires about the missing calendar, the response she receives is startling. “The calendar said ‘international’ and we’re not internationalists, we’re intercommunalists” (Shakur, *Assata* 222). In response to this claim, Assata reflects that the “problem was that “somebody had forgotten to tell these oppressed communities that they were no longer nations. Even worse, almost no one understood Huey’s long speeches explaining intercommunalism” (Shakur, *Assata* 225-226). As humorous as her comment may be, the basis of her criticism represents a significant divergence in political thought. Unlike Huey Newton, Shakur suggests that encouraging revolutionary nationalism, as well as international solidarity among such nationalist formations, is an important part of correcting the corrupt relationship between capitalism and nationalism. More importantly, her comments suggest that such a declaration cannot be internationalist because it fails to acknowledge the nationalist struggles of black people living in the so-called Third World. Once again, this encounter illustrates how dogma and hierarchy threaten the stability of black internationalism.

Both Shakur’s critiques of power dynamics within the BPP and the relationship between black nationalism and internationalism, represent the ways in which she exerts an autonomous political identity as a black internationalist feminist. As scholars like Dayo Gore have argued, it is precisely this practice of fluidly transcending the seeming boundaries between various radical traditions and black freedom struggles that makes black internationalist feminism unique. Rather than remain subject the political and ideological constraints of any one organization, black
internationalist feminists like Shakur pursue black women’s liberation through any and all strategic means necessary.

**Conclusions**

Assata Shakur’s autobiography exemplifies the well-known black feminist proclamation that the personal is political. Not only does her autobiography draw attention to consequences of living within a capitalist nation-state founded upon racial hierarchy, but it also provides an opportunity for a radical retelling of history through an experiential lens. For a black internationalist feminist like Shakur, this opportunity is literally a matter of life and death. As U.S.-Cuban relations continue to become more amicable, Shakur’s life is increasingly under threat as established diplomatic relations, along with the two million dollar bounty on her head, would almost ensure her forced return to the U.S. and re-imprisonment. So, what does it mean that in the twenty-first century, Assata Shakur remains on the FBI’s most wanted list? In 2009, the Talking Drum collective published *Assata: In Her Own Words*, which provides a full review of Shakur’s case. Despite the fact that there seems to be no forensic evidence supporting a conviction, the verdict that was reached nearly forty years ago still stands today. In fact, the anecdotal evidence against Shakur continues to grow. For example, decades after the trial, Colonel Joseph R. Fuentes, superintendent of the New Jersey State Police, states that “Werner Foerester’s service weapon was ripped from his holster as he lay wounded on the pavement, and that he was executed with two shots to the head from his own service weapon” (Shakur, *In Her Own Words* 13).

There have been many attempts over the last forty years to maintain a narrative that depicts Shakur as a mercilessly violent criminal. Shakur’s response to
her public image is almost poetic. “They call me the ‘most wanted woman’ in Amerikka. I find that ironic. I’ve never felt very ‘wanted’ before. When it came to jobs, I was never the ‘most wanted,’ when it came to economic opportunities I was never the ‘most wanted,’ when it came to decent housing. It seems like the only time Black people are on the ‘most wanted’ list is when they want to put us in prison” (Shakur, *In Her Own Words* 28). In line with Shakur’s own response, I argue that this public obsession with Shakur as America’s “most wanted domestic terrorist” is reflective of the truly radical nature of her politics and the desire to discredit them.

Both the dominant narratives of Shakur in the academy and the U.S. media represent a failure to comprehend the complexities and nuances of her politics. However, they also reflect a certain awareness of the way she threatens the dominant discourses that correspond to each institution. As a revolutionary black radical, Shakur’s active opposition to U.S. imperialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy represent a threat to U.S. hegemony. The power of this threat is demonstrated by the forty years of tension and attention surrounding her activism. Similarly, Shakur’s emphasis on black power and class struggle resist the trend to define black feminism as anti, or post nationalist. Shakur’s life and activism continue to be cast in the monolithic light of militant, black nationalist terrorism. However, as I have demonstrated, the life, work and legacy of Assata Shakur is best understood as a dynamic combination of black feminist, nationalist and internationalist politics that not only targets and contests the authority of the capital nation-state, but also identifies its primary means of governing and subduing the black community. As such, her politics amount to much more than “vitriolic nonsense.” They threaten the stability of a U.S. nationalism that has fortified itself through the progressive narratives of social progress and black liberalism.
As Robin Kelley notes, the fractures between black Marxists and white Western socialists were not merely the result of irreconcilable notions of nationalism. The embrace of white supremacist forms of nationalism by American and Soviet communists during World War I led black Marxists like W.E.B. DuBois to condemn these forms of socialism as irredeemably racist.

Assata Shakur currently has a two million dollar bounty placed on her. Founded in 1970, the Black Liberation Army was a militant organization that supported armed struggle. Many former Black Panthers, like Shakur, joined the BLA after government repression and assassinations greatly reduced Black Panther Party membership. The party largely operated as an underground organization, so as to avoid counter-insurgency attacks.

Rather than conform to the sexist practices of certain party leaders, Eldridge Cleaver for example, figures like Shakur draw attention to the intersection of black feminist and black nationalist politics. For a greater analysis of how Shakur and other black feminist nationalists accomplished this, see Perkins, Autobiography As Activism.

The Talking Drum Collective, for example, is a group made up of several black organizations that continues to facilitate a campaign against the FBI’s attacks on Shakur. The collective is also responsible for Assata Shakur’s website and aids her contemporary political campaign.

Due to the threat of extradition and reimprisonment, Assata Shakur is extremely difficult to locate. While this difficulty is a necessary part of her survival, it also makes the process of tracing her contemporary activism an elusive one. My own attempts to contact the activist were met, understandably, with silence.

Shakur herself acknowledges that black men are specifically targeted by the state and imprisoned at a rate much higher than any other population. Thus, her intervention is not an attempt to decenter black men, but rather an attempt to situate this issue within the wider framework of black feminist politics.

Whereas civil death can be understood in terms of the loss of citizenship and its rights, social death is defined as a total exclusion from social existence, enacted through dehumanizing practices like natal alienation, psychological warfare and sexual violence. Arguably, the practice of social death was perfected through the enslavement of black people. This practice continues today, most notably through the mass incarceration of poor people and people of color. For a history of the concept of social death, see Patterson, Slavery and Social Death.

For a detailed analysis of this process, as well as its continuing effects, see Alexander, The New Jim Crow; Childs, Slaves of the State; Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?; and James, The New Abolitionists.

This reality is reflected in the fact that less than one percent of black people imprisoned before 1861, and ninety percent in some counties and states after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment (Childs 9).

For more on queer negativity, or the critique of reproductive futurity, see Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive; Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity; Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure. For a discussion of black queer futurity, see Ferguson, Aberrations in Black.

See Orlando Patterson’s Slavery and Social Death for a history and analysis of natal alienation.

See, for example, McDuffie, Sojourning For Freedom; and Kelley Freedom Dreams. Margo V. Perkins diverges from this tendency slightly by discussing Shakur as a leading figure in the wider Black Power movement.

Huey Newton announced the Black Panther Party’s disavowal of internationalism during a speech at Boston College in 1970. He argued that because the United States was no longer a nation, but an empire, and many oppressed communities, such as black Americans, did not have a nation of their own, the concept of internationalism was erroneous. In place of internationalism, Newton argued for the pursuit of revolutionary intercommunalism, an interrelationship among global communities where the people own the means of production and wealth is distributed equally. This version of intercommunalism stands in opposition to globalized capitalism, or what Newton calls reactionary intercommunalism.
Chapter 2
Writing Within the Revolution: Black Internationalist Feminism in the Poetry of Georgina Herrera

In contrast to rise of neoliberal economic policies and ideologies in much of the rest of the world, the Cuban state represents the possibility of permanence for Third World socialism at the level of the nation-state. As such, it forms an important part of my analysis of contemporary practices of black internationalist feminism. Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera’s writing and activism in post-1959 Cuba reflect a unique way that black internationalist feminists renegotiate and re-theorize their politics in relationship to a socialist state. For example, Herrera’s emphasis on the history of black resistance to white supremacy, racial slavery and Western imperialism situates black internationalism as a tradition that exists autonomously from Cuban socialism. In addition, by prioritizing the tradition of black internationalism and illustrating its autonomy, Herrera challenges the tendency to subsume racial oppression under the category of class struggle and signals the important specificities of the black experience. Furthermore, Herrera’s particular engagement with the issue of sex tourism, and its disproportionate effect on black women, pushes the boundaries of Cuban racial and gender politics by challenging the contradictory dominant discourses of colorblindness and black indecency.

Born in Jovellanos, Matanzas in 1936, Herrera describes her upbringing as the beginning of an awareness and appreciation for what it means to be poor and black. The combination of poverty and conflict at home made for a grueling childhood. Despite these obstacles, Herrera found refuge in her local community of black women elders. It was out of an appreciation of their stories, as well as in an effort to escape
her immediate surroundings, that Herrera took up poetry at the young age of fourteen (Castillo and Herrera 74-76.). In 1956, at the age of twenty, Herrera moved to Havana to begin work as a domestic maid. It was during this time that she experienced the harsh realities of urban segregation (Castillo and Herrera 85-87.). It was during this time that she was introduced to the Cuban publishing house *El Puente*, which functioned as a relatively safe space for young black writers (Herrera, *Always Rebellious* 16). The literature produced by *El Puente* emphasized the histories and empowerment of Afro-Cubans. It was during this time that Herrera met and worked with other Afro-Cuban writers, such as Nancy Morejón and Rogelio Martínez Furé, as well as her ex-husband, black activist Manuel Granados (Herrera, *Always Rebellious* 17).

After the 1959 revolution, Herrera gained easier access to the world of academics and art, and although she was still confronted with racism and sexism, she was able to begin her forty-two year career at Radio Progreso.¹ As a radio storywriter, Herrera made her career by focusing on female characters and received much of her material from the stories told to her by women in her community. Her radio work allowed her to tell stories that reflect the lived experiences of the women in her community through a medium with a much wider audience. Additionally, it allowed her to link the historical tradition of oral storytelling to our contemporary context. Herrera’s desire has always been to convey issues and themes relevant to black Cuban women. However, public push back against the representation of racism on the radio has led Herrera to emphasize these themes more in her poetry (Castillo and Herrera 106-109)².

In the 1980s Herrera’s poetry began receiving attention in England and since then has become extremely well received abroad.³ Her work has been included in
various reviews and anthologies, including the *Afrocuba* anthology edited by Pedro Perez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, the *Afro-Hispanic Review* and the recently published anthology, *Afrocubanas*. Still, as a poet Herrera has received far less attention and recognition by the Cuban government’s artistic academies than her contemporary Nancy Morejón. Recently, however, Herrera became the most recent recipient of the Premio Mackandal after almost a sixty year long career publishing poetry. Despite this accolade, Herrera still represents one of the less canonical poetic voices on the island.

Thematically, Herrera’s work focuses on the struggles of working class black women. She accomplishes this task by engaging with questions of representational politics, integrating oral history and literature into her work, and invoking the imagery of strong, black female figures. At the 2003 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Daisy Rubiera Castillo presented a paper written by Herrera in which she discusses the historical role black women have played in the production of Cuban literature. Herrera argued that oral histories function as evidence of black women’s participation in Cuban cultural and literary traditions, even when their contributions have not been officially recorded by history (Castillo and Herrera 76–81). Because her own poetry stems from oral history, it shares a connection with the communities that have traditionally been kept out of canonized literature and, as a result, it goes beyond the written text. It is through participation in this poetic tradition, that Herrera articulates her black feminist and black nationalist politics. By speaking to and from her own social location, Herrera conveys the ways in which a Third World socialist nation-state has successfully fostered gender and racial equality, as well as the ways in which it has failed.
While Georgina Herrera continues to work as a scholar and activist today, I focus on her work during the 1990s. My decision to limit my study to this period is due to the fact that the 1990s represent a context of increasing concern over racial and gender inequality in Cuba. The economic crisis brought on by the fall of the Soviet Union made such disparities increasingly apparent and, as a result, opened up a space for greater debate and activism.

In addition to my providing a unique political context for examining the practice of black internationalist feminism, Cuba is also significant due to its status as a model of racial liberation for black people throughout the diaspora. Just as Quotations from Chairman Mao played a role in fostering a Third World socialist imaginary among black radicals, Cuba’s 1959 revolution came to represent the possibility of manifesting such politics on the level of national revolution. During the 1960s and 1970s, Cuba aligned itself in rhetoric and practice with black internationalist struggles, including U.S. Black Nationalism and various anti-colonial movements throughout Africa. Black radicals such as William Lee Brent, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Huey Newton, and Stokely Carmichael not only expressed their political solidarity with Cuba, but many visited the island, and some ended up there in exile. For example, Robert Williams, Amiri Baraka, and John Henrik Clarke visited the island with the Fair Play For Cuba Committee shortly after the 1959 revolution. Assata Shakur continues to live in political exile in Cuba, a nation she describes as “a country of hope” (Shakur, Assata 269). Even figures not associated with the Black Power movement, such as Alice Walker, have expressed an unprecedented respect for the Cuban revolution.4

In addition to its solidarity with black activists throughout the diaspora, Cuba has created some of the most radical anti-racist policies in existence. The 1961 Urban
Reform Act, along with labor reform laws, allowed for a more equal distribution of land and employment opportunity along racial lines. Similarly, access to free or affordable health care and education fostered a restructuring of the racial hierarchy. In addition to these domestic policies, Cuba has provided support, military and otherwise, for black anti-colonial movements, most notably in Angola.

Likewise, the new revolutionary government made great strides against gender discrimination. Perhaps the most notable of these efforts is the 1975 Family Code, which legally established women’s equality with respect to marriage, divorce, property and education. In addition, the code recognized the rights of children with unmarried parents. In essence, the Family Code sought to provide equal opportunity and responsibility among men and women, as well as transform the nature of their social relationships.

Rather than merely implement legal and institutional reforms, the Cuban revolution radically overhauled the structures that fostered racism and sexism. Still, these changes have not made the nation immune to criticism. Afro-Cuban scholar Carlos Moore, for example, has been one of the most vocal expatriate critiques. Even well-known intellectuals on the island, Roberto Zurbano for example, have articulated their dissatisfaction with the way racial issues are handled by the government and the public. Despite these existing criticisms, Cuba’s revolutionary approach to addressing structural and legal discrimination holds enormous and unmatched significance to discourses on anti-racist and anti-sexist state politics.

In addition to the important role Cuba has played in the black radical imaginary, scholars such as Paula Sanmartin have acknowledged Cuba as the ideal case study for investigations into black female political and cultural representation.
Despite the contemporary debates on issues of race and blackness in Cuba, the island stands alone in its attempts to legally redress institutional racism.

Nevertheless, despite the contemporary focus on Cuba’s history of black resistance there has been little attention paid to the specific intersections of race and gender in Cuba. This oversight is exactly why a figure like Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera is extremely important. As a black feminist writer living within the context of a revolutionary socialist nation-state, she is in a unique position to analyze the relationships between black nationalist, black feminist, and revolutionary socialist politics.

The intervention made by black Cuban women like Herrera is particularly significant given the fact that before 1959 there were few literary works authored by black people on the island. In her book, *Black Women as Custodians of History* (2014), Paula Sanmartín addresses the shared history of Afro-Cuban and African American women who have used literature as a means of inscribing themselves into historical processes. There is a history of black Cuban women poets, the earliest being Juana Pastor, however, much of this early poetry did not focus on issues of race. Cuban women writers during the period of romanticism and modernismo addressed race, but largely through the lens of slavery and, again, not from the perspective of black women themselves. Thus, although there are many representations of black Cubans in literature, from abolitionist texts like Avellaneda’s *Sab* to the poetry of the negrismo movement, these representations have been almost entirely constructed by white male authors.

This tradition of representing blackness through the lens of white authorship was largely disrupted by the 1959 revolution. Since then, a number of black women poets have gained notoriety. These poets include Nancy Morejón, Excilia Saldaña,
Lourdes Casal, and Georgina Herrera. Although many of these poets do not directly focus on questions of race, their self-representation can be read as a direct response to the historical representation of black and mixed race Cuban women as voiceless, hypersexualized figures.

Georgina Herrera certainly fits within this categorization, however, she differentiates herself by her explicit focus on black agency. While certainly not the only theme in her work, the particular way she represents blackness, through recounting and re-writing black histories of resistance, is unique and more representative of a black nationalist politics than the work of her contemporaries. In this chapter, I examine not only how Herrera’s work promotes black feminist involvement in reconstructing and rewriting historical narratives, but also the specific ways she centers her black nationalist and black feminist politics in such a process. I am particularly interested in the way Herrera’s poetry can be read as a black nationalist response to narratives of mestizaje, which promote national unity on the basis of racial heterogeneity, as well as the ideology of transculturation, a term coined by Fernando Ortiz that situates black culture as an integral part of national culture. My analysis looks at the ways in which her work challenges anti-blackness within the Third World socialist nation-state, and advocates a more central role for black consciousness in revolutionary nationalism.

**Black Nationalist Politics Within a Third World Socialist State**

The topic of race in Cuba, and blackness in particular, is contentious at best. The 1962 Second Declaration of Havana proclaimed that the problem of racism had been solved. However, black scholars and activists, such as Walterio Carbonell, Rogelio Furé, Roberto Zurbano and Esteban Morales Domínguez, have vocally
challenged this proclamation in one way or another. The tension and debate surround race and racism in post-1959 Cuba is due in part to the government’s early embrace of a traditional Marxist view of race. This view contends that racism is a product of class inequality and, as a result, its eradication will coincide with that of class difference. The fruit of this approach has been the great structural changes with regard to education, unemployment and housing. Between 1960 and 1965, unemployment was cut nearly in half. By 1970, unemployment in Cuba was reduced to 1.3%. Along with labor reforms, the new government tackled housing issues with the Urban Reform Act of 1961. The act placed all housing into state hands, allowing for more equal redistribution. All rent was limited to 10% of a person’s income with the exception of former property owners who were compensated with monthly rent for life. In addition to housing and employment, the revolution made electricity, education and medicare free to the public, and the 1961 literacy campaign saw the rise of literacy to an all-time high of 96.1% (Domínguez 165-186). Although the extent to which the revolution has perpetuated or eliminated institutional racism and discrimination in Cuba is certainly up for debate, most Afro-Cubans did benefit materially from the national redistribution of resources and the structural changes in education, healthcare and employment. As a result, these changes signify an enormous shift in the socio-economic hierarchy. Also, because black Cubans and women were most often found at the bottom of this hierarchy, these changes signify a redressing of structural racism and sexism.

Nevertheless, structural changes in Cuba did not bring about the complete eradication of racist and sexist practices. Cuban Black Nationalists, such as Carlos Moore and Juan Betancourt, have criticized the Cuban government’s early approach to racial equality by saying that although Castro and revolutionary officials profess
anti-racist politics, they have largely employed a paternalistic attitude towards blacks and chosen to ignore race issues in favor of colorblind politics (Moore 28). In the case of race, this practice has resulted in the steady encouragement that black Cubans be “passive beneficiaries” of the revolution, as opposed to “active protagonists” working for their own causes and concerns (De la Fuente, “Recreating Racism” 323). This expectation is exemplified by the comments of some white Cuban members of the communist party who believe that their sacrifice for the revolution should be matched, if not exceeded by that of blacks since “a los negros la Revolución los había hecho personas” (Lopez-Cabrales 201). The attitude expressed by these members of the Cuban communist party is extremely alarming. Such a claim suggests, in essence, that because the revolution officially recognized black humanity and dignity it must not have existed prior to the revolution. This notion reinforces the logic of imperialism that justifies itself by proclaiming a mission to civilize, and thus humanize, the “savage”. Clearly, this type of logic is antithetical to revolutionary politics and as such, it must be challenged.

Furthermore, critics like Moore and Betancourt attribute the loyalty of those black Cubans who display gratitude toward the revolution to racial overcompensation, an excessive response to minimal changes that is the result of prolonged suffering, or what Carlos Moore calls “the gracias Fidel complex” (Moore 44). Specifically, critics like Juan Betancourt, were unsatisfied with socio-economic changes. They wanted power and positions of high authority in the new government (Moore 46-49). One possible explanation, and the most common critique of this second approach to race in Cuba, is that advocates of Black Nationalism, like Betancourt, were mostly members, or hopeful members, of the black middle class. Unlike working class black
Cubans, their concern was with power rather than socio-economic equality (Serviat 85).

What voices of black dissent like Moore and Betancourt bring to light is the remaining presence of racist practices in post-1959 Cuba. Some of these practices, particularly those that correspond to social prejudice, can be traced back to Castro’s strategic choice to refrain from pushing for complete social integration due to the unease it caused white Cubans. The integration of social clubs serves as an emblematic example of the tension that arose from Castro’s intent to promote social equality between the races. Fears of black men dancing and socializing with white women and displays of “disrespect” from proud black Cubans caused scandal among white revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries alike. Even mixed-race Cubans were uncomfortable with integration because it threatened their slight advantage in the racial hierarchy. Thus, while economic equality among the races could be accepted, social equality could not. In response to public uproar, Castro chose national unity over social change and announced in a 1959 speech that the revolution would not impose on people’s “private beliefs” (De la Fuente, “Recreating Racism” 267). As a result, Cuban anti-racist politics took on a decidedly structural focus.

Concerns over residual racism only increased in the 1990s with the initiation of Cuba’s greatest economic crisis since 1959, the Special Period. The fall of the Soviet Union meant the loss of Cuba’s most important financial ally and, in combination with the U.S. embargo, fostered extreme economic depression. In response, Cuban officials took several policy measures that would cushion the impact of the crisis, such as the legalization of dollars, self-employment, and foreign investment. In many ways these measures have fostered an increase in economic disparities across racial lines. The legalization of dollars, for example, has disproportionately benefitted the white
population, which receives remittances from the mostly white Cuban diaspora.\textsuperscript{13} Criminalized before 1993, remittances now make up the greatest source of hard currency for Cubans, nearly 890 million dollars annually (Cabezas 66). As a result, their distribution among racial lines has radically increased economic inequality between white and non-white Cubans. Public responses to the economic crisis have been equally racialized and gendered. Balseros, those who flee the island on makeshift rafts, have primarily been white males, while many black Cubans have looked to the underground economy as an alternate source of income. The effect is an increase in economic disparities and a lack of solidarity that threatens to undermine racial and gender equality in Cuba.

To suggest that racism and sexism have been completely eradicated in Cuba would be naive, to say the least. However, it would be equally naive to discount the effect of post-1959 laws in increasing structural equality along racial and gender lines. Acknowledging that the reality about racism in Cuba lies somewhere in between these two extremes, government officials, intellectuals, and even Castro himself, have recognized the need to address contemporary racism. Still, despite this acknowledgement and the perceived resurgence of racial and gender discrimination following the Special Period, the practice of not discussing racism in Cuba continues to threaten social progress.\textsuperscript{14} Some sociological, political and historical books have been published with blackness as a central theme, but they largely fail to address the systematic implications of slavery and racism on Cuba’s black and mixed race population.\textsuperscript{15} Since the 1980s, however, there have been a number of authors who have engaged the subject.\textsuperscript{16} Many of these texts utilize an ethnographic approach. Still, their presence represents an important opposition to the practice of ignoring race altogether.
Esteban Morales Dominguez, Professor Emeritus of Political Economy at the University of Havana, is one of the only intellectuals within Cuba to have published multiple books addressing race and racism since 1959. Morales book, *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba* (2009), represents the first book-length attempt by a Cuban citizen to discuss race and racism in Cuba since the 1960s. Morales’ relative success in addressing racism in Cuba may be due in part to the fact that he does not emphasize black nationalist politics in his work.

Rather than emphasize the centrality of blackness, or the need for black collectivism, Morales’ approach has been to highlight both the achievements and failures of post-1959 racial policies. Despite the ideological, social and cultural existence of racism in Cuba, the nation has made enormous leaps with regard to structural equality, overseas support for African anti-colonial movements (including military aid, medical care, etc.), and refuge and support for black nationalists from the rest of the diaspora. Likewise, Cuba made important achievements in fight against South African apartheid, such as the victory over the South African army in Cuito Cuanavale, Angola.

With such a history of participation in black internationalist movements, accusations of racism in Cuba have been difficult to substantiate. The state’s support for black nationalism abroad has often been seen as evidence of racial equality at home. However, the delicate balance between institutional advances and social and cultural lagging was largely disrupted by the fall of the Soviet Union. The resulting rise in economic disparities between white, black and mixed-race Cubans fostered an environment where it is now possible to revisit issues of existing racism. More importantly, these growing inequalities serve as proof that one cannot ignore the way structural, cultural, and ideological racism are interconnected. Furthermore, as
Morales argues, these inequalities reveal that racism in Cuba is “not simply a case of inherited burdens, but rather a problem that our society is still capable of generating” (Race in Cuba 20).

The work done by figures like Morales has resulted in a number of important advances toward racial equality in Cuba. In 2011, for example, the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party was 41.7 percent women and 31.3 percent black/mixed-race. Despite these changes, the racialized nature of economic disparities in Cuba is unsettling. Black and mixed race Cubans continue to be underrepresented in managerial positions in corporate and tourist sectors. Likewise, they make up less than two percent of private agriculture sector, and because nearly eighty four percent of Cuban emigrants are white and many of the remaining sixteen percent hold lower paying positions, black and mixed race Cubans receive the least amount of money from remittances (Morales, Race in Cuba 63).

With regard to these issues, Morales concludes that racial equality in Cuba has been thwarted by several factors. First, there is a clear lack of black social history equal to that of the white population. The importance of such a historical consciousness is exemplified in Morales’ observation that “[i]t is not enough that all be born in the same hospital, study in the same school, and go to the same places of recreation. That is, it is not enough to provide an equal starting point at birth because it is not sufficient to balance the historical point of departure, inherited from parents, the racial group, the district, or the family in general” (Morales, Race in Cuba 76). Finally, Morales suggests that until racism becomes a national problem, it will continue to be an issue (Race in Cuba 55).

A second obstacle is the nationwide resistance to racial identification. With an emphasis on the legal end to racism, the silence on issues of race in Cuba largely
meant the espousal of colorblindness. One of the structural implications of this tendency is the absence of any mention of race in a national census between 1981 and 2002. Furthermore, in 1981 only thirty three percent of Cubans identified themselves as black or mixed-race (Morales, Desafíos 157). Similarly, in the 2002 census only ten percent of the population identified as black and only twenty five percent identified as mixed race (Morales, Desafíos 157). These statistics are explained in part by the fact that race is largely understood in terms of socially accepted categories based on phenotype. Thus, someone who may be considered black in nearly every other country in the diaspora may be categorized as white or mixed race in Cuba.

According to Morales, “lo anterior es muy importante, porque resulta evidente que, dentro de la población negra y mestiza de Cuba, a pesar de todo lo que se ha avanzado, sobreviven aún, en un nivel inaceptable, problemas de marginalidad, autoestima, precariedad de vida, pobreza y ‘destacarse por lo negativo’” (Desafíos 160). This ideology extends far beyond the public realm. It is an internalized, influencing the way Cuban citizens understand and identify themselves racially.

Morales’ observations are astute, but in his attempt to maintain clear support for the state, he fails to address its role in propagating anti-blackness. The reluctance to self-identify as black in Cuba is directly related to dominance of mestizaje as an ideology of national belonging. As an advocate of mestizaje, national poet Nicolás Guillén proposed, “that Cuba will achieve universal transcendence through the Cuban nation’s vindication of its black population” (Morejón and West-Duran 52-53). This belief is deeply reflected in his poetics, as much of Guillén’s work sought to forge a national identity built on racial hybridity. By infusing his poetry with music, language and commentary that recognize the presence and significance of Cuba’s African
ancestry, Guillén pushed for the political, social and cultural incorporation of blackness into the greater national formation.

Although *mestizaje* was solidified as a dominant ideology with the onset of the Cuban Revolution, its origins and relationship to poetics extend far beyond Cuba’s recent history. The idea of *mestizaje* as a formula for Cuban national identity was established by national hero José Martí. As a leader of the independence movement, Martí espoused racial inclusivity and a recognition of Cuba’s many races. Martí’s equalitarian language was due in part to his desire to garner black support for the independence movement. However, it was also an effort to forge a unified national identity that could stand in clear contrast and opposition to the Spanish empire.¹⁹

Nevertheless, many white Cubans feared the potential outcome of giving blacks positions of power.²⁰ In response, Martí utilized the idea of *mestizaje*, a united, national identity forged from the multiple racial and cultural identities that existed, as a means of pacifying white fears. *Mestizaje* called for a new notion of Cuban identity based on color blindness. Martí claimed that this racial formation had been a fundamental part of Cuban identity since the Ten Years War and would continue to be instrumental in the fight against Spain.²¹ What Martí accomplished with *mestizaje* was the creation of a racial formation that recognized and embraced its racial diversity as a historical component of the present national identity. The implications of this racial formation are that it one, established colorblindness as the official racial discourse and two, because Martí was an independence leader, poet and, posthumously, a national hero, his work set the precedent for the connection between racial formation and poetics in Cuba.

*Mestizaje* flourished as an ideology in the 1930s with its representation in the work of Nicolás Guillén. Guillén was able to successfully distinguish himself as a
leader of the *negrismo* movement by incorporating rhythms that mimic African music and words derived from African languages. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Guillén was able to succeed José Martí as a national poet, and in doing so, furnish the relationship between poet and nation with a sense of longevity.

The problem with *mestizaje* as an ideology is that it subsumes blackness under a broadly racialized national identity without actually accounting for its historical and material significance. This phenomenon is much more than a failure to self-identify as black. Rather, in not identifying as black, many Cubans attempt to move into whiteness. The logic of *mestizaje* allows each member of the nation to be at best white and at worst *mestizo*. In either case, the specificity of the black experience and the need to redress specific forms of black oppression, get erased.

In refusing to deconstruct the dangerous myth of *mestizaje*, Esteban Morales overlooks a significant part of the race debate in Cuba. He is more concerned with making blackness and racial equality issues of national concern than he is with affirming the history and future of black internationalism as a tradition with roots that predate 1959. Morales, and others like him, embrace Cuba’s participation in the international black anti-colonial struggle as a historical reinforcement of claims about ending racial inequality. Furthermore, figures like Morales rely on the events of the Special Period as a way to criticize socio-economic inequality along racial lines without directly blaming the state. In many ways, this approach is both strategic and accurate. However, as figures such as Walterio Carbonell, Rogelio Martínez Furé and Roberto Zurbano suggest, racial inequality in Cuba has other roots and remedies.

In order to frame the relationship between the Cuban state and back nationalists, I begin my analysis with Walterio Carbonell. Carbonell was born in 1920 to a relatively well-off Afro-Cuban family. As a university student, Carbonell
strategized with Fidel Castro about the anti-colonial movements in Africa. After the 1959 revolution, Carbonell attempted to establish a black nationalist organization, but was met with accusations of being divisive and counter-revolutionary. As a result of his black nationalist politics, Carbonell was sent to a labor camp, and later a psychiatric hospital. The veracity of his nervous breakdown is still a subject of debate today. Regardless, these events were enough to cause Carbonell’s political retreat. He spent the rest of his years working at the national library until his death in 2008.

Although Carbonell’s contributions to the discourse on race and racism in Cuba went relatively unrecognized during his life, his work has resurfaced in the last ten years and become central to current debates on these issues. In his most discussed writing, “Como surgio la cultural nacional,” Carbonell centers Africa in discussions of American identity and modernity. He argues that Africa played a prominent role in Cuban culture and religion in the nineteenth century, as most of the population of Cuba between 1800 and 1850 was black (109). Carbonell also insists upon the differentiation between structural and ideological rule. According to him, the bourgeois powers responsible for racism did not merely dominate politically and economically, but also ideologically. Furthermore, he identifies the move away from blackness as a conscious decision on the part of the nineteenth-century Cuban bourgeoisie due to the fact that knowledge about Africa was no longer a source of economic gain after slavery ended. In making this claim, Carbonell situates black consciousness in direct opposition to capitalist knowledge production. As a result, black consciousness becomes a necessary part of anti-capitalist politics.

Rogelio Martinez Furé and Roberto Zurbano both credit the life and work of Walterio Carbonell as the inspiration for their own work on issues of racism and racial identity. In fact, in his 2008 article about contemporary racism in Cuba, Furé calls
Carbonell’s “Cómo surgió la cultural nacional” a seminal text “que puso los puntos sobre las íes en una época en que muchos historiadores se tapaban los ojos, se tapaban la boca y se tapaban los oídos como los tres monitos para no enfrentarse a una realidad que ya se veía sacar su oreja peluda en la década de los sesenta” (223). Like Carbonell, Furé suggests that racial progress in Cuba cannot proceed without reclaiming of African roots, heroes and cultural practices. His writing reflects a clear delineation between a black “us” and a non-black “everyone else.” However, his work manages to avoid being counter-revolutionary. For Furé, revolutionary politics emerged from black traditions of resistance. As such, blackness is at the center of revolutionary progress.

Roberto Zurbano makes very similar claims in his writings about race and racism in Cuba. However, despite the suggestion that his recent New York Times article is counter-revolutionary, Zurbano defines his relationship with the Cuban revolution as one based on both self and collective determination. His understanding of revolutionary black nationalist-internationalism dictates that “ser negro y revolucionario en Cuba no es una identidad paradójica, sino un camino colectivo que se elige para, junto a otros condenados de la tierra, confinar todas las discriminaciones que nos impiden la plenitud como ciudadanos” (Zurbano, “Soy un negro”).

Both Furé and Zurbano articulate black nationalist politics, as well as its centrality to state revolutionary politics. In many ways, Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera articulates a very similar, albeit explicitly feminist, position. However, unlike Furé and Zurbano, Herrera’s work rarely directly names these politics. Instead, they are reflected in her literary work and activism. Rather than publish essays on the issue of Cuban anti-blackness, Herrera uses her poetry to centralize the history of black
resistance to white supremacy, colonialism and slavery. In doing so, she locates a
tradition of black radicalism that predates the revolution. Furthermore, by
emphasizing the role of black women in this tradition, she articulates a specific
history of radical black feminism. Thus, much like Furé and Zurbano, Herrera’s
representation of blackness is one that challenges the dominant narrative of
established by the Cuban state.

Writing Against Mestizaje: Poetry and the Politics of Blackness in the
Work of Georgina Herrera

The specific way Herrera embraces black nationalist politics becomes clear
when her work is contrasted with that of Nancy Morejón.23 Eleven years after the
revolution Morejón emerged as the only black woman poet to be recognized
nationally. Since black women poets were virtually unheard of before the revolution,
Morejón’s success is both an accomplishment and a testament to the success of the
revolution’s racial policies. Like Guillén, Morejón’s poetics reflect the ideology of
mestizaje. In her words, “[w]e Cubans have set out to create a homogenous nation
from the nation’s very heterogeneity, created for a political purpose (the Cuban
Revolution headed by Fidel Castro), rather than for purely cultural or racial
controversy” (Morejón, Fundación de la imagen 190). Although Morejón identifies as
womanist, her dedication to mestizaje and national unity dominates her poetry.24

Morejón’s most anthologized and translated poem, “Mujer negra,” was first
published in 1975 and presents a historical narrative from the time of slavery to the
Cuban revolution. “Mujer negra” is unique in that it places the Afro-Cuban slave
woman front and center in Cuban history. Within the poem, the titular black woman
takes on a vital role in the Cuban revolution and tells her story in first person.
The poem begins with the African slave woman recounting the horrific journey across the ocean from Africa to Cuba. Left to work like a beast in a new land, but nourished by the oral history of her people, the Mandinga, she rebels. Later, she is purchased by a slave master who impregnates her, yet refuses to acknowledge their son. When her master is killed by an English lord, she escapes. She works the land, builds her own shack, suffers physical abuse, and is denied access to the fruits of her labor. She finally finds independence in the “palenque,” or maroon settlement of the runaway slaves, where she joins with the troops of General Antonio Maceo, a key leader in Cuba’s Wars of Independence. A century later, she participates in the Cuban revolution in order to put an end to capitalism and the military forces that defend it. After the revolution, the poetic “I” becomes one with her descendants as she now expresses her voice in first person plural: “Ahora soy: sólo hoy tenemos y creamos.” The slave woman, who contributed through backbreaking work to economic and social systems that denied her humanity as they prospered from her labor, is now a creative and integral partner in the revolutionary process. For the first time ever, she reaps the benefits of her labor as an equal under communism: “Iguales míos, aquí los veo bailar alrededor del árbol que plantamos para el comunismo” (Morejón, Looking Within/Mirar Adentro 200-203).

Although the euphoric ending of this poem has been criticized for conforming to the myth that the revolution solved all racial disparities in Cuba, the journey of the Afro-Cuban woman portrayed in this poem certainly undermines a Marxist privileging of class over race. Nevertheless, the Cuban revolution is greatly idealized in the poem and credited not only for the ultimate liberation of the black woman, but essentially her humanization as well.

One of the differentiating factors between Herrera and Morejón is the way
each poet addresses the collective. For example, Morejón’s decision to tell a story from the perspective of a personalized individual, the “*mujer negra,*” differs greatly from Herrera’s approach of situating stifling experiences of oppression within a larger, more collective trajectory. This is not to say that Nancy Morejón does not situate her subject within the collective. Clearly, references to the palanque and mountain in “*Mujer negra*” are meant to connect the trajectory of the individual subject to that of the collective, first the maroons and then the revolutionaries. However, in “*Mujer negra,*” the narrating subject *stands in* for the community of Afro-Cuban women, articulating their historic struggles. The collective voice only emerges as a result of the Cuban revolution, that is, it is depicted as the fruit of the revolution, which did not exist prior to 1959. In an interview with Linda Howe, Herrera articulated her discomfort with such representations of black women’s agency. She states, "I didn't appear with the revolution. It simply opened many doors for me" (Howe, “The Lion’s Version” 152). Likewise, during my own interview with her, Herrera emphasized the way her writing emerged from a long tradition of black storytellers, particularly black women elders. While the revolution helped facilitate a greater reception of her work, it cannot take credit for it.

In contrast to Morejón’s singular poetic subject, Herrera tends to employ poetic speakers who rely on the communal black and/or feminist “us” as part of a greater pattern that imparts a sense of collective historical memory. In addition, oral literature makes more than just an appearance, as it does in “*Mujer negra.*” These stories are central to Herrera’s poetry and serve as the medium through which her speakers and their communities perpetuate their existence. For example, the short poem “*La pobreza ancestral*”, published in 1989 in *Grande es el tiempo,* discusses the implications of poverty with regard to communal and familial histories.
Like many of Herrera’s poems, “La pobreza ancestral” can be considered semi-autobiographical. In her autobiography she recounts being in a similar position to that of the poem’s speaker, unable to afford family portraits (Castillo and Herrera 77). The commonalities between the author’s experiences and the poem’s theme highlight the dual nature of its representation, as the author emphasizes the thin line between aesthetics and experience. The poem follows:

La pobreza ancestral

Pobrecitos que éramos en casa. 
Tanto
que nunca hubo para los retratos; 
los rostros y sucesos familiares
se perpetuaron en conversaciones (Herrera, Grande es el tiempo 224)

The poem opens with an identification of the narrator and her family as “pobrecitos” a term that carries a double signification. Here, “pobrecitos” not only signifies material lack, but also connotes that the narrator and her family are deserving of pity and compassion. This second signification must, however, be questioned. The shift in tone in the last line, where the speaker conveys her family’s act of resisting their visual erasure through oral histories, invokes a second reading of “pobrecitos.” Whereas a privileged reader may begin the poem with a sense of empathy and look for an ending that confirms this sense, Herrera challenges this logic and points to history of black resistance from which she proceeds.

The second line of the poem is especially significant because it disrupts the syllabic rhythm of the poem. Each of the poem’s other lines is hendecasyllabic, yet the second line consists of only one, two-syllable word: “tanto.” Likewise, because this word stands alone, it is both visually and sonically striking. This emphasis on the isolated word “tanto” conveys not only the degree of the family’s material poverty, but also a deep sense of cultural and historical marginalization.
In the fifth line of the poem, the word “perpetuaron” serves to contextualize and explain the reasons why the family is unable to procure a family portrait, a visual and material marker of history, heritage and familial structure. Because “perpetuar” represents the continuance of the past into the present, and even the future, it elicits consideration of the temporal trajectory of the poem’s thematics. For example, one way to read the word “perpetuar” is as a reference to the continuation of the structural and social circumstances responsible for the poverty suffered by the speaker and her family. Here, the absence of a family portrait signifies the erasure of a particular history, that which correlates to Africa, and connects this erasure to socio-economic inequality. In addition, by specifically focusing on the erasure of poor black faces, Herrera critiques the notion of mestizaje that is so fundamental to Cuban national identity. Considering the historical role Cuba’s nationally recognized poets (Martí, Guillén, Morejón) have played in articulating and perpetuating this ideology, Herrera’s challenge is significant.

Herrera has long argued for the recognition of a rich black women’s literary tradition, in spite of the fact that this tradition is primarily oral. Within the poem, she accomplishes this through the double signification of “perpetuar.” This second signification “perpetuar” refers to the family’s resistance to erasure through oral histories. Through her engagement with the oral tradition, Herrera points her readers toward a rich and complex body of thought that can only be accessed via auditory means. Speaking of her and her family’s own stories, Herrera states “eran historias muy desgarradoras, pero que nos recuerdan quienes somos, de dónde venimos, y son también un alerta para que nadie se quiera equivocar tratando de someternos en vez” (Castillo and Herrera 73). What Herrera signals to in this quote is the
Desgarradores effects caused by the historical oppression of the black community, as well as the recognition that the community continually resisted this oppression.

In addition to its potential to transform power dynamics, Herrera’s emphasis on oral literature forms part of her aesthetic representation. To speak of oral literatures is to speak of communal articulation. With each rendition, there is something added or taken away. Each storyteller simultaneously makes the story their own and affirms its communal belonging. In the poem above, this engagement with the oral tradition manifests itself in at least two ways. First, the fifth line of the poem demonstrates the speaker and her family’s reliance upon the oral tradition to carry their family image and perpetuate their history. Second, in retelling this history in the form of a poem, the speaker involves the reader. The reader is now a part of the storytelling cycle, a vehicle of the speaker’s history.

The concept of black oral histories as an alternative means of tracing heritage is reiterated in another one of Herrera’s poems, “Retrato Oral de Victoria.”

Qué bisabuela mía esa Victoria.  
Cimarroneándose y en bocabajos  
pasó la vida.  
Dicen  
que me parezco a ella. (Herrera, Always Rebellious 146)

In this short, five line poem, the speaker recounts the way her grandmother resisted the oppression of slavery. This resistance is framed as part of a tradition, rather than an individual example. This tradition is one that the speaker inherits, signified by her resemblance to Victoria. Here, Herrera subverts traditional notions of history, lineage and inheritance. Oral histories and lived practices of resistance take the place of portraits and written accounts. In representing these histories, Herrera advocates for a specific black radical tradition, which can be traced all the way back to Cuba’s maroons. Furthermore, the temporal bridge between the speaker and her maroon
grandmother represents the relevance of such a tradition today. Given the poet’s context, “Retrato oral de Victoria” leaves the reader wondering, what role do the descendents of Cuba’s maroons play in society today?

Overall, Herrera’s focus on the centrality of black histories, specifically histories of resistance to racial slavery, represents a practice of black nationalist politics within the context of a socialist nation-state. Her representations of black histories challenge national formations that overlook the specificities of the black experience. In addition, these representations emphasize black agency throughout history, challenging the idea that “a los negros la Revolución los había hecho personas” (López-Cabralés 201).

In addition to centralizing black histories of resistance in her work, another important aspect of Herrera’s poetry is its capacity to bridge the divide between the individual and the collective without the erasure of either. “Ana Fidelia,” published in 2009 in Gatos y liebres o Libro de las conciliaciones provides an excellent example of this particular characteristic. Written in free verse, the poem depicts Ana Fidelia Quirot, a Cuban runner who represented her country on numerous occasions and set several world records. Within the poem Herrera interrogates the relationship between the public sphere – the site where Quirot represents Cuban nationalism and black womanhood as an international athletic figure – and the domestic sphere. The tension between these two spheres became a subject of national concern in 1993 when Quirot suffered a tragic injury in a house fire that caused her to miscarry and almost took her life. Beyond the horrific physical consequences of the fire, Quirot was forced to confront the rumor that her accident was a suicide attempt, speculated to be the result of a recent break-up with the father of the child she was carrying (Harvey).
Thus, despite her many triumphs as an athlete, Quirot’s personal struggles became her lasting legacy.

Herrera confronts the tension between personal and private in “Ana Fidelia” by providing several threads of analysis regarding black womanhood, communal representation, and the madness ascribed to women who succeed outside of the domestic sphere. In the poem that follows, the speaker enters into conversation with Ana Fidelia, once again engaging with the oral tradition, to discuss themes of public performance and private pain.

*Ana Fidelia*

(Las mujeres, tenemos que empezar a ser cómplices, porque ellos siempre lo han sido en contra nuestra)

Ríes, al parecer con muchas ganas; dices “debi ser menos buena”.
Y ríes más.
Tras la risa, tu código de ternuras internas se hace añicos.
Dejas de ser misterio y no lo sabes.
Te me descubres sobre la pista, ligera
vas y yo te alcanzo.
Qué cosas...
Una tonta pregunta, una respuesta esquiva. Queda
escrito un libro grande
acerca de la vida (Herrera, Gatos y liebres 25)

The positionality of both the speaker and Ana Fidelia are very important in the poem. Because both are depicted as black Cuban women, there is an element of shared community between the speaker and interviewee. In addition, the fact that Ana Fidelia is portrayed as an interviewee reflects the performance of her public
persona. Within the poem, this public persona smiles and emphasizes contentment. Yet, the narrator identifies with the desgarramiento that is suppressed by Ana’s performance. This brokenness is revealed in the silences of the poem, what is not asked but signified, for example, by the ellipsis in line twelve. This brokenness is that which pertains to the private sphere – a forced smile, eluding a probing question, etc. Therefore, the words spoken jokingly by Ana Fidelia in the third line, “debió ser menos buena” cannot be taken at face value. On the surface, Quirot seems to suggest that her success necessitated a downfall. However, the underlying tone reflects the tension and contradiction between her exaltation as a public figure and the lack of consideration for her personal struggles.

Within the poem, Herrera uses the fictional interview with Quirot as a means to imagine a space where all is understood, even if it cannot be spoken. This understanding is important with regard to the challenges Herrera is making to current racial and gender formations. Because Ana Fidelia is a black woman and public figure, her success is seen as an example of social progress under the revolution. As a result, in revealing the brokenness behind the public figure, Herrera suggests that a similar brokenness exists among her communal counterparts, despite the public appearance of progress and contentment.

The author’s response and solution to this brokenness comes at the beginning of the poem, rather than at the end. The epigraph reads: “Las mujeres, /tenemos que empezar a ser cómplices,/porque ellos/siempre lo han sido/en contra nuestra.” The epigraph invokes women’s collective identity and solidarity by reminding the reader of the hegemonic powers that stand against them. It also suggests that women band together to confront the tension between what is required for the good of the public and what is necessary for the care of the individual. Such labor invokes collective
effort based not only on mutual struggle against hegemonic forces, an approach that most directly reflect Cuba’s national politics, but also the specific effects on internal communities. Thus, Herrera argues for racial and gender formations that acknowledge the specific oppression faced by black Cubans in general, and black Cuban women in particular. Beyond just acknowledgement, she suggests the need for safe spaces in which these groups can work toward their own liberation, addressing the specific needs of their communities.

The notion of contesting the Cuban state’s idea of freedom through the lens of black womanhood is something Herrera addresses throughout her work. For her, it is not enough to simply live in a nation where sexism and racism are outlawed. As a result, she directs much of her thematic attention toward the cultural and ideological constructs that continue to limit women of color in Cuba. When I met with Herrera in Cuba, she made it clear that equity is much more than a legal construct. Rather, it is "el derecho de llegar hasta donde tú puedas y quieras, eso es la verdadera independencia" (Herrera, Personal Interview).

In addition to prioritizing the histories and experiences of black Cubans, black women in particular, Herrera’s views on the role of black nationalism are exemplified by her representation of black nationalist-internationalist movements. More specifically, they are demonstrated by her particular framing of black anti-colonial movements in relationship to Cuba. A primary example of this can be seen in her poem “Respetos, Presidente Agostinho.” At first glance, the beginning of the poem appears to depict Africa as a mythological homeland. The speaker states, “Según abuelo, África / era un país bonito y grande como el cielo, desde” (Herrera, Always Rebellious 90). The disconnect between reality and mythical image is epitomized by the continents description as a single country. The speaker describes how this
particular image of Africa has been passed down through oral history, namely through the stories told her by her grandfather.

The next four lines of the poem, however, rupture this initial image by inserting the real history of the middle passage:

\[
\begin{align*}
el & \text{ que a diario, hacia} \\
\text{el infierno occidental, venían} \\
\text{reyes encadenados, santos} \\
\text{oscuros, dioses tristes}
\end{align*}
\]

In these lines, the speaker juxtaposes the image of a mythical African past with that of the horrors of slavery. The contrasting imagery of kings, saints, gods, and the hell of slavery in the Americas reflects both the dehumanizing process of slavery, as well as the way it ravaged black culture and history.

Following this history, the poem undergoes a temporal shift in the sixth line. The speaker no longer refers to the mythological image of Africa, nor its historical past. Instead, she focuses on Africa’s anti-colonial present and future.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Usted viene de África.} \\
\text{No es santo, rey, ni Dios siquiera,} \\
\text{es simple, grandemente, un hombre bueno.} \\
\text{Un hombre al que obligaron} \\
\text{a ganarse la paz de guerra en guerra} \\
\text{“el esperado,”} \\
\text{El que toca a la tumba de mi abuelo,} \\
\text{quien lo despierta, le habla} \\
\text{así, con su manera suave, irrevocable,} \\
\text{le explica de igual modo} \\
\text{en qué puntos estuvo equivocado (Herrera, Always Rebellious 90)}
\end{align*}
\]

The speaker now directs her voice to the poem’s addressee, President Neto. In contrast to the imagery of kings and saints, President Neto is depicted as a good man, made of flesh and blood. The nature of his goodness is categorized by the speaker’s reference to his participation in Angola’s anti-colonial struggle. The significance of these three depictions of Africa is exemplified by the speaker’s description of
President Neto as "el esperado." This long-awaited figure, leader of a black freedom struggle, correlates to the necessary redress of Western oppression on the continent.

The representational significance of President Neto is exemplified by the line, "El que toca a la tumba de mi abuelo." This ability to transcend her grandfather's death is a metaphor for the way anti-colonial struggles function temporally. On one hand, they represent a long awaited response to Western imperialism. On the other hand, the way that President Neto is characterized, as one who gently explains to the speaker's grandfather the errors of his ways, represents the complexity of this redress. Not only is his anti-colonial struggle about sovereignty, but it is also about cultural and ideological formations. It is a struggle that signals to a very present, materialist manifestation of Africa. As such, the figure of the president contradicts the relegation of Africa to a mythological past. This particular understanding of black international struggle represents Herrera's investment in opposing cultural, political and ideological hegemony.

Herrera’s specific reference to Angola is significant given Cuba's history with the nation. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Castro provided military and political support for the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a Marxist nationalist party led by Agostinho Neto. After Angola gained independence from Portugal, Cuba continued this support as the MPLA fought against the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), a party supported by Western anti-communist governments, as well as the South African government. Cuba’s involvement in Angola culminated in the 1988 battle of Cuito Cuanavale, which was a decisive victory against the expansion of South African apartheid.

Given this history, Angola represents the intersection of black internationalist and Third World socialist struggles. Still, it is significant that within the poem it is the
African leader who occupies the role of teacher. Neto explains the misconceptions of blackness and Africa to the speaker’s grandfather. Likewise, it is him who is characterized as the long awaited one. Rather than frame Angola’s anti-colonial struggle within the narrative of Cuban revolutionary success, Herrera uses it as an exemplar of black internationalism. In praising the figure of President Neto over Castro, Herrera gives priority to black nationalist struggles.

In addition to promoting black nationalist-internationalism, Herrera’s ode to President Neto speaks to the need to reclaim Africa in the present, both culturally and politically. Within the poem, the figure of President Neto materializes Herrera’s conception of Africa and blackness. Rather than projecting a mythical view of Africa, she grounds her work and her identity in black internationalist struggle. In an interview Paula Sanmartin conducted with Herrera, the poet discussed her desire to publish a book she has been working on for several years, titled *Africa: The Personal Approach to the Demythologization of Its Passions and Culture, Unique and Diverse* (266). At a recent public interview held in San Diego, Herrera reiterated her commitment to this project (Herrera, “Living the Legacy”). Not only does this reflect her understanding of the connections between black Cuban struggles and those of black people throughout the diaspora, it also illustrates her artistic and intellectual commitment to promoting these connections through a materialist lens. As such, poems like the “Respetos, Presidente Agostinho” illustrate Herrera’s movement beyond mere Afrocentrism. Rather, her poetry is rooted in holistic struggle.

**Jineterismo, or the Black Cuban Woman’s Indecency**

Although much of Herrera’s poetry advocates black nationalist-internationalist politics, she also pays particular attention to the specificity of black
womanhood in Cuba. Herrera’s activism and writing around gender emerges from a Cuban black feminist tradition that is rooted in the history of slave rebellions, cimarronaje, resistance to marginalization and otherness, transculturation and syncretism (Iglesias 152). The history of this tradition, as one that predates the Cuban revolution, is the subject of the recent *Afrocubanas* anthology. Published by Cuban feminists on the island, the anthology includes documents such as “*Voces negras a favor del Partido Independiente de Color*.”28 and Catalina Pozo Gato’s “*La negra cubana y la cultura*.”29 Along with academic essays and literature, the documents in the anthology establish a long trajectory of Cuban black feminist thought. As a participant in the anthology, Herrera is one of few contemporary women writers engaging in explicit black feminist politics. Still, this anthology represents one, counter-cultural effort to address the specific history and experiences of being a black Cuban woman. The issue of gender in post-1959 Cuba has been approached systematically, but with very little, if any, attention to the intersections of race, gender and sexuality.

One of the revolution’s earliest attempts to address gender specific issues involved reforming and eventually outlawing prostitution. Immediately after the revolution, measures were taken to register sex workers, provide health checkups, and prevent the exploitation of sex workers by brothel owners. In 1961, prostitution was outlawed and the revolution began rehabilitation programs that provided job training and basic education for former sex workers. These efforts were meant to foster a sense of national dignity in the face of foreign imperialism by rejecting the notion that Cuba and its female subjects existed for the world’s pleasure. In addition, the programs were meant to provide a sense of empowerment and social equality.30 For these very
reasons, the re-emergence of sex work as a prominent industry, specifically in connection to tourism, is both a sensitive topic and a source of national debate.

As with race, the onset of the Special Period saw the re-emergence of gender inequalities. Women, who primarily work in the healthcare and education sectors, have been less affected in terms of unemployment. In fact, the number of women employed increased between 1990 and 1996. Nevertheless, the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) asserts that since 1990 women primarily bear the burden in helping their families and communities cope with the crisis (Vigil 309-310). This responsibility often translates into abandoning professional positions for those that earn dollars, taking up temporary work when shortages of gas and electricity shut down jobs, or staying home due to the closure of daycares (Páges 312).

Among the people forced to bear the burden of the post-1990 economic crisis are those who have joined the rapidly growing sex tourism industry. Although not officially sanctioned, the growing industry is tolerated due to its great economic contribution. The scholarship surrounding sex work suggests that Cuban women of color represent a disproportionately large number of the industry’s participants (Lopez-Cabrales 204). As a result, the term *jineteras*, which emerged during the Special Period as a general term for those seeking supplemental income from the tourism industry, is now a highly racialized and sexualized term that refers specifically to black women sex workers. As such, *jineterismo* epitomizes the issues that surround the intersection of race and gender in Cuba.

As an activist, Herrera worked with feminist network MAGIN to challenge the ways in which *jineteras* were treated and discussed by state sanctioned groups like the FMC. MAGIN, which was established in the 1990s, was fostered by international feminist dialogue and remained heavily grassroots in nature. In addressing the topic
of *jineterismo*, Herrera and other members of MAGIN disagree with the official stance of the FMC that *jineteras* are nothing more than “decadent trash whose parents had lost control of them” (Sarduy and Stubbs 121-123). As Herrera pinpoints, the FMC’s line of thought coincides with a classist and racist moral code, one that is unfortunately shared by many. For example, in a 1995 survey, fifty eight percent of whites considered black Cubans to be less intelligent and sixty nine percent believed black Cubans do not have the same “values” or “decency” as whites (De la Fuente, “Recreating Racism” 321-322). The prevalence of such thought signifies the continued existence of racist ideologies, despite proclamations of colorblindness.

Along with the work that Herrera and MAGIN did, there have been other efforts to challenge the conventional notion that sex workers are nothing more than indecent, immoral women of color. Amalia Cabezas, author of *Economies of Desire*, for example, posits that the term “sex work” is inaccurate because it suggests a static, readily defined entity. Instead, she argues, that situations involving sexual exchange and currency are much more complicated and involve shifting connections between pleasure, intimacy and monetary support. As a result, the commodification of sex does not always signify oppression. Rather, it can be a form of resistance (Cabezas 4, 20, 138). Cabezas’ evaluation is important because it highlights the complex power dynamics involved in such labor, and challenges the rigid moral systems that wholly condemn both sex work and sex workers. Nevertheless, *jineterismo* is still a representative issue regarding the specific oppression faced by black Cuban women. The work produced by intellectuals like Herrera and feminist networks like MAGIN suggests that Cuban women of color represent a disproportionately larger number of participants in the industry. Furthermore, Cuban black feminist theorists, such as Yulexis Almeida Junco, have asserted that while white women have been gendered as
feminine and beautiful, “lo negro se ha asociado con lo instintivo, primitivo y salvaje...[y los] mujeres negras y hombres negros como personas con una apetencia sexual exacerbada” (136). As a result, black and mixed-race Cuban women are the explicit victims when it comes to image appropriation and sexualization for the benefit of the tourism industry. Thus, regardless of the industry’s fluidity, it represents the distinct economic marginalization of black women in Cuba.

In emphasizing the distinct racialization of jineterismo, Herrera poses a challenge to moral hierarchies that privilege whiteness. Critics like Raisa Pagés and the FMC have dismissed jineteras and blamed the increase in jineterismo on “the search for easy earnings by young people avoiding work and social and family responsibilities” (Páges 314). Contrary to the language of indecency used by white Cubans and the FMC, Herrera’s understanding of moral code is informed by circumstance and the need for survival, elements that are fundamental to any woman of color feminist framework. In an interview with Pedro Perez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, Herrera makes an astute observation and analysis of jineterismo in relation to black Cuban women. She remarks:

The whites always had the power, have always been better placed. Those who left Cuba at the start of the revolution because they had everything to lose were the whites. The blacks stayed. Now, whites are the ones abroad who can help their families—because now it’s allowed, they’re no longer traitors, or anything like that. Blacks are still the most marginalized...So it’s logical that blacks still face more economic privation, and, in the case of the black woman who is also exotic and attractive, she has the most difficulties. Whites help each other out a lot. With the bankruptcy of the socialist camp, chains of stores were opened that we call “shoppings,” because you can only buy there in dollars, and all the whites who were in power in the government started placing their people, their families and friends, and almost no black women. And so, black women were the first to go into jineterismo. Needs aside, they know they’re attractive. It’s a means of survival, there’s no doubt about that. (Sarduy and Stubbs 123)
Although she pinpoints the specific marginalization of black women, Herrera also suggests that, more than their white counterparts, these women of color go beyond the domestic sphere of keeping a “happy home.” Their physical and sexual labor is the foundation on which the booming tourism industry rests, as well as a source of income and sustenance for their communities. Unfortunately, the language of immorality has served to justify the exploitation of these women and resulted in the social construction of black women in Cuba as disposable, sacrificial bodies.

The official condemnation and clandestine encouragement of jineterismo is one illustration of the contradictions that can take place between the rhetoric and practice of collective politics. Herrera’s poetry and activism engage and confront this contradiction. It is her commitment to black women’s issues like jineterismo, along with her effort to foster the type of historical consciousness and racial formation described by Walterio Carbonell that makes Herrera’s work unique in its ability to address the specific racial and gender formations responsible for the continued marginalization of working class black Cuban women. It is in this regard that Herrera’s poem, “Calle de las mujeres de la vida,” holds distinct relevance.

Although Herrera wrote the poem in response to sex workers in her hometown, and not jineteras specifically, the poem was published in 1996 amidst the hostile climate surrounding jineterismo. Furthermore, the fact that the poem was written before the Special Period demonstrates the long standing roots of the racialized moral code being used against jineteras, thus highlighting the connection between racist ideologies before, during and after 1959.

Written in free verse, the poem’s content becomes that which provides form and meaning.

*Calle de las mujeres de la vida*
Desde la línea para allá, hacia arriba
el paso era
prohibido.

The first three lines of the poem discuss the physical and social boundary put in place between the “personas decentes” and the “mujeres de la vida.” This separation is accentuated by the third line, which consists of the singular word “prohibido.” This prohibition represents an effort to erase these women from communal space, an erasure that is especially relevant given the government’s proclamation of collective politics and identity.

As the poem continues, the author’s satirizes the “personas decentes.”

Las personas decentes, junto
a las que por tal pasaban mientras
no se descubriese lo contrario,
torcían el rumbo, los labios,
todo,
nada más que de mencionar aquella calle.

The nature of these people’s decency is challenged in the fifth and six lines, which conveys that even “personas decentes” are not moral innocents. Instead, these characters merely perform innocence and decency when, in fact, they have firsthand knowledge of what happens on the “calle de las mujeres de la vida.”

In lines seven through nine, their performance is emphasized, “torcían el rumbo, los labios,/todo,/nada más que de mencionar aquella calle.” Visual imagery conveys the way disgust is embodied by those who condemn the women. Likewise, their fear of contamination functions to pathologize sex work as a social ill. The singular presence of “todo” in the seventh line solidifies this point by conveying the absolute nature of their judgment and disgust.

In lines ten through eleven, however, the concept of guilt is subverted through
a play on the street’s name, “Calixto Garcia.”

No remedió la culpa el que llevase
nombre de un general de las pasadas guerras.
Decir
en cualquier casa de mi pueblo
Calixto García, venía siendo como
mentar al diablo.
Corriendo algunos riesgos, yo diría
que era mentar la soga en casa del ahorcado.
A todas estas, Calixto García
no llegaba a ser calle.
Era un camino
donde, a veces,
podía usted toparse un montón
de viejísima madera
en función de piso, techo
y pared.
Pero volviendo a lo anterior, Calixto
García, calle o camino, desde
su comienzo, allí, en la línea de ferrocarril
hasta donde
dejaba el pueblo de ser pueblo, era
la calle de las <<mujeres de la vida>>.

The speaker says that the name does little to remove guilt from the situation. This statement may be read as a comment on the sex worker’s guilt. However, a more subversive reading attributes this guilt to the legacy and rhetoric of liberation symbolized by the heroic national figure, General Garcia. Similarly, the idea that what Garcia represents “no llegaba a ser” echoes the statement that when it comes to creating a place where black people are “dueños, forjadores y críticos de nuestro propio destino de cubanos...[e]se país no ha llegado todavía” (Zurbano, “El país que viene”).

The second half of the poem is radically different in tone from the first half. The empty line between the first and second stanzas is a visual representation of how the speaker ruptures with the previously articulated narrative.

Damas
como no supo serlo alguna otra eran,
apoyadas
sobre un taburete en la pared;
sencillas, serias, esperando
cambiar unos momentos
la habitual rigidez de los que iban
en busca de algo más
que el apacible formulismo,
siempre a mano
en el hogar, formado
más que de amor
por las costumbres pueblerinas.
A la luz del recuerdo las presento:
formales, quietas, serias. Ellas
que dieron más que recibieron
en esa compra-venta del vivir a diario
a como se pudiera.
De la memoria saltan
al papel, hablando
del sinuoso tiempo,
largo como ofidio.
Sean todas
Benditamente recordadas siempre (Herrera, Gustadas sensaciones 33-34)

Rather than articulate the shame and stigma associated with these women, the speaker begins a new narrative, one in which they are “benditamente recordadas siempre.” The speaker accomplishes this by re-characterizing the “mujeres de la vida,” calling them “damas,” a name that both draws attention to and deconstructs the social hierarchy that disparages these women. The women are further described as “formales, quietas, serias” and those “que dieron más que recibieron.” Herrera’s words humanize and honor the women. While her characterization of the “mujeres de la vida” as "damas," "quietas" y "serias" may appear to reaffirm the gendering of women as quiet and subjugated, a closer examination reveals otherwise. Herrera’s effort to recharacterize the “mujeres de la vida” is linked to the current racialization of sex workers as “indecent blacks.” Historically, the gender formation of a quiet, submissive woman has been reserved for those women who are part of the dominant racial group, i.e. white women. On the contrary, female slaves and their descendants
have been historically racialized and gendered as hypersexual objects without dignity or access to dominant forms of womanhood. For white and mixed race women who occupy the higher strata of social hierarchy, narratives of sexual liberation are indeed counter hegemonic. However, this is not the case for many black women. Rather, a counter-hegemonic narrative is that which simultaneously challenges their relegation as sexual objects and ascribes to them a sense of dignity formerly reserved for white women. Herrera attempts to do this in the poem above by walking the thin line between two seemingly contradictory gender formations. While these women exercise control over their sexual labor, reminiscent of the discourse of sexual liberation, they are also characterized with a dignity formerly ascribed only to white, upper-class women.

Conclusions

Because poetry has historically been linked to creation of specific racial and gender formations in Cuba, it has an essential role to play in the effort to foster the kind of historical consciousness and deconstruction of bourgeois cultural formations described by black nationalist Walterio Carbonell. In making oral literature both a subject in her poetry, as well as a genre through which her work may be sustained, Herrera credits the plural, communal voices that make up the oral tradition with the very existence of her work. Thus, her writing becomes not just another effort to recognize or represent communal literature, but an effort to participate in the tradition, adding her voice as one among many. Moreover, because the traditions she draws from are black and feminist, she expands and privileges these communities within the context of post-1959 Cuba. As a result, and much like Rogelio Furé and
Walterio Carbonell, Herrera situates blackness - its traditions, histories and culture - as central to the narrative of revolutionary progress.

In addition, both in re-imaging the “mujeres de la vida” and focusing on the body as a site of exploitation, Herrera reasserts black women’s claims to the rights promised to them by the revolutionary government. Her work seems to suggest the possibility of black women’s full liberation, but cautions against ignoring the large scale cultural and ideological work that remains to be done. Herrera’s life and writing illustrate that this work best proceeds from the kind of artistic and cultural labor produced by black feminists like herself. Furthermore, she demonstrates a specific praxis available to poets like her, one that challenges the structural and cultural formations responsible for discrimination. As a poet, black feminist, and organic intellectual, Herrera produces a body of work that is inextricably linked to action and activism. Her medium permits wide access to the critical consciousness it produces. By articulating new racial and gender formations, Herrera works not only for black women’s liberation, but, echoing the sentiment of the Combahee River Collective, she seeks to undo the ideological and social hierarchies that affect us all. Furthermore, as a black internationalist feminist, her pursuit of liberation involves a direct engagement with the state.

By constructing and propagating black national consciousness within the context of the Cuban socialist nation-state, Herrera’s poetry and activism demonstrate that race and class are inextricably linked and, as a result, an anti-capitalist nationalism must incorporate black nationalism. However, this incorporation is distinct from the ideology of mestizaje. Much like U.S. multiculturalism, mestizaje fails to address the particular experience of blackness as a category that converges with class. In contrast, national black consciousness focuses
on intersection between class oppression and anti-blackness as a global phenomenon that is central to any Third World socialist revolution. For black consciousness leaders like Walterio Carbonell and Rogelio Furé, this consciousness must materialize in the form of black government leadership.

Herrera’s activism and poetry suggest that revolutionary nationalism must concern itself not only with the well-being of the worker, but with the specific well-being of the black woman worker. Furthermore, they suggest that black nationalist politics are important because they counter cultural and ideological trends that erase blackness and label such erasure as progress. Herrera’s work has important implications for Marxist scholarship. For one, it illustrates that the tendency to analyze the tensions between Marxist and black nationalist politics primarily through the lens of the relationship between Soviet communists and black nationalists overlooks the importance of Cuba as the only socialist nation-state to have a large, but not primarily, black population. This means that unlike in black nationalist movements in primarily black countries, or in contrast the primarily white USSR, the tensions between these two forms of nationalism are not easily resolved or ignored. It also brings to surface a primary claim of black nationalist politics, one that has yet to be answered by the Cuban government, the need for black leadership and self-determination within any and all emancipatory nationalist movements.

1 Nationalized in 1960, Radio Progreso transmits a variety of programs ranging from history and literature to sports and music.
2 In her autobiography, Herrera explains that at the beginning of the revolution, characters were depicted as entirely good or entirely bad, and that this was framed around revolutionary values. She tried to challenge this by depicting complex characters who were somewhere in between the two. She also discusses the push back she received for representing racial issues in her radio work (Castillo and Herrera 106).
3 Dr. Antonio Turall from the University of Bristol, literary critic Catherine Davies from the University of Nottingham, and Dr. Elizabeth Dore from the University of Southampton have been greatly involved in circulating Herrera’s work internationally.
4 See Walker, “My Father’s Country Is The Poor.”
5 See the “Código de la Familia.” Ley No. 1289. República de Cuba. 8 Mar 1975.
In 2013, *The New York Times* erroneously titled a translation an article written by Zurbano as “For Black in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun.” This interpretation represents a sensationalized version of Zurbano’s critiques of the Cuban state. However, the original article does provide its own contentious arguments about race and racism on the island.

There have, of course, been exceptions to this as with poets such as Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (known as Placido) has been recognized as an important early mixed race poet.

A key element of this process is returning to the past in order to rewrite the present. Sanmartín also looks at Georgina Herrera as one of the primary figures on the island involved in this tradition.

The publication of *Minerva*, the first Cuban magazine dedicated to black women, allowed for black women to begin publishing at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among the black poets who published in this magazine is Cristina Ayala. In the mid-twentieth century, before the revolution, Rafaela Chacón Nardi began publishing. However, it was after the revolution, in the 1970s and 1980s that she began to address questions of race (C. Davies 139).

The *negrismo* movement includes the work of poets like Ramón Guirao, José Zacarías Tallet, as well as other authors like Alejo Carpentier and Emilio Ballagas. This movement is credited with representing African influence on Cuban national culture. However, it has also been criticized for dealing with blackness in a superficial manner. Within this movement, however, Nicolás Guillén stands out as an exception. His famous relationship with Langston Hughes demonstrates the way some Cuban authors participated in international black literary movements. Still, Guillén’s poetry reiterated ideologies like *mestizaje*, rather than centering black agency. Furthermore, Guillén’s representation of blackness was critiqued by black contemporaries like Marcelino Arozamena for reproducing simplified, stereotypical images of black people (Jackson 41). In contrast, another one of Guillén’s contemporaries, Regino Pedroso, spent more time representing the specific forms of injustice black Cubans faced (Gomez García 222).

In addition to his well-known book, *Contrapunteo Cubano* (1940), works such as *Los negros brujos* (1906), *Los negros esclavos* (1916) have played an important role in acknowledging black contributions to national culture. However, Ortiz’s work has also been used to support a form of multiculturalism which often overlooks the specificity of the black experience in Cuba.

For further discussion of this approach, see Serviant, “Solutions to the Black Problem.”

In 1990, the onset of the Special Period, the U.S. census estimated that 83.5 percent of Cuban immigrants were white.


For example, see works by Julio Carreras, Pedro Deschamp Chapeaux, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Jose Luciano Franco, and Juan Perez de La Riva.


Most of the writings on contemporary issues of racism appear in journals, most notably *Temas* and *Catauro*.

For a detailed discussion see De la Fuente, *A Nation for All. Race, Inequality, and Politics In Twentieth-Century Cuba*.

For Martí’s theory of *mestizaje* see “My Race.”

Although Guillén was born seven years after Martí’s death, he succeeded him culturally and ideologically as a national poet.

Mentored by national poet Nicolás Guillén, Nancy Morejón was the first Afro-Cuban to graduate from the University of Havana. She was also the first black woman poet to publish widely and be accepted as a professional writer, critic and translator in Cuba.

Linda Howe discusses this pattern in depth in her article, “Raza y género en la poesía de Nancy Morejón.”
For a discussion of the political implications of the poem’s ending, see RoseGreen-Williams 12.

See Herrera’s poem “Oríki para las negras viejas de antes”

Agostinho Neto was the leader of the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola during its independence movement. He was the president of Angola from 1975 until his death in 1979.

The Partido Independiente de Color (PIC) was a black political organization founded by Evaristo Estenoz in 1908. The PIC condemned anti-black racism in Cuba as a colonial practice that was incompatible with Jose Martí’s vision for Cuban independence. Published in the newspaper Previsión in 1910, this statement by feminist Carmen Piedra argues for black autonomy.

This response to Gerardo del Valle’s 1930 article about the “negra Cubana,” redirects discussions of race and gender to include an analysis of the systematic and structural barriers to equality faced by black Cuban women. Furthermore, the author challenges the stereotype that all black Cuban women are poor, uneducated, and therefore fated to a miserable existence.

For a further discussion of the revolution’s approach to sex work, see Lewis, O., Ruth Lewis and Susan Rigdon, “The ‘Rehabilitation’ of Prostitutes.”

As opposed to an acronym, the name MAGIN is taken from the word Imaginación.

See the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement.”
Chapter 3

Embodying Black Internationalist Feminism: Grace Nichols’ Long Memoried, Fat Black Women

By the mid-1980s, the era of national liberation was coming to an end and Western capitalism was increasingly winning the war for dominance as the world’s prevailing socio-economic power. With the exception of Cuba, the majority of Third World socialist revolutionary efforts had failed to materialize on the level of the nation-state. In this chapter, I argue that British Guyanese author Grace Nichols uses poetry as a method of theorizing the practice of black internationalist politics, even when revolution is not possible at the level of the nation-state. Her work, however, moves beyond mere theory, and is itself an example of black internationalist feminist praxis.

Grace Nichols was born in 1950, the same year that the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) was formed and led by Forbes Burnham. After spending the first eight years of her life in the small country village of Stanleyville, Nichols and her family moved to Georgetown. In 1966, Nichols finished school at the young age of sixteen, just as Guyana gained its independence. A year later, she graduated with a diploma in Communications from the University of Guyana. Shortly after, Nichols took a position as a student-teacher. However, by 1972 Nichols had left her job as a teacher to become a reporter for The Chronicle, as well as a clerk with Guyana Telecommunications Ltd.

Although Nichols grew up relatively privileged as the daughter of a school headmaster, her class politics are greatly informed by the context of her childhood. From the time of Nichols’ birth to her emigration in 1977, Guyana saw the emergence of two competing political parties, the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) and the Afro-
Guyanese led People’s National Congress (PNC). During her work as a freelance journalist, the newly independent nation began nationalizing most of its industries and foreign investment assets. Despite what may be understood as steady progress towards the establishment of a concretely democratic socialist government, Guayana was plagued by racial violence, largely due to the antagonism between the PPP and PNC.

In 1977, only two years before Walter Rodney established the multiracial, Marxist Working People’s Alliance (WPA), Nichols migrated to the UK with fellow poet and partner John Agard. In many ways, her migration serves as a material example of the way black feminists were navigating their political identities amidst a declining radical era. Although radical movements were still thriving in many parts of the black diaspora at this time, the increasing global hegemony of U.S. capitalism was undeniable. Furthermore, Nichols herself had firsthand experience living in a postcolonial nation plagued by turmoil and division along racial and political lines. On a larger level, this political and racial turmoil represents the complications and limitations that Third World radicals faced when attempting to manifest Marxist politics on a national level. However, unlike Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera, Nichols chose not to remain in this context.

The realities of Thatcher era Britain were not much better for Nichols. The clash between mutually increasing British neoliberalism and black immigration resulted in a tense national climate rooted in anti-black sentiment. The brutalities imposed upon black immigrants by the British Special Patrol Group (SPG) are just one example of how this sentiment materialized in dire ways (Solomos 133-137). Despite these racial tensions, Nichols managed to become a rather successful author. Between 1977 and 2006, Nichols published over twenty texts, including poetry,
children’s literature and a novel. Of these texts, her two poetry collections published in the mid-1980s, *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, are the most critically acclaimed. As a result of her early success, Nichols became the first ever writer in residence at the Tate Gallery in London in 1999.

Although Grace Nichols boasts a wide body of work, in this chapter I examine poems from *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. Published in 1983 and 1984 respectively, these works represent the height of Nichols’ engagement with British racial and gender politics. For example, in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, Nichols foments a radical black feminist consciousness rooted in the practices of the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD). This consciousness is based upon an understanding of blackness as an anti-racist, anti-imperialist political identity that surpasses phenotypical labels. Furthermore, in both *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* and *I Is A Long Memoried Woman*, Nichols envisions the body as a site of political, social and cultural redress. The body represents both the physical site of black women’s embodied resistance to their oppression, as well as a means to projecting its futurity.

Overall, Nichols’ brand of black internationalist feminism shies away from more radical calls for national revolution. Instead, she contemplates the potential future of these politics, as well as the means through which they are practiced. Black British women writers like Nichols occupy a unique position with regard to their critique of empire. Far too often, postcolonial critiques reify the centrality of Europe in defining that which is postcolonial. In contrast, black British women occupy a unique space due to the plurality of their identity, and the way they are able to construct home and exile in varying ways. As a result, a black British feminist critique of empire de-centers European notions of home and belonging. Thus, as Carole Boyce
Davies concludes, black British women “are able to launch an internal/external critique which challenges simultaneously the meanings of Empire, the project of post-coloniality as well as the various nationalistic definitions of home” (C.B. Davies, *Black Women* 96). In many ways, Davies articulates the specifics of Nichols’ practice of black internationalist feminist politics. On one hand, Nichols’ thematic emphasis on black self-determination affirms black nationalist politics. On the other hand, the anti-imperialist and feminist themes present in her poetry destabilize the seemingly concrete categories of nation and empire.

Still, the politicized way Nichols represents black womanhood in her poetry is especially significant given the fact that colonialism and capitalism were the driving forces behind the black presence in Britain. Her writing, and the political identities it constructs, opposes the practice of anti-black British immigration policies that flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. I argue that such anti-black policies are not only reflective of British white supremacist ideologies, but that they also represent a racialized anxiety surrounding the potential threat of black internationalism. As a result, I situate Grace Nichols’ work within the larger tradition of black internationalist writing and activism and, by doing so, contest the myth that capitalist hegemony ushered in a post-radical era.

Although I read Nichols in light of her anti-racist and anti-sexist politics, I agree with Carol Boyce Davies’ statement that, “[i]f we see Black women’s writing only as gender- and race-based, peripheral, then we miss a major understanding of the very specific critique of imperialism that many of these writers are offering. For postures of dominance, of the policing of boundaries and categories are almost always linked to another anti-hegemonic reassertion” (C.B. Davies, *Black Women* 18). In an attempt to avoid the kind of reading Davies warns us about, I argue that Nichols
grapples with the role of black radical politics within the specific context of late Thatcher era Britain, as well as the larger context of the late Cold War. In this seemingly post-radical era, Nichols’s work simultaneously maintains the historically black internationalist critique of U.S. and European imperialism, while also re-theorizing the ways black internationalist and black feminist politics exist within these empires. By focusing on the long history of black radical resistance, Nichols challenges the discourse of post-radicalism. Furthermore, by imagining black women’s bodies as a potential site for practicing radical black feminism and black nationalism, Nichols illustrates that these politics can be practiced on a number of scales.

**Contextualizing Black Womanhood in Late Twentieth Century Britain: Repression, Political Organization and Cultural Production**

The history of black women’s lives, activism and cultural production in late twentieth century Britain is worth noting because it illustrates the particularities of black womanhood in this context. During the immediate post-war period, British demand for cheap labor resulted in the recruitment of migrant workers from freshly independent nations. During this time, the number of independent women immigrants nearly matched that of men. Despite this, British immigration law and welfare policies failed to take into account that migrant women came without husbands or families. During the 1970s, the participation of black women in labor struggles began to challenge this erasure. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, women’s organizations began to form, such as OWAAD. Founded in 1978, OWAAD was a grassroots organization that allowed black British women to unite nationally in their struggle against British racism and sexism. Not only did groups like OWAAD operate
on a political level, but they also opened up spaces for women of color writers. Community workshops, as well as sponsored performances and groups, provided grassroots opportunities for women of color writers to emerge in Britain, despite the resistance they faced by the keepers of the literary canon.

Although the organization only lasted five years, OWAAD in particular represents the political practice of blackness from an internationalist perspective. Julia Sudbury describes this practice in her book, Other Kinds of Dreams:

The term ‘black’ has long been a site of invention and creativity in the British context. Gaining popularity in the late 1960s as powerful images of revolution and change were projected onto television screens in inner city communities, black communities adopted much of the rhetoric of the American Black Power movement...the term ‘Black Pride’ resonated in a way which the ‘back to Africa’ movement did not. This resonance was due partly to the appeal of a diasporic politics of staying, rather than that of return. It was also due to the openness of the signifier ‘black’...It was in this context that Asian young people were able to rally with those of African descent under the umbrella of ‘black struggle’...Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, ‘black’ was seen as a forceful unifying term which projected an uncompromising demand for rights and an end to discrimination. (109)

Despite this unity, the concept of blackness as a political identity remained contested in Britain. Whereas some would argue that defining blackness on the basis of cultural difference, as opposed to racial or ethnic sameness, has greater political power, others would argue that this approach overlooks the specific needs that exist within Britain’s diverse postcolonial community. Regardless of these criticisms, this understanding of blackness is significant because it locates working-class blackness as the necessary focus of any anti-racist, anti-imperialist political organization. Even for those whose politics were more focused on labor reform than anti-capitalism, working-class blackness constituted the political focal point of their activism. In many ways, this viewpoint reflects Stuart Hall’s famous observation that in Britain, “[r]ace is the modality in which class is lived” (394).
Despite the debates about the category of blackness and the future of black British feminism, black British women writers continue to advocate anti-imperialist politics. At the height of OWAAD’s organizational activism, black women writers focused their efforts on transforming second wave feminism’s “global sisterhood” into a discourse that accounted for the racialized experiences and concerns of women of color living under Western imperialism. In the UK, writers like Hazel Carby, Pratibha Parmar and Valerie Amos became the voices of this movement. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, much of British black feminist scholarship was subsumed under the discourse of anti-racism. As such, the focus of mainstream black feminism became the gendered manifestations of racism, rather than their structural causes. Yet, this is also the time when black British women’s writing, much like in the United States, exploded in popularity. Poetry, novels and autobiographies offered unique perspectives on the nuanced complexities of black British womanhood. As a result, from the 1970s and 1990s, the focus of black British feminist discourse shifted from “the right to be equal” to “the right to be different.”

As the popularity of black British women’s writing in the 1990s fostered the growth of identity politics and the politics of difference, it also resulted in the dissolution of earlier black British feminist political projects. Nevertheless, because colonialism and capitalism were the fundamental driving forces behind the black presence in Britain, the work produced by black British women writers like Nichols inevitably addresses the legacies of colonialism, questions of migration, and the dehumanization of black women caused by the evolution of capitalism.
Framing the Author: The Legibility of Radical Black Feminism in Mainstream British Literary Culture

Writing in the 1980s and 1990s, Nichols’ work is often praised and consumed by Western readers as an affirmation of social progress (Welsh 18). I argue that the attempt to categorize her as such represents the tensions and contradictions involved in articulating radical politics in mainstream literary and popular culture. One possible explanation of this classification is that Nichols is also an author of children’s literature. As a result, readers have found it easy to dismiss her more poignant critiques as literary anomalies. In doing so, they prioritize her children’s literature over her other works. In addition to constructing a limited view of Nichols’ writing, this practice of ignoring her cultural criticism involves an overall misunderstanding of her engagement with marginalized literary and cultural traditions, as well as a misinterpretation of her use of language as an act of resistance to Western hegemony.

In contrast to her construction as a symbol of British social progress, Nichols and her contemporaries represent the fruit of 1970s black British activism and Caribbean literary production. They are also the first generation practitioners of a distinctly “black British aesthetic” (Welsh 7). I argue that the perceived lightness of Nichols’ work is in fact a strategic move. Influenced by radical writers like Linton Kweski Johnson, but publishing in the 1980s and 1990s, Nichols is forced to renegotiate the means through which she propagates her message. In this, she is representative of the way black internationalist feminist writers living in a so-called post-radical era find new ways of representing their opposition to Western imperialism and capitalist hegemony.

Another explanation of her classification as a representative figure of social progress is the fact that Nichols occupies a complex position that corresponds to
multiple cultural traditions. As such, her work is sometimes interpreted as existing in the service of British multiculturalism (Welsh 12). Much like the tendency to focus on her children’s literature, the narrative of Nichols as a multicultural author has resulted in her “light-hearted” work being praised, while her more “political” poems are ignored due to their inability to fit within this classification (Welsh 12). At best, these latter poems are recognized for their polemical nature, but dismissed as the product of her burden as spokesperson for the black British, black women’s, and Caribbean communities.

The misconception of Nichols as a representative of British multiculturalism stems from the fact that for her, home represents multiple meanings. However, rather than being a sign of racial progress, this multiplicity corresponds Nichols identity as radical black feminist. Carole Boyce Davies, herself the daughter of a black woman who migrated to the U.S. from the Caribbean in the 1960s, argues that the context of various types of black women’s migration - physical, cultural, etc. - manifests in the way black women writers re-negotiate their identities, therefore challenging previously held assumptions about identity, community and theory (C.B. Davies 3). She argues that black women’s writing is best understood as “a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (C.B. Davies 4). The particularity of the black diasporic experience necessitates such a formulation. Thus, in the case of a writer like Nichols, “Caribbean is not so much a geographical location but a cultural construction based on a series of mixtures, languages, communities of people” (C.B. Davies 13).

Davies’ understanding of the Caribbean as a cultural construct reflects Nichol’s own articulation of her identity. For her, simple binaries are complicated by the non-static movement between cultural, physical and other boundaries. Like many
other black British writers, Nichols complicates concepts of home, nation and belonging. In discussing how she conceptualizes her own position as a member of multiple diasporas, Nichols states, “I like to think of myself as a Caribbean person because the Caribbean embraces so much...You have Africa, you have Asia and Asian culture, you have European culture, and the Amerindian, the indigenous culture. It’s all there” (Butcher 17-20). In this sense, the Caribbean functions as not only a physical and cultural space, but also a metaphorical one. Rather than presenting us with an image of a multicultural Caribbean, Nichols describes a black diasporic identity that allows for nuanced differences, while simultaneously providing unity through Third World experience. This last point represents one of the ways Nichols challenges the hegemonic narratives of social progress, such as that of multiculturalism, by constructing an identity rooted in radical black feminism.

Still, Nichols relationship to Caribbean literature in particular, especially works produced in the UK, is significant to the interpretation of her work as a body of literature grounded in radical anti-imperialism. Her writing reflects a tradition established by Caribbean writers who migrated to the UK in the mid-twentieth century. During this period, writers such as George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, Jan Carew, Andrew Salkey and John Figueroa, as well as Guyanese writers Wilson Harris and Pauline Melville migrated to the UK for various reasons ranging from political exile to educational and publishing prospects. Between 1948 and 1958 alone, around one hundred novels written by Caribbean authors were published in Britain, contributing to what is known as the “boom years” for Caribbean literature (Welsh 3).

The combination of the literary boom and anti-colonial movements throughout the Caribbean in the mid-sixties fostered spaces for Caribbean intellectual
and cultural exchange. One of the most well-known of these spaces is the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), founded by John La Rose and Kamau Brathwaite. With distinct internationalist ties, CAM became a space for artistic, political and intellectual Third World alliances. Although CAM eventually dissolved into the journal *Savacou* in the early seventies, it left a footprint on both British and Caribbean literary landscapes.\(^4\)

Inheriting many of the literary stylistics developed under CAM, Nichols is specifically known for her use of Creole as an example of a distinctly grassroots Caribbean cultural form.\(^5\) Creole, or as Kamau Brathwaite calls it “nation language,” asserts the significance of heterogeneous, grassroots projects of cultural and political national identity (Braithwaite 13). In terms of legibility by non-speakers, because Creole operates on a continuum, rather than existing as a finite, static entity, the possibilities for legibility lay in the hands of the speaker, thus the speaker exerts her own agency in electing who understands her. In the English speaking world, Creole is often understood as being comprised of European lexicon and African syntax or grammatical structure. This conception of Creole is significant because it offers a structural representation of how the language can be theorized as a disruption of, or intervention into, European language and epistemology. However, Creole, at least in its poetic manifestations, is perhaps best understood as its own language, the invention of an entirely new system of expression.

This definition of Creole also allows for a reading of Nichols’ work that privileges her use of language as a way of constructing new social and cultural meanings. Instead of defining her as a black woman writer, or a Caribbean writer, or some other subject with a particular race, class, or set of experiences, reading Nichols and her work through the metaphor of nation language permits an analysis of her
writing as an interrelated “dub” or “remix” of other versions (Welsh 15). So, whereas Linton Kwesi Johnson’s use of nation language to construct black British national identity is one “dub” of Caribbean literature, which altered the canon by forcing it to come to terms with its racist practices, Grace Nichols’ use of nation language is yet another “dub.”

This use of Creole is an important counter to the assertion that Nichols’s writing is “light-hearted.” Speaking about Nichols, Carole Boyce Davies states that her “deliberate fracturing of the English word disrupts from outside the contained identity of Englishness as expressed in its language” (C.B. Davies, Black Women 110). Creole in itself is an example of what Fred Moten describes as the object possessing and transforming the subject. It is a literal and figurative example of agency. Davies describes the work of writers like Nichols as “uprising textuality,” that which posits anti-imperialist discourses and works against the historical silencing of black women (C. B. Davies, Black Women 108). In adding to the body of work that draws from Creole as a literary and aesthetic means of signifying, Nichols confronts the cultural and ideological dominance of white supremacy and eurocentrism. She uses her writing as a form of political praxis that challenges the racism and patriarchy inherent to “the master’s tongue” (O’Callaghan 6).

Another key characteristic of Nichols’ work that challenges her categorization as a symbol of racial progress is her use of multiple narrative voices to construct a collective identity. This is exemplified by the long memoried woman’s use of the lowercase “i,” which emphasizes communal identity over individual identity. This is the same aesthetic practice used by Assata Shakur in her autobiography, as well as one utilized by black women writers throughout the diaspora. It functions not only as a literary aesthetic of black internationalist feminism, but also as an example of the
way communal politics are linked to personal practices. On one hand, this technique fosters community and reaffirms the tradition of oral history and literature in which it participates. On the other hand, the way black women writers like Nichols navigate the boundaries between “i” and “we,” “self” and “other,” interrogates the legitimacy of such categories.

This boundary crossing and interrogation also functions on a stylistic level. Writers like Nichols often move between several genres within the same collection, or even the same poem. The author’s ability to move from historical fiction to fantasy, or autobiography to epic poem, or any other number of genres, challenges the rigid classification of writing that is characteristic of Western epistemology.

Overall, Nichols’ work demonstrates itself to be anything but that which operates in the service of British multiculturalism. Rather than promoting narratives of Western social progress, her work emphasizes the need to address the inequalities that affect black people on a material level. She accomplishes this by privileging that which is bodily over that which is abstract. Her writing also privileges suppressed forms of knowledge and expression, such as African oral traditions, religious practices and Creole. Doing so allows the poet access to a mode of expression that cannot be found within the English language.

**The Language of Memory & Resistance in I Is a Long Memoried Woman**

Nichols’ collection of poems, *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, exemplifies her use of Creole as a form of cultural resistance to Western hegemony, as well as her theory of using the body as a site for practicing black internationalist feminist politics. This collection of poetry narrates the journey of a black woman from Africa, across the Atlantic and into slavery. Speaking about the collection’s origin, Nichols has said
that *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* was inspired by her dream of a young black woman swimming from Africa to the Caribbean. She interpreted the dream as a representation of how the young girl was “trying to cleanse the ocean of pain and suffering that her ancestors had gone through” (Markham 298). Nichols goes on to say in another interview that she had no didactic intentions for the poem. Rather, the dream encouraged her to go on a historical search that would later inform her writing.

Nichols is not alone in writing about the journey of a black female protagonist across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. In fact, the collection bears a resemblance to Afro-Cuban poet Nancy Morejón’s “Mujer Negra.” Like “Mujer Negra,” *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* articulates the history of black resistance in the Americas, from Nanny and the maroons in Jamaica to the Haitian Revolution. However, *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* is more of a remaking of mythology, than a poetic link between maroon revolt and socialist revolution. Nichols herself describes the protagonist of the collection, the long memoried woman, as “something of a mythic figure...She is a woman of complex moods who articulates her situation with vision. Her spirit goes off wandering, meeting women from other cultures. She’s a priestess figure and employs sorcery when necessary” (Welsh 55).

In addition to being a mythic figure, the protagonist is also a representation of a heterogenous community. At any given moment she may be an elder, or a goddess or a young woman. Throughout the collection, the “i” is a nameless speaker who operates not only as an individual voice, but also as a communal one. In being both, the long memoried woman avoids speaking for the community. Instead, she is speaking along *with* the community.

The protagonist’s status as a mythic figure is further solidified by the fact that she is not fixed by her status as a slave, but travels beyond her current circumstances
through dreams, storytelling and spiritual journeying. Her mythic nature allows her to transcend her physical limitations. Her encounters with Yemanji, experiences as Ashanti spider, and recollections of Aztec and Inca pasts, all represent the way her “chameleon spirit” travels through space and time. This spiritual journey forges a link that is more than symbolic between the long memoried woman and other women and subjugated peoples from various times and places. Rather than serve as a representative figure for black women under slavery, the long memoried woman, living up to her name, embodies a historical consciousness that links the subjugation of Third World and subaltern peoples throughout time and space.

Still, despite the international nature of the long memoried woman’s journeys, Nichols places great emphasis on West African religion, language and oral tradition. Poems like “Ala,” “Among the Canes,” “Yemanji,” “Time of Ogun/Mamu,” “We the Women,” and “Like Anansi” all invoke West African religious and literary traditions. Not only do these poems demonstrate the historical ways in which slaves resisted imposed European language and tradition, but they also reassert their epistemological significance today. As with Assata Shakur and Georgina Herrera, this practice of depicting the history of black agency forms part of Nichols’ specific aesthetic as a black internationalist feminist writer. Furthermore, poems such as “I Coming Back,” “Hi Di Buckras Hi!,” “Night Is Her Robe,” “Love Act,” “The Return,” “Nanny” and others all form part of Nichols’ narration of black women’s resistance to the specifically gendered dynamics of slavery.

“Hi Di Buckras Hi!,” for example, illustrates the way black women have historically made skilled use of language and doublespeak as a mode of resistance. In the poem, the speaker specifically uses Creole language and song to deconstruct notions of white and black womanhood. Singing about the “Buckra,” a Creole term
for white people, the speaker not only satirizes each “buckras” performance of their racialized gender role, but also specifically juxtaposes the white buckra woman’s performed womanhood with that of the black woman. The first half of the poem reads:

Vexation of mind
Vexation of eye
Vexation of spirit

...

Look at the buckra woman
head in parasol floating
by white and pale
being helped from carriages
being lifted over ditches
floating by white and pale
not even looking
not even seeing
the pain and rage and black
despair

This first half of the poem confronts the reader with the reality that white womanhood, as a historical gender formation, was only made possible by the “pain,” “rage,” and labor of black women. The idea that the “buckra” woman plays her part in the cultural performance of chivalry, while simultaneously overlooking the black bodies that make her charmed life possible, links gender performance to the racial inequalities that make it possible. Thus, Nichols’ poem illustrates the way privileged forms of white womanhood are dependent upon the subjugation of black women.

However, Nichols' poem does not end with the subjugation of black women. Rather, the speaker uses language and song to question and subvert the racial hierarchy responsible for her subjugation. As the poem continues, the speaker sings:

O buckra woman she come over de sea
with she round blue eyes from she
cold countree
She walk straight, she head high
she too fenky
she better take care she don’t turn
zombie

O buckra man him come over de sea
with him pluck-chicken skin
from him cold countree
Him palaver him a pray him a dress
fancee but suddenly so him turning
weak and dizzy

...

Hi de buckras hi
Hi de buckras hi
Hi de buckras hi
O Hi de buckras hi!

On the surface, these lyrics mock the white master and mistress, contesting the social order of slavery. However, references to “zombies” and imagery of the masters as “weak and dizzy” allude to far more. As many scholars have articulated, from the Haitian Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion, fear of black revolt was an ever present reality of slavery. This fear affected the way slave owners exercised terror and dominion, but it also served as a source of power from which slaves could draw. The image of “zombies” in the poem is therefore tied to something worse than death. It is an image that haunts. By threatening that the mistress must be careful so ”she don’t turn zombie,” the speaker draws upon the fear of insurrection as a source of power and resistance to white supremacist dominion.

Poems like ”Hi de Buckras Hi” not only represent the historical practices of resistance that belong to a black tradition that predates the so-called radical era, but they also illustrate the way these practices have remained largely illegible by members of the dominant class. In a similar fashion, the poem “Skin teeth” represents the way slave’s performance of contentment should not be conflated with their compliance. In
the poem, the speaker communicates this point by warning her that her words and actions should not be taken literally. The poem reads:

Not every skin-teeth
is a smile ‘Massa’

if you see me smiling
when you pass

if you see me bending when you ask

Know that I smile
know that I bend
only the better
to rise and strike
again (Nichols, Long Memoried Woman 56)

Here, the speaker refers to the fact that the skin pulled back slightly from her teeth is interpreted as a smile, a sign of submission by the master. In reality, this action signifies something else entirely. To say that this smile is false would be to oversimplify the statement being made by the speaker. Rather than being an act of falsehood, this “skin-teeth” stands in as a metaphor for black performance.

In Scenes of Subjection, Saidiya Hartman analyzes the significance of such performance. It is well known that slaves were often required to sing or dance for their masters, literally performing their obedience and subjugation. This performance can be understood as a means of survival, but Hartman goes further to analyze the complex dynamics involved. In addition to being pragmatic, these performances can also be understood as subversive. As Hartman puts it, “these performances constituted acts of defiance conducted under the cover of nonsense, indirection, and seeming acquiescence” (Hartman 8).

It would be naive to assume that every performance by a slave for a master constituted an act of subversion. The question then becomes, “how does one determine the difference between ‘puttin’ on ole massa’ - the simulation of
compliance for covert aims- and the grins and gesticulations of Sambo indicating the repressive construction of contented subjection?” (Hartman 8) Deciphering between these two types of performance is essential to determining which acts reify systems of subjugation and which ones challenge them by creating new modes of signification. The latter successfully challenges the notion that race has simply always existed, by enacting not only racial subjugation, but also white dominance and power, and the conditions of racial hierarchy. As Hartman puts it:

These performances of blackness are in no way the “possession” of the enslaved; they are the enactments of social struggle and contending articulations of racial meaning. The unremitting and interminable process of revision, reelaboration, mimicry, and repetition prevents efforts to locate an originary or definitive point on the chain of associations that would fix the identity of a particular act or enable us to sift through authentic and derivative performances, as if the meaning of these acts could be separated from the effects they yield, the contexts in which they occur, or the desires they catalyze, or the performative from scenes of torture. Moreover, these performances implicitly raise questions about the status of what is being performed-the power of whiteness or the black’s good time, a nonsensical slave song, or recollections of dislocation. (57)

Hartman’s analysis focuses on the subversive performance of compliance by slaves. In bringing this tradition to the forefront of her poetry, I argue that Nichols parallels the situation of black people under slavery to that of black people living under capitalist hegemony. Clearly, Nichols is not equating the two, as the status of black people under slavery represents a historically unmatched period of genocide and oppression. However, there is a comparison to be made with regard to the possibilities available to black people living under socio-economic systems that relegate them to the bottom rungs of society.

The long memoried woman’s tale represents such a history and stands in opposition to those discursive and historiographical practices that would limit black radical and oppositional politics to the context of twentieth century interwar and cold
war era activism. Instead, by deconstructing this myth, Nichols challenges the notion that black nationalist-internationalist and radical feminist politics are past tense. More specifically, she deconstructs the myth of a post-radical era. Instead, by focusing on the body as a site of redress, Nichols use the specific history of black women’s embodied resistance as a means to projecting its futurity. She also uses this as a means of speaking to the way black people are forced to re-strategize their resistance under the seeming failure of the revolutionary politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Just as slaves were able to question and deconstruct the racialized power dynamics of slavery through these performances, Nichols seems to suggest a similar possibility for agency today through subversive cultural performance.

The theme of double signification in “Skin Teeth” harkens back to the collections prologue, where the speaker warns

From dih pout
of mih mouth
treacherous
calm of mih
smile
you can tell
i is a long memoried woman.” (Nichols, Long Memoried Woman 7)

Here, the speaker uses her memory as a weapon to threaten those who oppress her. Through the long memoried woman, Nichols emphasizes the significance of memory to both recognizing the long standing tradition of black women’s resistance to oppression, as well as redressing the oppression itself. Furthermore, she creates a counter-history through the speaker’s memory that challenges the periodization of black radicalism as a twentieth century phenomenon.

Nichols does not, however, stop with the suggestion of resistance through performance. Rather, the last lines I Is a Long Memoried Woman illustrate that these tactics are temporary acts of pacification, while the speaker prepares to “rise and
strike again.” These last lines have multiple meanings. To “rise and strike” can be understood as a literal rising of the masses. Alternatively, this could be imagery alluding to the way a cobra rises and strike down its adversary. In any case, the message is clear: a moment of radical resistance stands firm in the future, not the past. How this moment will manifest, however, remains unclear.

**Flesh, Bone and Sand: Anti-Imperialist Politics and Caribbean Spaces**

Another key aspect of how Nichols engages black internationalist politics is through her contemporary discussions of Western imperialism. The importance of anti-imperialism as a key element of black internationalism was solidified during the interwar period. By focusing on this as a key tenant of black internationalist politics, Nichols draws upon a long standing tradition. Because this tradition, and the role of black Caribbean participation in it, is central to understanding Nichols’ articulation of black internationalism, its history is worth noting.

The role Caribbean intellectuals have played in forming the discourse and politics of black internationalism in the Americas is now well known. Figures like Claude McKay, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Richard B. Moore, Amy Jacques Garvey, and Eric Williams are just a few of the many examples that come to mind when one thinks of Caribbean black political leaders. These figures’ experiences with U.S. white supremacy served as a catalyst for their radicalism. Likewise, their experiences and knowledge of Western imperials outside of the U.S. helped foster the growth of black internationalism within the country. A similar argument can be made about the growth of black internationalism in Britain.

Despite the fact that black British subjects had far less access to the metropole than their Francophone counterparts, from 1920 to 1935, London functioned as a
major haunt for black radical intellectuals and black internationalists alike. As black British subjects began to exchange cultural and political ideas, new organizations emerged and defined the terms of black British activism. Whereas the British communist party was reluctant to involve itself in anti-colonial struggle, organizations such as the Union of Students of African Descent (USAD), African Progress Union (APU), Gold Coast Students Union (GCSU), the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), the Negro Welfare Association (NWA), and the West African Students Union (WASU) were actively involved in fighting for the equity of black people worldwide. Primarily coalitions between students and workers, these organizations represent the diverse activities of black British internationalist politics. Some of these organizations, such as NWA, where distinctly socialist. Others were, at the very least, leftist in their approach to black liberation. These nuanced approaches were due, at least in part, to the fact that many of the student intellectuals and activists were children of the African and Caribbean elite, still negotiating their specific role and alliances with London’s black working class, who were brought to the country through military service and other labor needs.

By the late 1930s, there was a distinct shift towards building a more explicit black international in Britain. At this time, figures like Una Marson, C.L.R. James, and George Padmore were leading the movement and arguing that the racialized practice of European imperialism necessitated a black internationalist response. For example, the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the threat of European fascism represent two of the many contradictions inherent to European imperialism that fostered the growth of black internationalist politics in Britain at the time. Ethiopia’s long held symbolic significance for black people throughout the globe meant that Italy’s attack constituted much more than an imperialist venture. Rather, it
symbolized the way European imperialism operated on the basis of anti-blackness. The importance of this event is summed up in George Padmore’s split with the Communist party after they provided supplies for the Italian invasion. Like Padmore, Una Marson was particularly involved in rallying black support for the Ethiopian cause, as well as fomenting a more general anti-imperialist black politics. As a result, organizations such as the International African Service Bureau (IASB) were formed to support of African anti-colonial movements.

In many ways, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the growth of European facism during the interwar period solidified black internationalism as a political movement forged in antagonism to European and U.S. imperialist practices, specifically in Africa and the Caribbean. It also forged a political identity based on the shared experience of being racialized as black in places like London. The cultural and intellectual exchanges that took place between workers and students during this period formed new possibilities for articulating blackness as a political category of resistance.

It is from this context that the next generation of black British intellectuals began to embrace and articulate the particulars of black (inter)nationalist politics in Britain. Linton Kwesi Johnson, in particular, was at the forefront of the movement to theorize and construct a black British nationalism. A member of CAM before its dissolution, Johnson was heavily influenced by the works of Kamau Brathwaite, as well as the poetry of the U.S. Black Arts Movement. Drawing from their similar emphasis on the vernacular, Johnson developed his own aesthetic, which reflected a desire for young black people to vocalize their discontentment and inhabit public spaces without regard for white comfort. Johnson’s leftist politics and connections to the Black Panther Party challenged the marginal position of black British youth, as
well as their racialization as violent criminals. In terms of his literary influence,
Johnson was one of the first writers to use Caribbean Creole within the black British
context as an aesthetic strategy for advocating racial and class equality (Welsh 6). In
many ways, Nichols engages with Johnson’s aesthetic legacy through her similar use
of Creole.

In terms of Johnson’s literary and political legacy, I am particularly interested
in his withdrawal from the black British community. From 1984 to 1990, Johnson
When Johnson finally returned to the public sphere in 1991, it was to perform abroad.
At this point, his poetry had taken on a reflective tone, focusing on the seeming failure
of black British nationalism. For instance, Johnson’s poem, “Tings an’ Times”
contemplates the future of leftist collective politics in a world where capitalism and
liberalism have solidified their hegemonic domain. It is precisely at this time, during
Johnson’s withdrawal and disappointment, when Nichols begins to thrive as a public
poet. Influenced by the politics of earlier black British radicals, like Johnson, Nichols’
poetry attempts to negotiate the possibilities and limitations of black radical politics
given the changing political landscape.

In Back Home Collection, Nichols reasserts the importance of black
internationalism as an oppositional force to Western imperialism. She specifically
does so by criticizing the extension of U.S. military and cultural imperialism through
the tourism industry. In her poem “Price We Pay for the Sun,” for example, the
speaker contemplates the commodification of Caribbean land, and its effect on
Caribbean people. Like her poem “On Receiving a Jamaican Postcard,” “Price We Pay
for the Sun” questions the power dynamics and flow of benefits involved in a tourism
economy. The first stanza of the poem reads:
These islands
not picture postcards
for unraveling tourists
you know
these islands real
more real
than flesh and blood
past stone
past foam
these islands split
bone

Like Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera, Nichols critiques the tourism economy that commodifies Caribbean islands for the sake of Western tourists’ pleasure. The poem conveys this criticism by juxtaposing the idealized image of the Caribbean, symbolized by the postcard, with its inhabitants who make the island “more than flesh and blood.” Within this first stanza, Nichols contradicts the notion that Caribbean inhabitants are little more than part of a beautiful backdrop in the tourist’s picturesque experience. Rather, she uses the imagery of “flesh and blood” and the repetition of “real” to emphasize the material conditions of the people living on the island.

In the second stanza of the poem, Nichols uses landscape and weather imagery to illustrate the complexities of life that exist for the islands’ inhabitants.

my mother’s breasts
like sleeping volcanoes
who know
what kinda sulph-furious
cancer tricking her
below
while the wind
constantly whipping
my father’s tears
to salty hurricanes
and my grandmother’s croon
sifting sand
water mirroring palm
In contrast to the postcard imagery of calm blue seas and white sands, the poem presents the reader with lamentations, sickness and changes. The speaker’s reference to mother, father and grandmother stands in as a metaphor for lineage and legacy. These images and emotions are not meant to depict Caribbean life as pitiful, but rather to illustrate the existential breadth of Caribbean life. These complex emotions rupture the monolithic image of the docile, friendly Caribbean local, a trope that has long been used to justify the exploitative nature of tourism industry. However, these images also represent the violence and legacy of imperialist exploitation. Thus, by connecting the tourism industry to other imperialist practices of exploitation, the poem challenges the historical othering of Caribbean subjects for the sake of Western diversion and entertainment.

Finally, in the last stanza the poem reads:

Poverty is the price
we pay for the sun girl
run come (Nichols, The Fat Black Woman’s Poems 42)

The third line of the stanza can be read as either the speaker addressing the “girl” about the cost of a tourism economy, or the speaker discussing the cost behind the image of “the sun girl.” In this second reading, the juxtaposition of poverty with the “sun girl,” the racialized and gendered personification of white Western tourist enjoyment, reveals the contradictions of diversion and exploitation that are inherent to a tourism economy.

In addition to critiquing the tourism economy as a form of exploitation, the poem also questions the disparity between how Caribbean people exist in the Western imaginary, and the way their land is conceived. Whereas both have been exploited, they are conceptualized in very different ways. Caribbean land is an object of desire, a space the West seeks to inhabit. In contrast, Caribbean people are rejected from the
space occupied by white British subjects, at least when that space is in Europe. In essence, Nichols’ poem deconstructs the logic that simultaneously allows for white British resistance to sharing space with black Caribbeans at home, while enthusiastically enjoying sharing space with Caribbeans abroad. In doing so, she illustrates the role racial hierarchy plays in determining where and how Caribbean people are allowed to exist.

Like “The Price We Pay for the Sun,” Nichols’ poem “So the Eagle” also critiques Western presence in the Caribbean, particularly through her representation of the U.S. invasion of Grenada. Dedicated to the “death of the Grenadian revolution,” the poem serves as a political elegy. In writing “So the Eagle,” Nichols joins other black women writers, such as Nancy Morejón and Audre Lorde, who have also addressed the Grenada invasion. Although the event is largely absent from the discourse of U.S. military engagement in the Third World, the invasion of Grenada holds great significance within the black imaginary. As the first black revolution in the English speaking world, 1979 Grenada joined the ranks of Haiti and Cuba in representing the national revolutionary capacity of black radicalism. Thus, this poem in particular exemplifies Nichols’ engagement with a radical black internationalist discourse. The poem reads:

So the eagle
has turned full circle
again
swooping on a revolution’s
remains
winging bullets/burgers/
hot rescues
in the claws of its rein (Nichols, The Fat Black Woman’s Poems 54)

Within the poem, Nichols utilizes the well-known image of the eagle as a symbol for the U.S. to discuss the 1983 invasion of Grenada. She then, however, re-characterizes
the eagle, not as an honorable creature, but as an ignoble scavenger. The “circling” and “swooping” appear more like the actions of a vulture than an eagle, emphasizing the gross, predatory nature of the invasion. In the sixth line of the poem, the backslash serves as both a literal and figurative connection between the “bullets,” symbols of military force, and the “burgers” that represent cultural infiltration. The poem links these two forms of imperialism, causing the reader to consider the multiple means by which U.S. imperialism asserts itself.

It is worth noting that, like Herrera, Nichols’ practice of black internationalist feminism offers a vision of how the growing influence of U.S. globalized capitalism affects black women in the Third World. This is illustrated by the fact that the Grenada invasion is inextricably linked to U.S. tourism as an imperialist practice. For example, U.S. soldiers utilized tourist maps as guides during the invasion, demonstrating the intricacies U.S. cultural, economic and military expansion. Thus, through this poem, Nichols joins Herrera in challenging this very specific facet of Third World black women’s oppression, while also linking these experiences to those of black women living in the First World.

**The Fat Black Woman’s Poems**

In addition to focusing on the importance of anti-imperialist politics, Nichols also addresses the questions of how to exercise black feminist and black nationalist politics within the context of post-WWII Britain. Specifically, Nichols critiques anti-immigrant and anti-black policies of the time. The scholarship on race and immigration and post-World War II Britain is expansive. Generally speaking, the dominant narrative of British immigration policy maintains that the period between the 1948 Nationality Act and the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act marked an era
of pained debate that regrettably resulted in the cessation of free entry into Britain for British subjects. However, scholars have long since deconstructed this narrative to prove that British immigration policies during this period were explicitly anti-black.¹⁴

Both the Labour and Conservative parties were involved in instituting a number of administrative policies meant to prevent black immigration. To support such policies, the Nottingham and Notting Hill riots in 1958 were used as “evidence” of the undesirability of black immigrants and their “negative impact” on white British people, despite the fact that the riots consisted of mostly white British citizens attacking black people, the incidents were used to support control policies against black immigration.

By 1962, racial tensions resulted in the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, the first legal control of the immigration of colonial British subjects. Though the language of the act included all Commonwealth countries, it was specifically aimed at non-white British subjects. The Act made a legal distinction between citizens of Britain and its colonies, and the independent Commonwealth citizens who were mostly people of color. The latter were subject to immigration control and could effectively only enter the country by holding jobs that met specific labor needs, filling skilled labor shortages, or serving in the British Armed Forces. Although a number of reforms were instituted by the Labour Party over the next few years, the general pattern of anti-black immigration discourse and administrative action was sustained. The 1971 British Immigration Act, which essentially prevented black Commonwealth immigrants from settling in Britain, is a prime example of the racialized nature of British immigration policies during this period.

By the time Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, the Conservative party had adopted a policy of discussing immigration in terms of the threat non-white
people posed to the nation’s social fabric. In response to this threat, several measures were taken, including the further limitation of black immigration and the 1983 British Nationality Act. Moreover, it was during Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister that the debate around black immigration most decisively shifted from focusing on an “external threat” to that of an “enemy within” (Solomos 66).

In his analysis of the significance of the relationship between anti-blackness and British immigration policies, John Solomos concludes:

[T]he debates on immigration and race took place and developed the context of widespread social, political and economic change. The rapid transformation of many inner city localities, particularly in relation to economic and social infrastructure, provided fertile ground for the racialisation of issues such as employment, housing, education and law and order...This racialisation process moved public and political debate beyond the question of immigration per se and towards the identification of specific social problems with race. But the link...was maintained at another level, because it was the size of the black population, whether in schools or the unemployment queue, that was identified as the source of the problem. (66)

Not only did this shift in public and political discourse have implications for how black people were racialized in the late and post-Cold War era, but it also had very real, material effects on the way black people, youth especially, were policed and governed.

While some scholars have explained the racist nature of British immigration policies on the rise of British neoliberalism, I suggest that given the political context of anti-colonial movements and international black radical politics, these policies were much more than the result of white supremacy and anti-black public fear. They represent a racialized anxiety surrounding the potential threat of black internationalism. Although much of the scholarship regarding the tension between capitalist and socialist societies focuses on the U.S., U.K., U.S.S.R. and China, I suggest that the black international was an equal source of political anxiety.
Moreover, because black internationalist politics focus on the intersections of race, class, and, at times, gender and sexuality, it posed an even greater threat to Western structures of dominance.

Within this context, and only a year after the 1976 Race Relations Act, Nichols herself immigrated to the UK in 1977. Thus, the racial tensions surrounding immigration and the perceived threat of black people to British identity form the context of Nichols’ early work. Responding to an anti-black immigration discourse, which purports that black people would harm the racial character and national identity of the British people, Nichols defiantly published *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* in 1984. The collection recounts the thoughts and experiences of the titular Fat Black Woman. From shopping in London, to lamenting the past, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* presents the reader with a transgressive personification of black womanhood that challenges the dominant anti-black discourse of the time.

The poem “Fear,” for example, reads as a direct response to the racial climate of Nichols’ time. Published not long after the British Nationality Act, “Fear” raises questions about the roots of anti-black sentiment, as well as its effect on black futurity.

Fear

Our culture rub skin
against your own
bruising awkward as plums

black music enrich
food spice up

In these first two stanzas, the speaker signals to the emergence of a black British culture. However, the “rub” and “bruising” of cultural clash reminds the reader that this cultural nationalism is being violently contested.
You say you're civilised
a kind of pride
ask, 'Are you going back sometime?"

but of course
home is where the heart lies

In these next two stanzas, the speaker refers to the discourse of civilization that is perceived to be a core characteristic of British national identity. Yet, the passive aggressive question, “Are you going back sometime,” signals to the limitations of this civility when it is applied to non-white nationals and black immigrants. This underside of the public discourse is emphasized by the visual placement of “lies” apart from the concepts of home and belonging. This physical space represents the distance placed between white British nationals and black British nationals and immigrants. In other words, it represents the process of othering that excludes black people from ever fully claiming British national identity.

The rest of the poem concludes:

I come from a backyard
where the sun reaches down
mangoes fall to the ground
politicians turn cruel clowns

And here? Here

sometimes I grow afraid
too many young blacks

reaping seconds
indignant cities full of jail

I think my child’s too loving
for this fear (Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* 30-31)

In these final stanzas, the speaker inverts the hierarchy of First and Third Worlds, proclaiming that she is more afraid to live in Britain where blackness can be a matter of life or death, specifically for youth. Furthermore, the poem’s final lines question the
so-called civility or advancement of a nation where black people must essentially choose between "reaping seconds" and joining "indignant cities full of jail."

Nichols’ poem “Fear” does more than simply challenge the racial exclusivity of British national identity. Rather than focus on gaining access to this identity, she questions whether black people can even attain a viable existence within the British nation. Her questioning may appear mild in comparison with earlier black radicals, but, given her context, the challenge is rather profound. Nichols is living in a time when Western capitalism appear to have proven their superiority through the successful rise of the U.S and the U.K. as dominant world powers. To stand in opposition to this narrative and encourage its interrogation constitutes a radical act.

In addition to confronting the anti-black nature of British nationalism, Nichols also uses *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* to re-imagine the practice of black feminist nationalist-internationalism. Rather than focus on self-determination at the level of the nation-state, Nichols focuses on the black woman’s body. For example, in “The Assertion” the collection’s titular character is presented as an oppositional figure who, through her very existence, challenges the negative ways that black women are racialized and gendered. The first stanza reads:

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Heavy as a whale
eyes beady with contempt
and a kind of fire or love
the fat black woman sits
on the golden stool
and refuses to move
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The golden stool mentioned in the first stanza refers to the Ashanti king’s stool (Welsh 52). Rather than sit on the queen’s silver stool, the Fat Black Woman asserts her worth and makes her womanhood central, rather than marginal. The fact that her
eyes are “beady with contempt” and her whale-like body is obstinate, is not only a demonstration of resolve, but also existential rebellion.

As the poem continues, the fat black woman faces off with the chiefs:

the white robed chiefs
are resigned
in their postures of resignation
the fat black woman’s fingers
are creased in gold
body ringed in folds
pulse beat at her throat

This is my birthright
says the fat black woman
giving a fat black knuckle
shower her fat black toes (Nichols, The Fat Black Woman’s Poems 4-5)

Once again, the gold she wears symbolizes the powerful position she usurps. This imagery is combined with that of her flesh, linking the two in their regal nature.

Confronted with the Fat Black Woman’s bold assertion, the powerful chiefs are forced into resignation, a fact that is emphasized twice. It is important to note that the chiefs can be read as both an allusion to Ashanti leaders, as well as male figures in power in contemporary Britain. While the poem is set in an Ashanti kingdom, Nichols is using this setting to speak to her contemporary context. The fact that she does so reflects a desire to utilize non-Eurocentric epistemologies and to find alternative modalities through which to deconstruct Western imperialism. Thus, the poem should not only be read as a feminist declaration against patriarchy in general, but also as a specific criticism of white, capitalist heteropatriarchy.

In this regard, it is especially significant that the Fat Black Woman’s assertion is not symbolic or abstract, but bodily. Her size, her seated posture, her pulse and her knuckles all signify an embodiment of resistance. Thus, the poem suggests that black women’s empowerment must be physically enacted.
“The Assertion” can also be read as an attempt to make the Fat Black Woman’s body a site of redress. Here, I refer specifically to Saidiya Hartman’s threefold definition. Redress is first an act of re-membering the body through both articulating its captivity and violation, as well as locating it as a site of pleasure, eros and sociality. Second, redress involves reclaiming the body as human flesh rather than captive property. Finally, redress means articulating and pursuing needs and desire.

The Fat Black Woman’s assertion illustrates that “[t]he event of captivity and enslavement engenders the necessity of redress, the inevitability of its failure, and the constancy of repetition yielded by this failure. In this regard, the body is both the ‘eroding witness’ to this history of terror and the object of redress” (Hartman 76-77). Thus, Nichols’ use of an Ashanti practice as the poem’s setting not only challenges British gender formations, but reminds the reader of the presence of African cultures and societies that were ravaged by slavery. Furthermore, the poem signals to the disparate constructions of black and white womanhood that resulted from slavery.

If the Fat Black Woman’s body is indeed a site of redress, then her articulation of her “birthright” and obstinate corporeality illustrate the empowerment that comes from transgressing racialized and gendered power structures. The Fat Black Woman not only makes her desires known, but she ensures their fulfillment. Through her actions, the poem conveys the potential for redress through a transgressive embodiment of black womanhood that involves both existential and ideological rebellion. Still, as Hartman also concludes, complete redress is impossible without “the occurrence of an event of epic and revolutionary proportions” (Hartman 77). However, I suggest that, as an immigrant from Guyana who has lived through the complexities of implementing revolution on the level of the nation-state, Nichols is consciously negotiating the boundaries and possibilities for redress on other scales.
This effort echoes Audre Lorde’s assertion that “there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt” (39).

By using the body as a site of revolutionary practice, Nichols points to the centrality of black women’s material conditions and existence. For this reason, the "The Fat Black Woman's Motto on Her Bedroom Door" is "IT’S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR" (Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* 18). Given the perceived failure of Third World socialist politics to manifest in the widespread establishment of socialist nation-states, Nichols, and other radical black feminists like her, occupy a certain space of despair. While the way she theorizes black womanhood and critiques British nationalism may seem reactionary to some, they also constitute an attempt to reject this “slimness of despair” in favor of an embodied politics of explicit, or even confrontation black womanhood.

**Conclusions**

Nichols’ early work articulates a form of blackness that resists national incorporation, specifically Western capitalist national incorporation. For example, many scholars have concluded that post-WWII political policies forged an ideological link between blackness and immigration that continues to influence contemporary understandings of immigration and race (Solomos 57). Effectively, this means that both grassroots and top down formations of blackness in post-WWII Britain are more expansive than their American counterparts, including a spectrum of ethnicities whose experiences were impacted by anti-black policies. This manifestation of black feminism within the context of the UK reflects the fact that “being ‘black’ in Britain is about a state of ‘becoming’ (racialized); a process of consciousness, when colour
becomes the defining factor about who you are. Located through your ‘otherness’ a ‘conscious coalition’ emerges: a self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship” (Mirza 3). Although this formation of blackness was challenged in the 1990s by those who saw it as too afrocentric, its historical and political significance remain the same. The framework of British blackness described by Julia Sudbury translates into a unique form of black international identity. Here, black internationalism takes the form of a postcolonial politics that positions itself in direct opposition to anti-blackness, and is rooted in a politics of staying. In this sense, Nichols’ context as a black British feminist writer provides unique insight into the way black internationalism can function as a multi-racial, anti-imperialist political identity.

In addition to challenging imperialist forms of nationalism through blackness, Nichols’ work also re-imagines the physical spaces in which nationalist-internationalist politics are practiced. Given the perceived lack of futurity for black and Third World socialist revolutions at the level of the nation-state, Nichols shifts her focus to the body. The *Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, represents an attempt to theorize such a practice. By using the body as a site of resistance, Nichols points to the centrality of black women’s material conditions and existence. Thus, even if revolution at the state level seems impossible, Nichols suggests that there is still a way for black internationalist politics to transform the way black people are living.

In addition to focusing on the body as a site of redress, Nichols’ also focuses on the U.S. and Britain as representatives of capitalist and imperialist hegemony. In doing so, her form of internationalism focuses far less on the unifying power of class identity. Instead, the global dominance of a racialized class hierarchy becomes the cause of international collective politics. As a result, Nichols’ articulation of black
internationalism represents a unity through antagonistic identity. Arguably, this formation of black internationalist politics is a response to the conditions of postmodernity and the seeming victory of capitalism as the dominant world system. While this articulation does not necessarily offer as many concrete solutions as earlier forms of radical black internationalism, it does represent an important alternative to black liberalism. Nichols’ form of black internationalism rejects, rather than subscribes to, the belief that cultural incorporation and Western democracy, as they stand now, represent the greatest means to equity for black people. Admittedly, this means that black internationalism in this form exists primarily as an identity of negation. Still, I argue that this negation is a vital step in the process of rethinking the possibilities of black international politics in a post-radical era.

1 Although Forbes Burnham initially formed and led the PPP, he eventually split from the party and its Chief Minister, Cheddi Jagan, to form the Afro-Guyanese led PNC. The primary reason for their split was Forbes’ more moderate economic stance.
2 For further study of black womanhood in Britain during the 1970s, see Bryan, Beverley, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, Heart of the Race: Black Women’s Lived in Britain; and Ngebo, Let It Be Told: Black Women in Britain.
3 See Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood;” and Parmar and Amos, “Challenging Imperial Feminism.”
5 “Creolization” refers to the process of transculturation during the colonial period. Brathwaite discusses this in The Development of the Creole Society in Jamaica and Contradictory Omens. Brathwaite was undoubtedly influenced by the work of Aimé Césair, and perhaps that of his contemporary Edouard Glissant. “Nation language” refers to the language that Caribbean people speak, which is the product of Caribbean creolization. For a detailed discussion of nation language, see Brathwaite, History of the Voice.
6 Other authors known for using national language include Linton Kwesi Johnson, James Berry, Louise Bennett-Coverly and Nichols’ partner, John Agard.
7 See Nichols’s poems “Yemanji,” “Like Anansi,” “Of Golden Gods”.
8 This is not to say that these practices are exclusive to black internationalist feminists, but that they form part of their literary tradition.
9 For example, see James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia; and Stephens, Black Empire.
10 For a discussion of the link between Johnson’s performance and black British nationalism, see Eldridge, “The Rise and Fall of Black Britain.”
11 For a discussion of the relationship between tourism and imperialism, see Kempadoo, Sun, Sex, and Gold; Nixon, Resisting Paradise; Skwiot, The Purposes of Paradise; and Strachan, Paradise and Plantation.
12 As I discussed in the last chapter, this process of exclusion refers to inhabiting the same space as equals. Tourism industries driven by Western consumers permit the inclusion of people of color in subservient and hyper-sexualized roles.
13 For a detailed analysis of this theme, see Carole Boyce Davies discussion of Tourism Ideology and black women’s writing in Black Women, Writing and Identity.
14 For more details on these policies, see Solomos, Race and Racism in Britain.
Chapter 4

A Twenty-First Century Alternative to Beyoncé Feminism: Black Internationalist Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah

There appears to be a great disparity between the radical politics represented by earlier black feminist figures, such as Claudia Jones and Assata Shakur for example, and the popular representations of black women’s empowerment today. A primary example of this is the way language that has historically been attributed to black women’s self-empowerment has become part of quotidian colloquialisms, particularly among millennials. For instance, words like “gurl” have become popular mainstays. Magazines like Vogue have recently credited white celebrities for the body positive affirmation of curvier physiques (Garcia). Similarly, Allure and Teen Vogue selected white female models to dawn afros and Senegalese twists and potentially “new” and trendy hairstyles (Pergament and Welteroth).

In essence, symbols of black women’s self-empowerment and affirmation have been co-opted and divorced from their political histories. In keeping with these popular trends, Beyoncé feminism has emerged as the dominant twenty-first century representation of black women’s empowerment. However, I argue that rather than representing a radical step forward for black women, this form of black feminism is little more than a popular affirmation of black liberalism, which fails to adequately address black women’s, let alone the black community’s, collective needs.

Although she has been associated with Beyoncé in the media, as a popular figure, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie represents an important alternative to Beyoncé’s brand of feminism. For one, her work demonstrates an acute awareness of international black movements and their connections to our
contemporary moment. Additionally, because her writing and lectures communicate an engagement with anti-racist and feminist politics that is decidedly opposed to the global economic systems that perpetuate gender, racial and class inequalities, her work is a twenty-first century embodiment of the ideologies and practices inherent to black internationalist feminism.

In this chapter I discuss the phenomenon of Beyoncé feminism as it relates to the ideologies of black liberalism and black capitalism. As I examine the failures of these ideologies in addressing the greater needs of the black community, I look to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s recent novel, Americanah, as an important critique of these ideologies, as well as a source of an alternative vision of black collective politics. Adichie’s novel illustrates the way blogs and cyberspace operate as potential spaces for creating and fomenting a radical black internationalist political consciousness in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, like Nichols, she centers black women’s bodies, namely their hair, as a site of political activism through aesthetic choice. Adichie’s representation of hair as a political space goes beyond the symbolic. Rather, she suggests that the act of wearing natural hair, and the communities that form around this act, demonstrate a potential arena for facilitating radical black feminist community.

**Beyoncé Feminism: Black Womanhood in the Twenty-First Century**

The cultural significance of Beyoncé feminism is perhaps best exemplified by the 2014 *Time Magazine* article, “How to Reclaim the F-word? Just Call Beyoncé” (Bennett). The article focuses on Beyoncé’s performance of the song “Flawless” at the 2014 Video Music Awards. At the end of her performance, the singer is seen standing in front of the word “feminist,” written in large block letters, as author Chimamanda
Ngozi Adichie’s voice is heard giving the word’s definition. This particular performance is seen by the article’s author as one that solidifies Beyoncé’s standing as the example of a twenty-first century black feminist.\(^1\) In discussing Beyoncé’s brand of female empowerment, the singer is credited with projecting a softer feminism that contradicts the word’s contemporary connotation of being “militant,” “radical,” and “man-hating”  (Bennett).

The concept of Beyoncé feminism is something the artist herself has actively worked to construct. Pictures of Beyoncé dressed as Rosie the Riveter have appeared online and in January of 2014 The Shriver Report published an article written by Beyoncé titled, “Gender Equality is a Myth!” The article itself is rather short and principally echoes white, second-wave feminist critiques of wage inequality and gender expectations. Fascinatingly, there is no mention of the disparity between white women’s wages and those of women of color. The clear lack of an intersectional framework is just one marker of Beyoncé feminism. Other characteristics, elaborated upon in texts like Roxane Gay’s Bad Feminist, include the strong desire to participate in and benefit from racist, sexist and heteronormative social formations under the guise of fun, enjoyment and companionship. More often than not, this desire for normative inclusion supersedes any concrete political aims.

Although it emphasizes heteronormative sexualities, Beyoncé feminism has also become a cultural phenomenon among some members of the LGBTQ community. Actress Laverne Cox, for example, demonstrates how Beyoncé feminism is being used as a point of access to dominant forms of womanhood by some transgender women. Recently, the Orange is the New Black star has garnered increasing media attention for her transgender advocacy. Unlike Beyoncé, Cox openly talks about intersectionality and recognizes the contradictions and tropes that
pervade many of her performances. Still, as an icon, Cox affirms a very similar notion of black womanhood as Beyoncé. Like the singer, Cox is thin, light skinned and wears a long blonde weave. Beyond the visual similarities, the articles and interviews that surround her public persona often compare the actresses’ brand of empowerment with that of Beyoncé. Even bell hooks aligns the two when she critiques the stars’ embrace of Eurocentric beauty standards (hooks).

The allure of Beyoncé feminism is perhaps best summarized by the aforementioned *Time* article’s description of the artist as:

Universally loved, virtually unquestioned, and flawless, the 33-year-old entertainer seems to debunk every feminist stereotype you’ve ever heard. Beyoncé can’t be a man-hater – she’s got a man (right?). Her relationship – whatever you believe about the divorce rumors – has been elevated as a kind of model for egalitarian bliss: dual earners, adventurous sex life, supportive husband and an adorable child held up on stage by daddy while mommy worked. Beyoncé’s got the confidence of a superstar but the feminine touch of a mother. And, as a woman of color, she’s speaking to the masses – a powerful voice amid a movement that has a complicated history when it comes to inclusion. (Bennett)

The feminism described above is the softer, more heteronormative cousin of radical black feminism. It appeals to post-racial ideologies. Furthermore, what is seen as particularly empowering is how Beyoncé manages to both command her sexuality and maintain her respectability as a mother, wife and business woman.

A closer examination of this brand of black feminism reveals the multiple ways it reaffirms, rather than challenges, black women’s subjugation. First, what is hailed as feminist sexual empowerment is, in fact, nothing more than the commodification of a racist gender formation. As Hortense Spillers so eloquently articulates in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” the gender formations that have historically been applied to white women are not the same as those applied to black women and, as a result, what may be empowering for white women may not be for black women (80).
In the case of Beyoncé’s perceived sexual liberation, black women have been hypersexualized from the moment we first crossed the Atlantic. Thus, what is publically praised as progressive actually reifies age-old primitivist ideologies.

Similar critiques of Beyoncé feminism have been made by other black feminist theorists. Recently, bell hooks became the center of a media controversy when, during a New School discussion, she essentially called Beyoncé’s brand of black womanhood an act of terrorism against young black girls. While the comment itself may be polemical, hooks raises an important, albeit unpopular point. Beyoncé’s so-called empowerment must be understood as compliance with “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” for the sake of profit (hooks).

During the discussion, hooks suggests that Beyoncé’s public image may be out of her control. Yet, as Beyoncé has made clear in various interviews, this is not the case. The significance of hooks’ comment is even greater when we consider that Beyoncé’s brand of black womanhood does not emanate from some white corporate power, but from the artist herself. One could argue that Beyoncé is merely, and perhaps unconsciously, the victim of dominant racist and sexist ideologies. I suggest, however, that something greater is at play. As an icon, Beyoncé is the product of twenty-first century black liberal ideologies. Rather than using her cultural influence to address issues like police brutality or unequal access to education, Beyoncé’s version of black feminism promotes the respectability of the black middle and upper-middle classes, especially in contrast to their working-class counterparts. Ironically, this is largely accomplished through the reproduction and commodification of black stereotypes for public consumption. Nevertheless, the ideologies behind these acts are appealing because they emphasize individual power.
It is important to recognize that both Laverne Cox and Beyoncé manage to advance some counter-cultural elements of black feminist theory. Cox makes an important intervention into public conceptions of womanhood through transgender activism. Beyoncé is asserting feminist language and images in a society that is believed by many to be post-feminist. Still, what does it mean when the only black female bodies widely associated with feminism are blonde, light, thin and scantily clad? This is not to say that there are not black women who are in fact blonde, light, or thin, but that these images undeniably do more to reaffirm racist and sexist ideologies than to challenge them. Furthermore, this brand of black feminism encourages mainstream culture to appropriate the form of black women’s empowerment (language, attitude, etc.) while simultaneously evacuating it of its political content and denying attention to the grave structural inequalities that black women face today.

It is within this context that the presence of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie represents an important divergence. Adichie was born and raised in the university town of Nsukka. Although she originally studied medicine in Nigeria, Adichie moved to the United States at the age of nineteen to study communications. Later, she earned a master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University, as well as a master's degree in African studies from Yale University. After completing her graduate work, Adichie received several prestigious fellowships from universities including Princeton and Harvard.

Although primarily a novelist, Adichie has published a book of poems titled *Decisions* in 1997 and a play titled *For Love of Biafra* in 1998. She has also published a collection of short stories called *That Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Adichie is probably best known for her three novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013). Her writing has been extensively translated and
featured in such publications as *The New Yorker*, the *O. Henry Prize Stories*, and the *Financial Times*. She has won numerous awards, including the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award (Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* 51-52).

As a popular figure and public intellectual, Adichie first garnered attention from her TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” where she addressed the essentialist stereotypes that are often applied to African figures. Arguably, Adichie’s greatest fame has come from another TED talk titled “We Should All Be Feminists.” A clip from this talk was featured in Beyoncé’s song “Flawless.” As a result, Adichie has quickly become a well-recognized contemporary feminist figure. The slippage that occurs between a figure like Beyoncé and one like Adichie is exemplified by the literal overlaying of their messages in Beyoncé’s song. Adichie herself, or at least her public persona, has done little to oppose the mainstream acceptance of Beyoncé feminism and the confusion of her work with that of the singer. In fact, she has been quoted as saying “that anything that gets young people talking about feminism is a very good thing” (Adichie, “Feminism is Fashionable”). On one hand, her comments seem to affirm the mass appeal of Beyoncé feminism. On the other hand, given the dominance of post-racial and post-feminist ideologies, her comments can also be read as a strategic attempt to align herself with any and all feminisms that exists in opposition to these ideologies.

Adichie’s most recent novel, *Americanah*, tells a love story that spans multiple continents and decades, revealing the complicated ways race, gender, class and citizenship play into our daily lives. Thematically, the novel addresses the structural, social and personal effects of globalization. The story follows the life of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu. Through her childhood and college life, the text explores
the hierarchies created by Nigeria’s growing young wealthy class, as well as its privileging of Western culture and education. Likewise, as Ifemelu moves to the U.S., we are introduced to the complexities of U.S. racial hierarchy from the point of view of a “non-American black”. While living abroad, Ifemelu starts a blog about race in America, which serves as the source of poignant critiques throughout the text, contrasting the deeply personal nature of the rest of the narrative. Finally, after spending fifteen years in the U.S., Ifemelu returns home and views Nigeria through a new lens. *Americanah* is a vastly rich and detailed text that manages to be both well-written and culturally savvy. Because I cannot do justice to the whole of the novel here, I focus instead on four ways the novel represents a divergence from popular black feminism. First, *Americanah* critiques the elitism and individualism of afropolitanism and black liberalism. Second, the novel reveals the failure of black capitalism to fully address the economic disparities faced by millions of members of the black diaspora. Finally, the novel explores the concept of practicing black collectivism through mediums such as hair and cyberspace. As a whole, Adichie’s novel *Americanah* not only offers an important alternative to Beyoncé feminism, but it also imagines the possible applications of black internationalist feminist politics in our twenty-first century context.

**The Effects of Globalization on Nigeria**

In order to understand the way Adichie’s work responds to globalized capitalism, it is first necessary to understand its impact on Nigeria, the setting for half of *Americanah*. After gaining independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria’s economy was agriculturally focused, producing goods such as cocoa, groundnut, cotton, and palm oil. However, the discovery of crude oil drastically changed this focus. By the
1970s, oil accounted for 90% of Nigeria’s foreign-exchange earnings (Mazumdar 27). Concentrated economic efforts to capitalize on Nigeria’s oil reserves are largely credited for the shift from regional identification to national cohesion and the consolidation of a Nigerian bourgeoisie (Forrest 333). However, these efforts also resulted in the neglect of agricultural needs, leading to mass importation of food and other goods. Coupled with a mismanagement of oil revenue, these changes saw the Nigerian economy in crisis by the 1980s (Mazumdar 20).

In response to this crisis, neoliberalism, defined here as a the policies, practices and ideologies that promote unrestrained global capital flow, largely to the benefit of the global north, became the new framework that would shape Nigeria’s economy. This reshaping resulted in less government regulation, growth of the private sector leadership and control, and monetary devaluation. Policies such as the 1986 structural adjustment program (SAP), designed to restructure and diversify the productive base of the economy, reduce dependence on oil and create a market-based value for the naira, were instituted in an attempt to encourage entrepreneurialism (Adesina 138-139). The results of these policies, however, were catastrophic. As public enterprises were privatized, many workers were forced to accept lower wages, or lost their jobs altogether. Just a few years after SAP was instituted, the Nigerian national debt and unemployment rates had increased, while the standard of living and value of the naira drastically decreased. By 1996, all nineteen of Nigeria’s states reported that more than half of their populations were living in poverty (Adesina 140). The policy meant to catapult Nigeria into the ranks of "first world" economies had actually contributed to the nation’s further underdevelopment.

In many ways, policies like SAP demonstrate a clear adoption of Western ideologies, the belief that a liberalized economy, an entrepreneurial spirit and a
Protestant work ethic are the keys to economic and personal wealth. More importantly, these ideologies link the growth and success of a capitalist economy to the abstract concepts of morality, individualism and independence. Yet, as Nigerian historian Olutayo Charles Adesina observes:

SAP, which was the Nigerian implementation of neoliberal policies recommended by international institutions and First World globalization, resulted in a great increase in poverty and inequality... Under the conditions of globalization - improved infrastructure and a much more intense circulation of ideas - The deprived part of the population has begun to strive for cleaner pastures in the First World, where the immigrants are increasingly excluded. (137)

Adesina's observation reveals the connections between neoliberal economic policies, income inequality within Nigeria, and the racial and economic inequality faced by Nigerians in the West. Although manifest in different ways, globalized capitalism has effectively inducted Nigerians, both within and outside of the nation's borders, into neoliberalism's highly racialized social hierarchy.

The structural effects of globalization on African women include limiting important social services such as health and education, reducing subsidies on food and fuel and lack of access to resources such as land and water. In addition, these women are also faced with patriarchal gender roles and the decidedly gendered stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. In her discussion of how race and gender function under globalization, African feminist Filomina Chioma Steady argues that it is precisely because black women are extremely susceptible to the process of globalization that they become indispensable to any attempt to theorize alternatives. She theorizes that African women:

have been essential to the process of global exploitation due to the combination of their productive and reproductive roles. Directly or indirectly they produce export crops... Through social reproduction they subsidize global capital and reproduce the future labor force while
maintaining a household against tremendous odds. (Steady, “Foreword” ix)

Steady’s argument reveals the specific burdens placed on African women under neoliberalism, particularly with regard to gendered labor production. However, she also brings attention to the fact that because African women provide the greatest labor source in a number of industries and spheres (both domestic and industrial), they hold the greatest potential for challenging neoliberal hegemony.

In response to the crushing inequalities caused by global capitalism, African women have organized locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there were specific movements addressing the need for equal access to education, healthcare and political participation. Some of the most notable women's organizations include FEMNET, a network of NGOs and women in the media; Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), which focuses on legal issues, literacy, civil and voting rights, and education; ABANTU for Development and Akina Mama Africa, both based in London and focused on leadership training; Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), which promotes critical research on gender, democracy, and the economic impact of globalization on African countries and African women. This last organization has made significant strides by producing a knowledge base that is counter-hegemonic and challenges the authority of organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the International Monetary Fund (Steady, “Race and Gender” 19-42).

Following in the footsteps of these women, Chimamanda Adichie’s most recent novel, Americanah, addresses the structural, social and personal effects of globalization. The story follows the life of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu. Through her childhood and college life, the text explores the hierarchies created by Nigeria’s
growing young wealthy class, as well as its privileging of Western culture and education. Likewise, as Ifemelu moves to the U.S., we are introduced to the complexities of U.S. racial hierarchy from the point of view of a “non-American black”. The policies I have outlined here serve as the context for the novel and inform Adichie’s critique of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism.

**Afropolitans, 419 Men & Prosperity Preachers: Deconstructing the Myth of Black Capitalism and Meritocracy**

One of the defining characteristics of Beyoncé feminism is its adherence to black liberalism. Black liberals vary in their political orientation from left leaning to libertarian, however all assert that American liberalism is the best system for achieving justice for black people and that achieving this justice is the only way America will redeem itself (Dawson 253). Unlike the black radical tradition, which is largely based on the needs of the black working-class and the desire to dismantle unjust social systems, black liberalism is based on the experience of the black middle-class. As such, its goals are oriented around equality with the white elite. As I stated earlier, black liberals believe that economic accumulation and individual merit will result in a status of exception from the existing racial hierarchy, resulting in greater social mobility. Finally, black liberals believe that such mobility will benefit the black community overall.

In many ways, afropolitanism shares the beliefs of black liberalism, only within the context of post-colonial Africa and African migration. In a magazine article published in 2005, Nigerian and Ghanaian author Taiye Selasi defined Afropolitans by saying:
They (read: we) are Afropolitans - the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes...Most of us are multilingual...There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. There’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the back of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world...Ultimately, the Afropolitan must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural - with subtle tensions in between...So, too, the way we see our race - whether black or biracial or none of the above - is a question of politics, rather than pigment; not all of us claim to be black. If nothing else, the Afropolitan knows that nothing is neatly black or white; that to ‘be’ anything is a matter of being sure of who you are uniquely. (Selasi)

Since 2005, the concept of afropolitanism has exploded in popularity. From articles on CNN’s website, to a magazine called *The Afropolitan*, the image of the chic, culturally savvy, elite African has become a symbol of post-colonial prosperity in an era where the globalization of capitalism has reached levels previously unseen.²

There is a sense in Selasi’s definition of afropolitans, especially in their ability to select one’s racial identity, that ambition or economic standing can help one escape the confines of Western social hierarchy. In this way, Selasi’s description of afropolitanism illustrates its connection to black liberalism. Selasi’s quips about “funny blends” of fashion and accents, or “famed focus” and work ethic attempt to define afropolitans as the “good” Africans, the intelligent ones who work upper-class or, at the very least, upper-middle class jobs. Within the international hierarchy of blackness, afropolitans are the model minority. Ironically, in trying to circumvent racial hierarchy by affirming class hierarchy, afropolitanism does little more than affirm Western superiority.

Within Adichie’s novel, the topic of afropolitanism is addressed through the protagonist’s encounter with the Nigerpopolitan Club. Towards the end of the story,
when the protagonist moves back to Nigeria and begins working as a features editor for a magazine, she is invited by a co-worker to attend a Nigerpolitan Club meeting. While there, Ifemelu notices that everyone is dressed stylishly. The women wear their hair natural and complain about the lack of hair stylists in Nigeria who know how to do natural hair. Ifemelu finds herself agreeing and fitting in, yet she is discomforted by "the righteousness in her voice, and all their voices. They were the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer" (Adichie, *Americanah* 502). One of the men there, Fred, is interested in her and keeps trying to get her attention. Fred represents many of the club's members. "He was in impresario, well oiled and well practiced, The sort of man who did a good American accent and a good British accent, who knew what to say to foreigners, how to make foreigners comfortable, and who could easily get grants for dubious projects. She wondered what he was like beneath that practiced layer" (Adichie, *Americanah* 505).

The image of the Nigerpolitan Club is an obvious replica of the scene Selasi describes in her 2005 article. However, rather than characterize the club and its members as the ideal outlet for Ifemelu’s black consciousness, the novel depicts her criticism and rejection of afropolitanism. Even though the protagonist recognizes her own privilege and membership in the afropolitan club, she refuses to buy into its politics. She realizes that however “sanctified” and “gleaming” the nigerpolitans appear to be, their value only comes from their knowledge and appropriation of Western cosmopolitan mannerisms. Like the “well oiled” impresario who is capable of many accents, these afropolitans wear their experiences abroad like layered costumes, elements of a necessary performance that will secure their place in the upper echelons of Nigerian society. Furthermore, Ifemelu concludes that the logic behind afropolitanism is flawed. Lagos, arguably the epitome of an African cosmopolitan
space, has never aspired to be like New York or London. When returnees complain about the city’s lack in contrast to London and other Western cities, they assent to the inferiority of African cities. In contrast, Ifemelu argues that Lagos has developed differently, not inferiorly, because its growth was fostered by a different, non-European people.

Ifemelu’s rejection of afropolitanism represents an important critique of black liberalism in general. Afropolitanism and black liberalism are dangerous because they appease capitalist globalization and Western multiculturalism by providing racial diversity without challenging cultural or ideological hegemony. Furthermore, both ideologies fail to account for the political and cultural needs of the global black community. Black liberalism and afropolitanism center on the role of the black elite in society. Rather than challenging social hierarchy, both ideologies reaffirm it. Furthermore, they often do so through cultural commodification, thus reinforcing the negative racialization of most black people. Finally, because black liberalism and afropolitanism are founded upon the individual pursuit of social mobility, they stand in opposition to black nationalist and internationalist politics which promote collectivism. Within the specific context of black feminism, these two ideologies encourage the commodification of black women’s empowerment, separating it from its political grounding in the material reality and lived experience of black people around the world. Adichie’s *Americanah* challenges this practice by rejecting this process of separation in favor of black radical collectivism.

This criticism of black liberalism and afropolitanism in *Americanah* is linked to an overall criticism of black capitalism. Like black liberalism, black capitalism is a political ideology that can be defined by the belief that the success of a few black capitalists, as well as the black upper-middle class, will benefit the larger black
community by providing greater access to money and power. These financial elite will supposedly elevate the entire black community by challenging the racialization of black people as lazy, unintellectual and non-enterprising people. However, as the novel illustrates, black capitalism succeeds far more in reinforcing class hierarchy and practices of economic exploitation, than it does in challenging racism and elevating the economic status of the greater black community.

Within the novel, Adichie uses the figures of 419 men to illustrate this point. Although typically associated with advanced fee scams, the term “419” is derived from the Nigerian section of law that addresses fraud. The figurative term has been extended to encompass a wide range of fraud, scams and corruption associated with Nigeria. The language that surrounds 419 men, terms like corrupt, fraudulent and willing to do anything for money, is explicitly economic in nature. The significant role 419 men play in elevating Nigeria’s young, wealthy class becomes abundantly clear when, for example, the protagonist’s love interest, Obinze, returns to Nigeria with no job and no money. Upon his arrival, he is encouraged to hang around a character called Chief, a leader of Nigeria’s new, young wealthy class. Chief and his counterparts wear “the uniform of the Lagos youngish and wealthyish-leather slippers, jeans and open-neck tight shirts, all with familiar designer logos.” They are described as “consumed with money” (Adichie, Americanah 30-31). Obinze finally gets his big break when Chief asks him to front a real estate deal that, because of his connections and insider knowledge, will make millions. The ease of this process and the immediate wealth and status it brings Obinze are astounding. By Western standards, Obinze’s story is one of great capitalist success. Yet, Obinze and everyone else involved are well aware that this “success” is the result of nepotism, what Chief praises as the essence of “our free market.” The apparent lack of contradiction
between his success and its origins can be summarized in the refrain, “Lagos is about hustling” (Adichie, *Americanah* 28, 32).

The concept of Lagosian hustlers is a perfect illustration of how Nigerian capitalist pursuit gets depicted as something particularly urban. In broad terms, characters like Chief represent the emerging class of Nigerian businessmen and capitalists. While the novel is explicit in its depiction of how this elite depends upon nepotism and exploitation, it also demonstrates the way their practice of capitalism is specifically labeled as urban and thuggish. The ubiquitousness of this racialization is confirmed by an encounter Ifemelu has with a South African woman at a hair shop in New Jersey. While getting her hair braided, the South African woman notices a number of Nollywood films. When the owner asks her if she would like to buy one, the woman retorts, “I can’t watch that stuff. I guess I’m biased. In my country, South Africa, Nigerians are known for stealing credit cards and doing drugs and all kinds of crazy stuff” (Adichie, *Americanah* 230). Despite the fact that the owner had been praising Ifemelu minutes ago, she responds to the South African customer by saying, “Nigeria very corrupt. Worst corrupt country in Africa...I cannot marry a Nigerian and I won’t let anybody in my family marry a Nigerian...Not all but many of them do bad things. Even killing for money” (Adichie, *Americanah* 231).

The characterization of Nigerians as the most corrupt Africans, people who steal, scam and even murder for money is significant in at least two ways. First, it demonstrates the place Nigeria occupies within the African hierarchy. It is not just Westerners that view Nigerians as corrupt and fraudulent, but also those from the continent too. Second, the language used in this scene parallels the language that has historically been used to racialized blacks living in the West. For example, the shop owner’s declaration that she and her family will not marry any Nigerian echoes the
fearful language of anti-miscegenation heard throughout Europe and the U.S. Like their black American counterparts, Nigerians are racialized as morally corrupt, a nation of hoodlums and thieves.

The labeling of Nigerians, from 419 men to industrial capitalists, as hustlers and thugs reveals the racist contradictions within capitalist logic. This racialization is particularly significant when one considers the fact that almost half of the world’s black billionaires are Nigerian. Thus, the comments made by the women in the hair shop, and the language that surrounds 419 men, represent a larger pattern of racism that reinforces the inferiority of black people within the hierarchy of global capitalism. By illustrating this process, *Americanah* challenges the belief that black capitalism, as a political ideology, is capable of combating racism. On the surface, their success is a testament to effectiveness of neoliberal economic practices. However, stories of nepotism cast these rich black people as fraudulent, racially inferior members of the global elite. Furthermore, the gross economic disparities between these figures and their fellow Nigerians, not to mention other members of the African diaspora, reveals the inconsistencies in any explanation of their wealth as an example of global capitalist success. The economic elevation of these figures does more to reveal the failure of capitalism to bring about black equity and equality, than it does to support ideologies like black capitalism. The way Adichie deconstructs the myth of black capitalist success stands in stark contrast to the work of other mainstream black feminist figures like Beyoncé. Whereas the singer’s brand of feminism promotes black female empowerment through individual economic accumulation and social mobility, Adichie draws attention to the collective needs of the black community. Her expression of radical black internationalist feminism calls for political ideologies that
address the lived experiences and material conditions faced by the majority of the black diaspora, not just a small, elite minority.

Like the 419 men, prosperity preachers are equally representative of the fruit of post-colonial capitalist ideologies in Nigeria. In fact, it is precisely when the failed attempts of the SAP drastically increased the gap between the wealthy and poor that this theological movement took hold and began spreading like wildfire in Nigeria. Defined by the belief that “God wants to bless Christians spiritually, physically, and materially,” the prosperity gospel interprets Christianity theology through the lens of capitalist ideology. As a result, religious faith becomes a system based on monetary gain. Today, nearly one fourth of the nation’s population attends a prosperity gospel church (Attanasi 1-12).

The cultural implications of prosperity theology can be summed up in a famous Nigerian prosperity preacher’s revision of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my banker; I shall not owe.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
   He restoreth my loss; He leadeth me beside still waters.
Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of debt,
   I will fear no evil, for thou are with me;
   thy silver and thy gold, they rescue me
Thou preparest a way for me in the presence of business competitors;
   Thou anointed my head with oil, my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
   and I shall do business in the name of the Lord. Amen. (Wariboko 39)

As theologian Nimi Wariboko says in her analysis of the revised psalm, "[p]rosperity preachers in this covenant paradigm do not merely address poverty and fuel greed... They produce desires and dreams and connect them to a transcendental God... they motivate believers to become agents of their own personal economic improvement”(39). It is significant that this particular theological view is tied to the production of desire and imaginary, as well as personal action. In many ways, it is the
presentation of capitalism not as an economic system, but as a moral and religious structure that demands personal and spiritual investment. Because the basis of the prosperity gospel insinuates a moral or spiritual lack as the root of poverty (e.g. if you are poor then you must not be doing God’s will), what may otherwise be labeled as capitalist greed gets baptized and sanctified as a spiritual pursuit. Effectively, the prosperity gospel subverts those tenets of humanism that would criticize an individualistic pursuit of wealth by asserting that these pursuits are the will of a higher authority.

Throughout the novel, Adichie contrasts the enticing charisma of prosperity gospel churches, with their dependence upon exploitative practices and oppressive social hierarchies. There are numerous figures throughout the novel that represent the prosperity gospel’s disciples, however none as well as the protagonist’s own mother. Raised Catholic and married to an agnostic, Ifemelu’s mother converts to evangelicalism. After attending a fundamentalist Baptist church, she finally settles on a prosperity gospel church called Miracle Assembly, described as having “a marble-floored convention hall” filled with “perfumed people and the ricochet of rich voices” (Adichie, *Americanah* 52). "In this church of surging hope, of thumping and clapping, where Ifemelu imagined a swirl of affluent angels above, her mother’s spirit had found a home...If she worshipped with the prosperous, she said, then God would bless her as He had blessed them...Her God became genial and did not mind being commanded” (Adichie, *Americanah* 52).

Through the young protagonist’s eyes, we are presented with an almost absurd picture. From the marbled-floor below to the imagined “affluent angels” above and the genial God who takes command, we are presented with a satirical picture of Christian capitalism. The narrator emphasizes the performative nature of this belief,
giving examples of exuberant Sunday testimonies and loud proclamations by a pastor who would “leap out in his sharp-shouldered suit and pointed shoes and say, ‘Our God is not a poor God, amen?” (Adichie, Americanah 53) However, perhaps the best example of this performance comes from Ifemelu’s mother who continues to praise God for her sister’s good fortune and wealth, which she receives from her “mentor”, The General. It is not until she is boldly confronted with the irrefutable truth of her sister’s “blessing,” that she was the mistress of a married man and now the mother of his child, that she gives up calling her wealth a “blessing from God.”

Despite its satirical tone, the text’s depiction of prosperity gospel churches is rather benign until the day the Ifemelu confronts the reality that the church, in all its splendor, is paid for by 419 men and corrupt leaders. The protagonists’ disenchanted with her mother’s church comes from a very human error on the part of a church leader, Sister Ibinabo. Described as even more powerful than the pastor himself, Sister Ibinabo is the one person at church that no one dares to challenge. Yet, when Ifemelu witnesses her berating a young woman for wearing tight pants, she subconsciously decides that enough is enough. Moments later, when Sister Ibinabo asks Ifemelu to make garlands honoring their benefactors, she refuses and calls the church out shouting, “[w]hy should I make decorations for a thief?...This church is full of 419 men. Why should we pretend that this hall was not built with dirty money?” (Adichie, Americanah 62) Ifemelu had always known about the “dirty money” and had accepted it. What changes is her realization that Sister Ibinabo was “a person who denied that things were as they were. A person who had to spread the cloak of religion over her own petty desires” (Adichie, Americanah 63).

When Ifemelu calls out the 419 men, she is also calling out Sister Ibinabo’s hypocrisy and compliance in an unjust institution. Not only is she perpetuating
patriarchal ideas about women’s sexuality, teaching the young girls that it is their fault if a man harbors inappropriate sexual desires towards them, but she is also installing a sense of obligatory gratitude toward these men whose actions are anything but good. In ignoring the “sins” of these adult males, while berating and commanding the obedience of these young women, all for the sake of financial gain and personal power, Sister Ibinabo reflects the corrupt intricacies of racist sexist capitalist institutions.

“Hair is Political”: Embodying Black Internationalist Feminism

In addition to the novel’s critique of black capitalism, afropolitanism and black liberalism, *Americanah* represents a radical divergence from Beyoncé feminism in its approach to way black women both embody and practice black collective politics. One of the defining characteristics of black internationalist feminism is its embrace of black nationalist-internationalism. Although Adichie is not necessarily explicit in her articulation of these politics, the author continues to use hair as means of discussing their importance. For example, while promoting her book, Adichie has stated repeatedly that “black women’s hair is political...[and] a means to talking about other things” (Adichie, Interview). This statement is reaffirmed by the images of black women’s natural hair styles accompanied by quotes by the author that were created to promote the book (Erdmann).

The concept that black women’s hair is a literal and figurative representation of one’s politics permeates the text. For instance, when the protagonist begins contemplating going natural, one of her friends encourages her by saying, “[r]elaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn’t go running with Curt today because you don’t want to sweat out this straightness. You’re
always battling to make your hair do what it wasn’t meant to do” (Adichie, *Americanah* 257). Later, the protagonist herself writes a blog post titled, “A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor”. Both of these examples make the relationship between black women’s hair and politics explicit. To relax one’s hair is to confirm a belief in the possibility of black social mobility and acceptance via an adherence to Western beauty standards. On the other hand, to wear one’s hair in its natural state is a visual and political rebellion against white supremacist ideological and cultural rule. In this way, the decisions that surround black women’s hair are entrenched with political and cultural significance.

Because hair serves as one of *Americanah’s* major symbols, as well as an explicitly feminist signifier, the construction of cyber community around black women’s hair is particularly significant to the text’s black internationalist feminist discourse. Within the novel, blogs and websites play an important role in Ifemelu’s transition from relaxed to natural hair. Soon after the protagonist cuts off her damaged, relaxed hair, she begins scouring the internet for articles about natural hair care on websites named “happilykinkynappy.com”, allusions to real life sites such as blacknaps.org and curlynikki.com. Still insecure about her new look, she finds affirmation in the “message boards full of posts [and] thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils” (Adichie, *Americanah* 262). The wide array of hairstyles displayed on these sites contrasts with the one-dimensional styles of relaxed hair. Moreover, they contradict the idea that black women do not have their own beauty standards and styles.

As Ifemelu delves deeper into the world of black hair message boards and websites, she is met with great support. Online these black women “complimented
each other’s photos and ended comments with ‘hugs’... They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude” (Adichie, *Americanah* 263). Here, historically derogatory words, like “kinky” and “nappy” are reappropriated and juxtaposed with a virtual world of affirmation and acceptance. Drawing greater and greater inspiration from this community, Ifemelu finds herself running home to share new product discoveries and saying things like “there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me.” This statement appears rather banal at first, but considering the protagonist’s agnosticism and disdain for religious fanaticism, it is significant that “[s]he had never talked about God so much” (Adichie, *Americanah* 264). Her use of religious language is not a literal expression of faith, but evidence of how her cultural transformation parallels a spiritual one. Ifemelu’s online experiences convey the possibility of constructing virtual worlds which are wholly determined by the standards of black women. These spaces offer a positive affirmation that does not necessarily exist in the material world.

The emphasis on hair as a site of political resistance is one of the strongest examples of what differentiates Adichie’s contemporary black internationalist feminism from that of Beyoncé feminism. The rejection of Western beauty standards, even at the risk of lesser social mobility, contradicts the logic of black liberalism. As the *Time* article I discussed earlier demonstrates, Beyoncé, and her brand of feminism, is praised for its supposed ability to simultaneously challenge patriarchy while also performing heterosexual desire. In fact, Beyoncé feminism’s mass appeal is largely due to the fact it fails to speak to the specific experiences of black women. In contrast, Adichie’s emphasis on hair as a political space that affects black women’s lives in ways ranging from employment opportunities to personal relationships,
demonstrates her specific attention to the issues and obstacles that black women face in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, this issue in particular is one that undoubtedly challenges post-racial and post-feminist discourses by forcing readers to reflect on the very real effects of black women’s negative racialization today.

(Websites of Community and Blog Posts by a “Non-American Black”
In addition to using hair as a means to discuss racial and gender politics, *Americanah* engages in questions of black political and identity formation through the protagonist’s use of blogs. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu’s blogs narrate her experiences of racism, classism and sexism, as well as her journey towards black consciousness. In this way, the protagonist’s blog posts serve as a second, almost supplementary narrative that provides the story with cultural context and commentary. This second narrative is introduced in the very first chapter, despite the fact that the protagonist does not actually start writing the blog until halfway through the novel. Titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, the blog narrates Ifemelu’s experiences with Americans and what these interactions reveal about race, class and political ideology in the U.S. For instance, Ifemelu encounters a “dreadlocked white man...his hair like old twine ropes that ended in a blond fuzz, his tattered shirt worn with enough piety to convince her that he was a social warrior” (Adichie, *Americanah* 4). However, when she tells him about her blog, he retorts that race is no longer the issue, class is. The conclusion she draws from this encounter is summarized in her blog post, “Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down” (Adichie, *Americanah* 5). Another example is her run in with a white, middle manager from Ohio. When she explains her blog to him, she expects him to respond that “[t]he only
race that matters is the human race.” On the contrary, she is surprised to learn that the man and his wife adopted a black child and understand concepts like the systematic discrimination against black children in the adoption system. Her shock at his racial awareness is summarized in the post, “Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You think” (Adichie, *Americanah* 5).

These introductory posts set the tone for the remaining entries. Additionally, the blog’s title is itself a commentary on the way race functions in America. Raceteenth, is a play off of Juneteenth, the African-American holiday celebrating the abolition of slavery in the confederate south. Likewise, the description of American blacks as “Those Formerly Known as Negroes” is a reminder of the historical function of blackness within a white supremacist social order, as well as the ways in which this term has been appropriated in an attempt to subvert that order, e.g. the New Negro movement. Finally, the distinction of the blog’s author as a “Non-American Black” highlights the complex dynamics of contemporary blackness as it intersects with class, nationality and ethnicity. Although black people may find themselves at the bottom of the American racial hierarchy, there are various degrees of blackness. To be a “Non-American black” is to be separate from the historical racialization of African-Americans as poor, urban and uneducated. Such a distinction is strategic. It allows the text to criticize American racism without being labeled as the disgruntled rantings of an angry African-American.

In terms of form, the use of a blog within the novel provides a unique space for cultural critique. Not only are blogs associated with the young, millennial generation, but, like other forms of social media, they are often praised as an example of progress and an affirmation of globalization. A primary example of this is the discourse surrounding events like the Arab Spring. The power of social media has been credited
as a principal driving force behind these Middle Eastern political movements. In general, blogs, tweets and other social media posts are understood contemporarily as an express means of gaining collective force for social, cultural and political movements. In general, blogs, tweets and other social media posts are understood contemporarily as an express means of gaining collective force for social, cultural and political movements.

The fact that *Americanah* utilizes blog posts is therefore significant in several ways. First, blogs are largely associated with globalization, so their use as a medium to challenge its economic and socio-political implications for black people is, at the very least, subversive. Second, for the most part blogs represent non-academic spaces. They tend to circulate among a diverse body of readers and coincide with popular culture. They can be accessed online, typically at no cost to the reader. Additionally, blog posts are formulated to be shared and reposted. As a result, they provide greater accessibility and circulation. Finally, it is significant that both the protagonist and the blog are introduced to the reader at the same time. The narratives that surround each one are linked, yet divergent. Whereas the main story narrates the romantic relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze, the blog posts focus almost exclusively on Ifemelu’s experiences with U.S. social hierarchy. Posts titled "Understanding America for the Non-American black: What Hispanic Means," "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class," and “Why Dark-Skinned Black Women-Both American and Non-American-Love Barack Obama” stand in stark contrast to the novel’s carefully crafted love story (Adichie, *Americanah* 129, 205, 264-266). Furthermore, the language and tone used in each narrative differ greatly. Unlike the romantic tone of the story, the blog posts are satirical and audacious. Thus, through their poignant, unfiltered cultural critique and emphasis on the specific experiences of black womanhood in the U.S., the blog
posts represent a more subversive, explicitly radical black feminist narrative than the main story line.

One of the best examples of how blogs are used to analyze race in the text is a post titled, “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black Baby.” The post functions as an instructional text on how one will be racialized upon coming to the U.S. It begins:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—you say "I'm not black" only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder. And you want none of that. Don't deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? Would you still say "Don't call me black, I am from Trinidad"? I didn't think so. So you're black, baby.

Through humorous yet confrontational language, the writer underlines the absurdity of non-American blacks performing whiteness or difference in order to be seen as slightly above the rest of their black American counterparts. She criticizes the attempt to circumvent racial hierarchy through individualism. The post makes it clear that denying one’s blackness is almost always an attempt to move up in the racial hierarchy. Moreover, the concept that one is not black in their own country is deconstructed in the rest of the novel’s storyline, as the reader is confronted with the pervasive presence of Western beauty standards, such as light skin and long straight hair, in Nigeria. The fact that non-American blacks are aware of what it means to be black in America is further evidence that white supremacy has extended itself as far as the colonial reach. It is not that one becomes black in America, but that in America one can no longer ignore their blackness.
The post continues by explaining what is required of black people in the U.S.:

And here's the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as "watermelon" or "tar baby" are used in jokes, even if you don't know what the hell is being talked about—and since you are a Non-American Black, The chances are that you won't know...You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say "you are not alone, I am here too." In describing black women you admire, always use the word "STRONG" because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY. And if you are a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you're about to pull a gun. When you watch television and hear that a "racist slur" was used, you must immediately become offended. Even though you are thinking "but why won't they tell me exactly what was said?" Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended.

The writer’s tone here is sarcastic as she discusses the offense one should take at racist statements. This sarcasm is an important element of the post because it highlights the contradictions inherent to any essentialist conception of blackness, whether subversive or not. Yet, this sarcastic tone is balanced by the necessity for solidarity. This necessity is further affirmed by the instruction to nod to other black people to signify that “you are not alone, I am here too.” These acts of solidarity represent the gravity of American white supremacy and the forceful way it works to isolate black people in the U.S. Additionally, the post suggests that the way that racist ideologies continue to pervade American society, racializing black women as "scary" and black men as "violent", leaves black people with two options: affirm stereotypes or suppress one’s emotions and perform affective labor. This commentary provides a nuanced understanding of how contemporary racism operates not only on institutional and culturally levels, but also deeply personal and psychological ones.
The commentary on how to perform one's blackness continues as the writer states:

When a crime is reported, pray that it was not committed by black person, and if it turns out to have been committed by black person, stay well away from the crime area for weeks, or you might be stopped for fitting the profile. If a black cashier gives poor service to the non-black person in front of you, complement that person's shoes or something, to make up for the bad service, because you're just as guilty for the cashiers crimes. If you are in an Ivy League college and a Young Republican tells you that you got in only because of Affirmative Action, do not whip out your perfect grades from high school. Instead, gently point out that the biggest beneficiaries of Affirmative Action are white women. If you go to eat in a restaurant, please tip generously. Otherwise the next by person who comes in will get awful service, because waiters groan when they get a black table. You see, black people have a gene that makes them not tip, so please overpower that gene. If you're telling a non-black person about something racist that happen to you, make sure you are not bitter. Don't complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all, do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This applies only for white liberals, by the way. Don't even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion. (Adichie, Americanah 273-275)

In this section, the writer emphasizes the social pressure felt by individual black people to distinguish themselves from their cultural community in an effort to escape their general racialization as poor, angry, urban criminals. Generous tips, mild manners and a refusal to call out racism each represent unspoken requirements of black middle-class membership. Even among liberals, as the writer notes, there is a clear expectation that black people never draw attention to their racial difference if doing so will make white people uncomfortable. The various ways this alternate blackness is performed in the quote, via class privilege for example, are contrasted with moments when negative racialization is inescapable. The emphasis on these experiences suggests that regardless of individual actions, black people in America have both a shared history and futurity.
The blog posts accomplish much more than a mere narration of U.S. racism and social hierarchy. Rather, they represent an open conversation with the international black community on issues of political and cultural identity. When Ifemelu calls out non-American blacks for their disidentification, she criticizes a black liberal approach to political organization. Specifically, when she references the moments where blackness is inescapable, Ifemelu contests the notion that one can transcend racial hierarchy. Instead, by analyzing the pervasive way racism operates on social, cultural, structural and psychological levels, she suggests that it is in black people’s best interest to work together against their systematic oppression. This focus on black collectivism and racial solidarity is one example of how black nationalist-internationalist politics are represented in the text.

The use of cyberspace, as a site of black solidarity and organization, is another important example of how black internationalist feminism exists in the text. Both Ifemelu’s blog and her involvement in online natural hair communities depict cyberspace as a landscape with new possibilities for communal construction. In the case of Raceteenth, the protagonist determines the boundaries of the community, who is allowed to participate and who is not, as well as the criteria for participation. She accepts and responds to some comments, while deleting others. As the writer, she can determine the level of restraint or civility called for in these dialogues. For example, she can provide unrestrained racial commentary, as she does throughout the text, while filtering out those comments that would try to reassert a post-racial discourse. Thus, this use of cyberspace accomplishes something that has yet to be done in the non-virtual world. It provides a power dynamic through which a black woman, Ifemelu, can control and define the conversations that surround race, gender, class and sexuality. It also allows her to create a space where she can deny the policing
power of Western hegemony. Similarly, cyberspaces like the natural hair message boards and websites function as a source of strength which propels black women, like the protagonist, to confront and rebel against white supremacist ideologies in the material world. In doing so, they not only affect their participants’ present experiences, but also project new possibilities for their futures.

**Conclusions**

The predominance of ideologies like Beyoncé feminism, black liberalism and black capitalism represents a major obstacle to twenty-first century black political organization. Rather than promote collectivism and social action, these ideologies promote individualism and a fractured sense of communal identity. Furthermore, as Adichie’s novel illustrates, these ideologies do more to reaffirm racist, sexists and exploitative practices than they do to challenge them. Despite this, most popular representations of black women’s empowerment, such as Beyoncé feminism, continue to conform to these ideologies. As a result, it has become exceedingly difficult to identify popular examples of radical black feminism and black internationalism today.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* represents an important divergence from this trend. When one considers the trajectory of radical black feminism, Adichie may not appear as an exemplary black internationalist feminist figure. Even some of Adichie’s own commentary on feminism and race, such as her TED talk “We Should All Be Feminists,” seems rather mild in comparison with the explicitly Marxist rhetoric of earlier black feminists. Yet, a thorough analysis of her most recent novel illustrates how, both as an author and popular culture icon, Adichie represents a twenty-first century incarnation of black internationalist feminist politics. Without a doubt, her explicit emphasis on racial solidarity and the
embodiment of black resistance through women’s hair constitutes an oppositional politics to both Beyoncé feminism and black liberalism. Thus, Adichie’s work makes an important intervention during a time when globalized capitalism remains largely unchecked by popular culture, and contemporary black politics are plagued by individualism.

1 I purposely define Beyoncé feminism as a type of black feminism as opposed to its white counterpart, which is best exemplified by the work of figures like Girls creator Lena Dunham.
2 While commercial, ideological and physical exchanges on a global level are not new, I suggest that their current extent, as well as the ability to do so rapidly and without physical travel, represents an unprecedented level of globalization. Furthermore, I use this term in its connoted association with capitalist expansion.
3 I should note that I am using the concept of black capitalism as a political ideology, rather than as a racialized mode of production. The reality is that there are very few black capitalists, yet there are thousands of adherents to the ideology of black capitalism.
4 For example, see Nshehe, “The Black Billionaires.” Nearly each of the Nigerian entries is accompanied by a story about friendship with military leaders.
5 The blog posts in the novel also correspond to an online Tumblr page.
Conclusion

The Place of Black Internationalist Feminist Writing Today

I began this project because I wanted to rethink black political organization as it exists today. In search of what this practice might look like, I turned to the work of four black internationalist feminist writers: Assata Shakur, Georgina Herrera, Grace Nichols and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In chapter one, Assata Shakur's autobiography, poetry and activism frame the state as the primary antagonist of black international feminism. Shakur grounds her oppositional politics in the history of racial slavery, natal alienation, systematic mass incarceration and political repression. Her work highlights the threat black liberalism poses to the practice of radical black feminist internationalism, by fostering a desire for capitalist materialism and mainstream acceptance. Finally, Shakur's work illustrates the need to think about issues like black futurity through a materialist lens. This last point is particularly useful when thinking about contemporary movements, such as Black Lives Matter. Although police brutality is not a new phenomenon, the recent attention to the murder of black youth demonstrates the continued existence of racialized state violence. The echoes between Shakur’s own comments on black life and those of contemporary movements illustrates that her framework for engaging the state is still relevant today. Likewise, the resurgence of her representation in the media, whether in White House controversies or network television shows, affirms this relevance and the anxieties it produces for those in power.

In chapter two, I argued that even within the context of a socialist nation-state, black internationalist feminists are still pushing the boundaries of revolutionary politics. Author and activist Georgina Herrera illustrates how poetry and oral
histories represent important aspects of a radical black feminist praxis. Furthermore, her particular engagement of black nationalist and international politics challenges the belief that black internationalism is a tradition wholly rooted in communism. As such, her work and writing help us to think about the potential of this tradition today, long after the perceived victory of Western capitalism over communism. Furthermore, her writing and activism emphasize the need for a Marxist politics centered on the liberation of black, working-class women.

In chapter three, I examined the way Grace Nichols continue to advocate a black internationalist opposition to Western imperialism. Her poetry uses the legacy of black resistance to racial slavery as a means for rethinking strategies of political agency today. Moreover, I argued that Nichols uniquely re-theorizes the practice of black internationalist feminism by representing black women’s bodies as a site of political, cultural and social redress.

Finally in chapter four, I argued against the rise of black liberal feminism, exemplified by popular figures like Beyoncé. The danger of Beyoncé feminism lays in its affirmation of black liberalism and capitalist materialism. Both of these ideologies threaten black radical futurity by encouraging individualism and class competition amongst black people. In contrast, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses her position in popular culture and literary circles to advocate for an international black consciousness that challenges existing practices of white supremacy. Furthermore, Adichie’s emphasis on hair and blogs demonstrate some of the means through which black internationalist feminist politics can be embodied and practiced today.

Each of these four radical black feminists I examine proceed from distinct socio-political and geographical contexts. Yet, there is a common theme throughout their work. Their writing and actions highlight the importance of black self-
determination, as well as the need for international solidarity based on a black feminist Marxist understanding of class. Similarly, each of these figures demonstrates the need for a dynamic engagement of the state. As these writers illustrate, the practice of these politics involves a continual process of renegotiation and re-theorization. Discussing the evolution of radical black feminist politics, Joy James argues that as “conditions change, what it means to be a revolutionary changes” (244). James’ articulation is central to my understanding of black internationalist feminism in our contemporary context. As conditions change, like the rise of neoliberalism and the perceived victory of global capitalism over socialism, the practices of radical black feminism must also change.

In addition to defining the parameters of black internationalist feminism and its relevance to today, I have also argued that writing constitutes an important praxis. Literary and cultural production play an important role in fomenting a collective, black internationalist consciousness that pushes against the individualism of black liberalism. Autobiography, poetry, oral histories and blogs are all mediums through which we can build community and begin to envision a radical black futurity that grants the fullest liberation to the greatest number of people.

In thinking about the practice of black internationalist feminism today, I must also address what has quickly become one of the most well-known contemporary examples of radical black political organization today. Founded by three black women in 2012, Black Lives Matter defines itself as:

a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans
folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement. (Garza)

Firmly rooted in the traditions I have outlined, Black Lives Matter makes use of various mediums, like blogs and twitter, to not only facilitate organization activism, but also to encourage political dialogue on key issues related to black existence.

The public reception of Black Lives Matter, particularly as it is articulated by black leaders, frames the relationship between this movement and my project. Recently, at a public event in London, President Obama criticized the movement, saying that the group has to do more than “just keep on yelling” about issues (Silverstein). While his criticism also came with an affirmation of the movement’s mission, Obama argued that the group should focus on legislative change. This particular public moment, of a black liberal president criticizing a radical black movement, is emblematic of the problems facing black political organization today. Rather than risk his respectability by providing unqualified support for Black Lives Matter, President Obama attempts to reframe its politics in a way that fits within U.S. narratives of social progress.

Obama’s attempt to correct the radicalism of Black Lives Matter was not the first one made by a black leader. For example, last year The Washington Post published a piece by Barbara Reynold titled, “I was a civil rights activist in the 1960s. But it's hard for me to get behind Black Lives Matter.” Like others, Reynolds calls the movement “a motley-looking group” who could learn from the respectable, non-violent practices of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Reynolds). Similarly, although Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson has not openly condemned Black Lives Matter, he has continued to discount its radical politics by calling it part of the same story as the Civil
Rights movement and proof that black people are reaping the benefits of social progress (Thrasher).

The fact that black political leaders, such as President Obama and Jesse Jackson, are the voices being highlighted by the media for their critique of radical movements, like Black Lives Matter, illustrates the relevance of this project. While the Black Lives Matter movement is certainly reflective of black internationalist feminist practices, its reception reflects the need for other methodologies of activism that can fight the ideological and cultural strongholds working against radical black collectivism today. If we are to ever obtain the fullest freedom for the greatest number of people, then we must take the work of the radical black feminists I examine as a point of departure for rethinking the way we engage the state, as well as how we engage one another.

1 Barbara Reynolds is a former Civil Rights activist and the author of a Jesse Jackson’s autobiography titled, *Jesse Jackson, the Man, the Myth and the Movement*. 
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