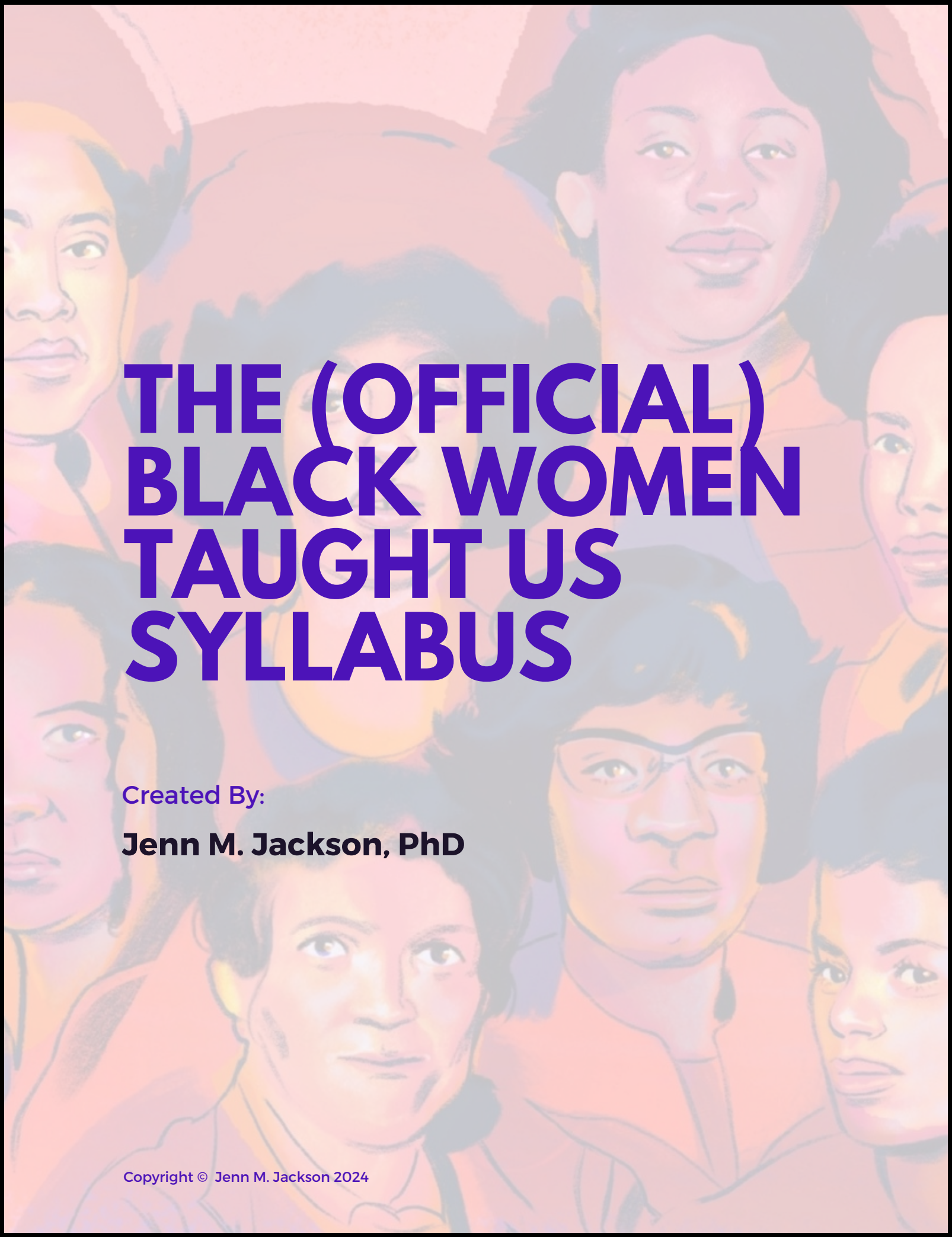

THE (OFFICIAL) BLACK WOMEN TAUGHT US SYLLABUS

Created By:

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LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR: JENN M. JACKSON, PHD

I published the book BLACK WOMEN TAUGHT US on January 23, 2024. It is loosely based on the course I teach at Syracuse University entitled "Black Feminist (Insurgent) Politics." It's a love letter to the Black women who raised me as much as it is an offering of reverence to the Black Feminists who shaped my academic journey. Amidst attacks on Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist and Queer Studies, and LGBTQIA+ politics, this book and syllabus are meant to challenge the erasure of our knowledge of the true contributions of Black Feminists to our collective liberation.

While each chapter of the book curates my pedagogical and curriculum choices in the classroom, the book primarily focuses on the life and experiences of Black Feminist thinkers, activists, and organizers like Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, Toni Morrison, The Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Angela Y. Davis, and bell hooks.

In this syllabus, I have curated a collection of Black Feminist readings that build scaffolding across these women's experiences via theory and practice (or praxis). By following along with this syllabus, you can embark upon your own Black Feminist journey. You can read along with the book or treat this as a a stand-alone Black Feminist course. In either case, this is a beginning, not an ending.

In solidarity,

Jenn M. Jackson

Get your copy of the book everywhere books are sold. If you can, purchase from Black-owned and/or queer-owned bookstores via Bookshop.org instead of buying from the big box stores. This is how we keep local bookstores alive.

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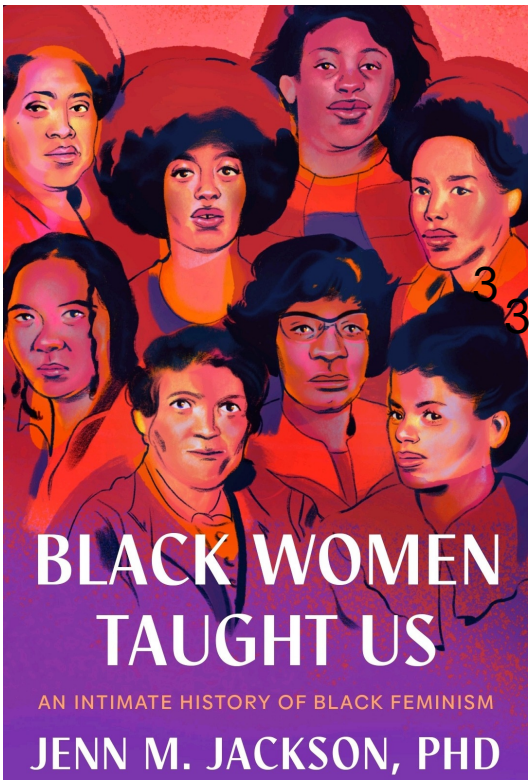
INTRODUCTION: BLACK WOMEN TAUGHT US



I wrote this book to honor the Black women who raised me as much as I wrote it to acknowledge and archive the theories, experiences, and scholarship of the Black Feminist foremothers and elders whose teachings have guided me on my own anti-racist, abolitionist, Black future-building journey. These women, like my mother, aunties, grandmothers, and church mothers, were some of my earliest Black Feminist teachers. Their loving advice and admonishments led me through a world that would always see me as too aggressive, too opinionated, too queer, too masculine, and too Black.

In this introduction, I explore the ways I started my process of connecting those early feminist lessons to my experiences with anti-Black racism to the broader Black Feminist teachings that underlie this project and book.

Thought Questions:

- *Why are Black women's experiences and intellectual contributions so frequently erased from history?*
- *How can we, as students of Black Feminism, better show up for our Black Feminist teachers and foremothers?*
- *How can we commit to a Black Feminist study and praxes that also seeks to dismantle the violent status quo?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Sister Citizen*, by Melissa Harris-Perry
- *Feminism is for Everybody*, by bell hooks
- "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," by Audre Lorde
- *Women, Race, & Class*, by Angela Y. Davis
- *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander
- *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, by Beverly Guy-Sheftall

CHAPTER 1: HARRIET JACOBS TAUGHT ME ABOUT FREEDOM

Harriet Jacobs' narrative in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* walks through the life of a slave girl they refer to as "Linda" throughout the text. In the beginning, we are introduced to her life with her mother, father, and grandmother. She is pursued by her master her entire life then becomes pregnant at 15 and 19 with children from another white man (Mr. Sands). Through her struggle for freedom (which she eventually gets) we see the complexities of slavery and its attachment to the Black female body.

In order to understand Jacobs' account of slavery, we must see her experiences and the experiences of enslaved women as wrapped up in the various forms of enclosures and prisons they face. Jacobs ends up hiding in an attic for seven years on her way to freedom. In the attic, she finds freedom for the first time.

Thought Questions:

- *What is freedom? How do we know it when we see it?*
- *Is there freedom in the attic?*
- *What are the enclosures (physical and metaphysical) that enslaved women face?*
- *In what ways does Jacobs' efforts towards freedom resemble the journey along the Middle Passage?*

Recommended Readings:

- *The Incidents of a Slave Girl Written By Herself,* by Harriet Jacobs
- "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," by Hortense Spillers
- "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves". *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 13 No. 1/2 Spring 1972, by Angela Davis
- *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America,* by Saidiya Hartman
- "Private Selves as Public Property," by Jenn M. Jackson

CHAPTER 2: IDA B. WELLS TAUGHT ME ABOUT RADICAL TRUTH-TELLING

Wells was born into slavery in 1862 during the Civil War. Thus, the war made her free. At 16, when her parents died, Wells took care of her siblings and became a school teacher. During this time, she was fired because of her vocal anti-lynching activism, so she became a publisher and writer. Hence, the birth of the "Free Speech," a Negro newspaper Wells co-founded in 1881.

Wells became politicized when three of her comrades, Calvin McDowell, Tom Moss, and Will Stewart, were lynched. They were the owners of the People's Grocery. They attempted to protect their grocery store but were attacked by Willian Barrett (a rival white grocer) and plainclothes officers. This began her fight. In her career, Wells struggled to show how the media worked to shape public narratives around lynching and perpetuate myths about Black people.

Thought Questions:

- *Why would lynch mobs target wealthy Black people?*
- *How is lynching also a part of the larger capitalistic framework of the post-bellum US?*
- *What does the US's history with lynching reveal about Blackness and gender?*
- *What does the "primary offense" Wells focuses on expose about white women's role in lynching?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Southern Lynch Law and all its Horrors*, Ida B. Wells (1892)
- *Crusade for Justice*, by Ida B. Wells
- *A Voice From the South*, by Anna Julia Cooper (1892)
- *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, by Paula Giddings
- *A Spectacular Secret*, by Jacqueline Goldsby
- "Lynching in America Report," by the Equal Justice Institute
- *No Mercy Here*, by Sarah Haley

CHAPTER 3: ZORA NEALE HURSTON TAUGHT ME ABOUT THE RECLAMATION OF OUR LABOR

Black women have always been forced to fit into the mold of someone's else's ideas of beauty, lifestyle and relationships. Throughout Hurston's canonical book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, traditional ideas of what a woman should be are imposed onto Janie. Whether it be her husband, her grandmother or the judgmental people of the town, Janie's self expression is put into question.

In many ways, Hurston's characters are an allegory for her own life as they frequently struggle to find themselves amidst a world that only seeks to water them down, erase them, and diminish their personhood. Hurston's story reflects the importance of remembering and honoring Black women's labor.

Thought Questions:

- *What is significant about Hurston's commitments to writing and telling Black stories?*
- *How did the treatment Hurston endured in her life reflect broader sentiments about Black people in the rural South?*
- *How did the conditions of Hurston's death echo the ways Black women's labor is often erased from the archives?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston
- "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," by Alice Walker
- *Mules and Men,* by Zora Neale Hurston
- *Dust Tracks on a Road*, by Zora Neale Hurston
- *Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou
- *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, by Michele Wallace

CHAPTER 4: ELLA BAKER TAUGHT ME WHY WE SHOULD LISTEN TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE

One of the most important lessons of an organizer's life is knowing how to show up in movements over generations. It's a lesson that shows up over and over again. Luckily, Ella Baker modeled for us how to remain present in Black liberation movements and struggles by empowering young people to take the lead. Baker's critical and central role in connecting traditional movements from the Civil Rights Era with the local and grassroots energy of young Black people all over the country, remains one of the most important contributions to Black struggle over the past few decades.

In studying the life and teachings of Ella Baker, we see that movements are much more than their charismatic male leaders. They are about the women, the children, and the young leaders coming up next.

Thought Questions:

- *What does Ella Baker's centering of young Black Americans in the Black liberation struggle say about the broader Black movement of her time?*
- *In what ways does Baker's focus on young people reflect today's movements?*
- *How might gender have shaped Baker's role in movements throughout her life?*
- *Baker modeled radical listening for us. How can we do the same?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, by Barbara Ransby
- *Freedom Dreams*, by Robin D. G. Kelley
- "Developing community leadership." Black women in white America: A documentary history (1972), by Ella Baker
- "Ella's Song," Sweet Honey in the Rock

CHAPTER 5: FANNIE LOU HAMER TAUGHT ME TO BE (UN)RESPECTABLE

Fannie Lou Hamer was widely known for her fierce struggles on behalf of poor, Black Mississippians who were disenfranchised and frequently found themselves under the boot of white institutions. Because of her righteous indignance, Hamer was targeted by police and racist white Americans who sought to end her organizing. She was victimized by doctor's who illegally performed a "Mississippi Appendectomy", or a hysterectomy, on her without her knowledge or consent. From these experiences, Hamer developed an unyielding hunger for justice for all Black people, especially those who were the most vulnerable.

Thought Questions:

- *Why must our social movement work center those who are the most vulnerable?*
- *What do Fannie Lou Hamer's efforts to advocate for poor Black Americans in the South teach us about the regional variations of white supremacy in the U.S.?*
- *How do Hamer's experiences with the violence of western medicine depict the gendered nature of anti-Blackness in the U.S.?*
- *Why won't respectability politics save us?*

Recommended Readings:

- *This Little Light of Mine*, Kay Mills
- *Killing the Black Body*, by Dorothy Roberts
- *Intimate Justice*, Shatema Threadcraft
- *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, by Robin D. G. Kelley
- *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920*, by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham

CHAPTER 6: SHIRLEY CHISHOLM TAUGHT ME TO HOLD WHITENESS ACCOUNTABLE

There is so much to learn from the life of Shirley Chisholm. From her immigrant experience to the challenges she faced in Congress, Chisholm was rarely greeted with warmth and welcome when she entered the public sphere. Despite the overt disrespect and misogynoir she faced, "Fighting Shirley" was not known to back down from an altercation.

Through her perseverance, Chisholm showed that accountability requires a commitment to justice and to seeing it through to the end. Holding whiteness accountable, especially in Chisholm's day, meant confronting the anti-Black hatred of the mass media, the white supremacist violence of white terrorist organizations, and the institutional violence of political leadership that has never supported Black women's political lives.

Thought Questions:

- *What does accountability mean in our politics?*
- *How should an ethic of accountability shape our movements?*
- *What are the risks to ourselves when we are the instruments holding whiteness accountable?*
- *What does Chisholm's example show us about the importance of courage in our Black Feminist life?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Unbought and Unbossed*, by Shirley Chisholm
- *Black feminisms, queer feminisms, trans feminisms*, by Jenn M. Jackson
- "Racism and Anti-Feminism," by Shirley Chisholm
- "Black Feminism on Capitol Hill," by Anastasia Curwood
- *Black Women in Politics : Demanding Citizenship Challenging Power and Seeking Justice.* State University of New York Press 2018, by Julia S. Jordan-Zachery and Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd

CHAPTER 7: TONI MORRISON TAUGHT ME THAT BLACK WOMEN ARE POWERFUL

Morrison reminds us that the long arcs of racism, anti-Blackness and white supremacy manifest in myriad ways. This includes the looming, lurking hauntings that her characters like Sethe and Denver struggle against throughout her book *Beloved*. Moreover, these experiences with hauntings are a part of the larger process of reckoning with the implications and outcomes of the “peculiar institution" of slavery.

As Morrison typically does, she sets the story in the rural Midwest, a place she knows well. And, it’s a place where Blackness has long been fraught. In Morrison’s haunting words, we see reflections of the power of Black women’s beings.

Thought Questions:

- *What does the character Beloved teach us about rebirth and the messiness of reckoning with our pasts/traumas?*
- *In what ways does the community surrounding “Sweet Home” become the saving grace for Sethe and Denver?*
- *What can this text teach us about healing in community with other Black folk and, especially, other Black women?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Beloved*, Toni Morrison
- *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison
- *Sula*, by Toni Morrison
- *Song of Solomon*, by Toni Morrison
- *The Book of Night Women*, by Marlon James
- *Who Fears Death?*, by Nnedi Okorafor
- *Augustown*, by Kei Miller
- *Barracoon*, by Zora Neale Hurston

CHAPTER 8: THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE TAUGHT ME ABOUT IDENTITY POLITICS

The Combahee River Collective shows us that Black Feminist organizing frequently emerges from a place of deep experience and close proximity to the very issues and concerns that animate the work. When folks recite the term "the personal is political," that is fundamentally what they are illustrating. For Black women (who are also queer, disabled, working class/poor, or otherwise marginalized), their unique positionalities provide a particular standpoint (credit to Patricia Hill Collins "standpoint theory") that allows them to understand and articulate what is otherwise invisible to the power structures as they exist.

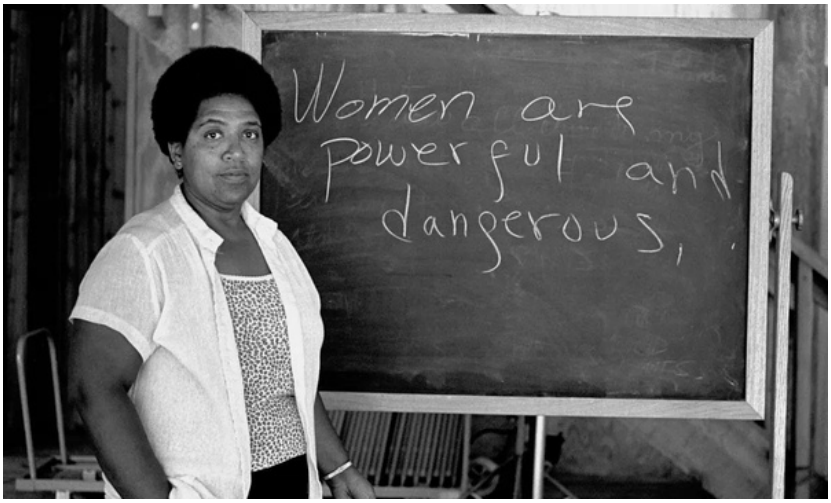
Thought Questions:

- *Why is it significant that the term "identity politics" emerges at this particular political moment?*
- *What exactly does this statement mean? If Black feminism is meant to fight simultaneous oppressions, what does mainstream white feminism fight?*
- *How do the members of the CRC situate their intersectional struggle with respect to the predominant movements for feminist liberation?*

Recommended Readings:

- 'A Black Feminist Statement', by Combahee River Collective Collective (1977)
- *How We Get Free*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
- "Transnational Black Feminism in the Twenty-first Century. In New Social Movements in the African Diaspora," by Kia Caldwell
- "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," by Chandra Mohanty
- "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law." Harvard Law Review, Vol. 101, No. 7 (May, 1988), pp. 1331-1387, by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.

CHAPTER 9: AUDRE LORDE TAUGHT ME ABOUT SOLIDARITY AS SELF-CARE



In reflecting on her experience with cancer, Audre Lorde shows us that the obstacles and challenges that Black lesbians encounter in receiving care for breast cancer are unique and critical to understanding the full power women have during this period. Much of the care surrounding breast cancer science, surgery, and treatment is committed to returning to some state of normalcy that Lorde suggests may never be actualized.

For Lorde, the emphasis on self-care emerged most acutely when she was faced with her own mortality. For many Black women, it is the deterioration of their bodies that forces them to grapple with caring for themselves.

Thought Questions:

- *How does the centering of appearance and physical alignment after mastectomy reinforce and mirror existing gender roles and hierarchies?*
- *What self-actualizing possibilities does Lorde open up? Is there anything foreclosed on?*
- *Why is speech so important in Lorde's dialogue/s?*
- *How does speaking across silence also bridge the divide of difference?*

Recommended Readings:

- *The Cancer Journals*, by Audre Lorde
- *Burst of Light*, by Audre Lorde
- *Care work: Dreaming Disability Justice,* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha
- *Bodyminds Reimagined,* by Sami Schalk
- *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind,* by La Marr Jurelle Bruce
- *The Black Unicorn*, by Audre Lorde

CHAPTER 10: ANGELA DAVIS TAUGHT ME TO BE AN ANTI-RACIST ABOLITIONIST

Angela Davis provides a positive and hopeful outlook on the possibility that we might one day be able to see crime and punishment as not inherently tethered to one another. In her abolition work, she helps us understand that prisons and the creation of the prison industrial complex (PIC) are not actually rooted in mitigating a crime epidemic, instead they are rooted in racism, capitalism, and anti-Blackness.

Moreover, if we are to imagine a world without prisons, we will first have to imagine a world where we do not first see prisons as inherent to our environment and permanent. Moving from that place, we will have to assess the relationships that have been borne through a long capitalistic tradition of literally monetizing everything including our bodies and labor.

Thought Questions:

- *What is the role of political imagination in building a new world?*
- *If not abolition then what? What are the alternatives to abolition?*
- *How do we imagine a freer world outside of the carceral state?*
- *What tools does Davis provide to help us imagine a freer world?*
- *How can anti-prison activists take up the work Davis outlines here?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Y. Davis
- "Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy." *Studies in American Political Development*, 21 (Fall 2007), 230–265, by Vesla Weaver
- *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California,* by Ruth Wilson Gilmore
- "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*: 1707-1791, by Cheryl Harris.

CHAPTER 11: BELL HOOKS TAUGHT ME HOW TO LOVE EXPANSIVELY

bell hooks offers us many lessons on the ways we can love ourselves whole. Black self-healing and self-recovery require that we first tell the truth about the harms committed against us and the harms that we endure via our own performance of strength.

Especially for Black women (and focusing on those at the intersections of transness, disability, fatness, and poverty), it is imperative that the work of healing ourselves and our communities stem from a deep accountability to listening to our own bodies and needs.

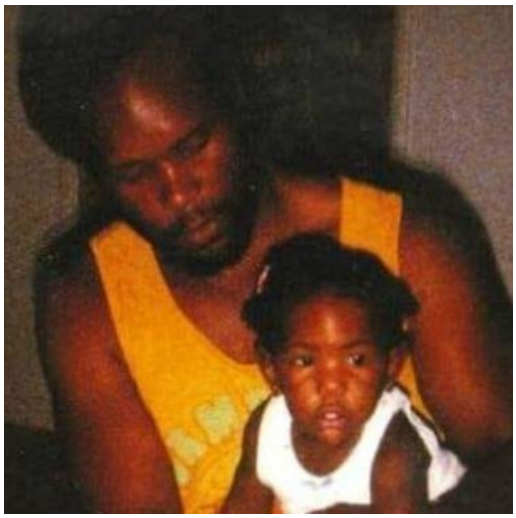
Thought Questions:

- *How can bell hooks' work help us to make connections between the personal and the political?*
- *In this moment of deep trauma and political transformation, what does it mean to face grief and loss?*
- *What does an ethic of love teach us about how to face our own healing journeys?*
- *What lessons can bell hooks teach us in navigating the COVID moment?*

Recommended Readings:

- *Sisters of the Yam, by* bell hooks
- bell hooks, "Love as a Practice of Freedom"
- *The Salt Eaters,* by Toni Cade Bambara
- *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist,* by Hazel Carby
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *We can learn to mother ourselves: The queer survival of black feminism 1968-1996.* Diss. Duke University, 2010.
- *Talking back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black,* by bell hooks

CONCLUSION:
I TAUGHT MYSELF ABOUT PATIENCE



Importantly, the book ends by reflecting on the timing with which all of these lessons visited me. In thinking about my own impatience (and the impatience of so many of my Black Feminist co-strugglers), I close on the lesson of patience because we are always becoming.

We should always challenge ourselves to become something and someone otherwise, constantly believing that our future self will draw from the wisdom we are sewing from today's obstacles.

Thought Questions:

- *How can we push back against pressures to be fully-formed right now?*
- *How can we practice radical refusal in response to institutions, groups, and individuals who ask of our labor without pouring back into our energy?*
- *How can we love all Black people while ensuring that love includes a deep love for ourselves?*
- *In what ways can we exercise more patience with our own Black Feminist journeys?*

Recommended Readings:

- *We Do This Til We Free Us*, by Mariame Kaba
- *Unapologetic*, by Charlene Carruthers
- *Eloquent Rage*, by Brittney Cooper
- *Arrested Justice*, by Beth Richie
- *Citizen*, by Claudia Rankine
- *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk
- *Invisible No More*, by Andrea Ritchie
- *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* by Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, Beth Richie, and Angela Davis
- *My Grandmother's Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem
- *Hood Feminism*, by Mikki Kendall
- *Head Off and Split*, by Nikky Finney
- *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*, by Nedra Tawwab

CLOSING REMARKS

I wrote BLACK WOMEN TAUGHT US during one of the most difficult times of my own and our collective life: during the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, I lost many of my aunts and foremothers who were pivotal in shaping my life and political outlooks. My Auntie Barbara, who I wrote about in the introduction of the book, passed away during the pandemic as well as my maternal grandmother, Lucille, my Aunt Michelle, Aunt Lori, my Aunt Carolyn, my cousin Amber, and so many of my close comrades and friends. From that grief, emerged a story that is at once an "intimate history" and a eulogy to the women and queer folks whose lessons live on in me. The story I have written was always mine to tell.

In this way, this book also functions as a living archive, just as we each are living archives, walking histories in the making. We each are the narrators of our own stories and experiences. And, as we continue to study the words and wisdom of our Black Feminist foremothers and elders, we build a community of comrades and co-strugglers with whom we can imagine freer futures.

This is just the beginning of the journey. Keep going.

Thank you to my foremothers, elders, and comrades who continue to affirm for me and remind me that everything I need is already in me.

Thank you to my team at Penguin Random House for supporting this important work and ensuring that it reflected the full stories of these women's lives.

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