Kimberly Springer

Third Wave Black Feminism?

Black feminists in the 1970s expended disproportionate amounts of energy attempting to legitimize themselves in the eyes of Black communities—so much so that often their organizing suffered (Springer 2001).[1] It is compelling to note similarities between 1970s Black feminists and those writing in the 1990s. Writings in the 1990s continue to refute the idea that working against gender oppression is somehow counter to antiracist efforts. Both attempt to strike a balance between adequately theorizing race and gender oppression as they intersect in the United States. Black feminists writing then and now struggle with advocating a love for Black men while passionately hating Black sexism.

And while older Black feminists are wrestling with past dilemmas and strive to impart knowledge about the struggle for racial and gender justice, younger Black women are also joining the dialogue through their activism, music, and writing. This article evokes three central questions about *contemporary* young Black women's views on gender and race: Is there a third wave Black feminist politic? What issues are contemporary young Black feminists prioritizing? How do these young women contextualize their experiences and their politics?

The article begins with a discussion of the term *third wave* and how this model excludes feminists of color. Looking closely at this term is key to positioning young Black women along the continuum of feminist history in the United States, as well as intervening in the exclusion of these voices from contemporary feminist theorizing and organizing. I examine three texts: Lisa Jones's collection of essays *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (1994), Joan Morgan's essays *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (1999; hereafter known

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[1] I capitalize "Black" to denote the 1970s political history of Black empowerment from which Black feminist theorizing and activism emerged.

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as *Chickenheads*), and Veronica Chambers's memoir *Mama's Girl* (1996). These texts stand out as they speak explicitly from or about young Black feminist perspectives in the 1990s. Jones's and Morgan's essays effectively meld the third wave penchant for personal narrative with second wave theoretical underpinnings, creating a case for interrogating the politics of style and the style of politics.

Chambers's book is the outlier of the three, as it is the only memoir. Though she was only twenty-five years old when she wrote it, and the production of memoirs has spiraled exponentially in the past ten years, it is important to examine Chambers's book because it is one of the few written by a young African-American woman. Her narrative's inflections of the complex interweaving of gender, class, and race reaffirm the value of memoir for relaying and contextualizing experiences that some might think are unimportant. These three texts have much to contribute to women's studies, African-American studies, and other fields concerned with examining the daily functioning of interlocking systems of oppression. Moreover, as texts that examine popular culture, they convey valuable, transferable messages for activists working around gender, race, and class in U.S. Black communities.[2]

Three themes emerged from my reading of these texts. The first is young Black women's relationship to our personal and political histories. This history includes our relationships to past social movements, our biological mothers, and our political foremothers. The next theme is a familiar one that spans the history of Black women's writing: relationship to self. Morgan, Chambers, and Jones all tackle the myth of the "strongblackwoman" and what it means for how we relate to our mothers, other Black women, and ourselves. Finally, the authors I analyze write about Black women's relationships to Black men: biological brothers, brothers in the political sense, and fathers.

There are still young Black women continuing feminist analyses of Black life, but they are not necessarily claiming the label of *third wave*. Their reasons, however, are different than those of women who fear feminism as an ideology. These women share their life stories in the public forum as a way of asserting a contemporary Black female identity that is mindful of historical context and community imperatives. The recuperation of the self in a racist and sexist society is a political enterprise and a Black feminist

[2] My omission of sexuality and sexual orientation is strategic because, as I explain later in this essay, these authors' discussions of sexuality are distinctly abbreviated and circumscribed.

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one that deprioritizes generational differences in the interest of historical, activist continuity.

I conclude with a proposal for ways that we can use these writings to move Black feminist theorizing and action out of the classroom and the more cerebral realms of reading and contemplation. How might we, as activists and teachers, pair the readings I discuss in this article with popular culture representations in conversations with schools, community groups, and other public arenas in the Black community that so desperately need what Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (in press) call "gender talk"?

Black feminism: Drowned out by the wave

Feminist activists and women's movement historians use the "wave" model to describe the women's movement in the United States. This model obscures the historical role of race in feminist organizing. If we consider the first wave as that moment of organizing encompassing woman suffrage and the second wave as the women's liberation/women's rights activism of the late 1960s, we effectively disregard the race-based movements before them that served as precursors, or windows of political opportunity, for gender activism.

In relationship to the first wave, the oration, organizing, writing, and agitation skills that white women gleaned from their work in the abolitionist movement, as well as the cues taken from Black women involved in antislavery, antilynching, and suffrage work, were instrumental to the evolution of the first wave. Consider these three examples. In Boston, Maria Stewart, a free Black from Connecticut, gave a public lecture to a racially mixed audience of men and women; she was the first woman of any race to do so. In the 1850s, Mary Shadd Cary, the first Black woman newspaper editor in North America, published the *Provincial Freeman,* which was an abolitionist paper with the motto "Self-Reliance is the True Road to Independence." Anna Julia Cooper, author of *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1988), wrote the first book-length feminist treatise on the condition of African Americans. A pivotal text of Black feminist thought, Cooper argues for women's leadership in the Black community, as well as the need for Black women to work separately from white feminists because of racism experienced personally, political betrayals, and the strategic need for separatism.

Inserting these women into the public record of feminist activism challenges the notion that "race women" were not also concerned about

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gender. African-American women, if inserted into this wave model, make the wave, shall we say, a much bigger swell. Remaining mindful of the links between the struggles for freedom from racism and sexism is critical as future social justice coalition work depends on accurate—for better or worse—historical memory.

More disruptive of the wave model is the work of scholars such as Angela Davis and Deborah Gray White on enslaved African women's forms of resistance to gendered violence. As Davis observes in her pioneering article "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" ([1971] 1995), and as White notes in *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), enslaved women actively resisted rape, forced pregnancy, and separation from their children on plantations. Through natural abortion methods and fighting back against nonconsensual sexual relations when they could, they enacted an early form of feminist resistance to distinctly gendered oppression aimed at women. Harriet Jacobs's (1987) emancipation narrative, for example, is one of the few historical documents written from a Black woman's perspective demonstrating early feminist resistance to slavery and sexual abuse. None of this is meant to discount the gendered atrocities that Black men faced in the slave economy (e.g., castration and other attempts at demasculinization), but it is meant to highlight the ways in which, early on, Black women enacted feminist politics that acknowledged the ways that they were oppressed as Blacks *and* women. This resistance to *gendered* violence predates that of the abolition movement, but it also happened while the movement emerged. Thus, we can make the case that the idea of a first wave beginning with suffrage excludes the fact that Black women resisted gendered oppression during the antebellum period.[3]

In sum, as we learn more about women of color's feminist activism, the wave analogy becomes untenable. What might, for example, the inclusion of American Indian women's gendered resistance do to even my time line? Reexamining the wave model of the women's movement can only benefit the movement as we continue to expand the category of "women" and make sure that, as bell hooks asserts, "feminism is for everybody" (hooks 2000).

Another way that this critique of waves dismisses race is the evolution of the term *third wave* itself. My initial reading of writings labeled as third wave, such as the Barbara Findlen anthology *Listen Up! Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995) and Rebecca Walker's volume *To Be*

[3] I first heard this critique of the wave model posed by Guy-Sheftall in a graduate course on Black women's history.

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Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995), triggered memories of women of color using the term *third wave* in the late 1980s. Barbara Smith, founder of Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press and editor of, among other works, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), confirms that Kitchen Table set out to publish a book on racism called *The Third Wave*. In this conceptualization of third wave that emerged in the late 1980s, the book was to describe an antiracist, women-of-color-led feminism for the coming decade. Smith notes quite logically that it is only common sense, based on the first wave and second wave analogies, for those seeking to define a new direction of feminism to call it the "third wave" (Orr 1997; Smith 2001).

The term *third wave feminism* as we now know it signals a new generation of feminists. It came to public consciousness, or at least leftist consciousness, in the form of Rebecca Walker's founding of the Third Wave Foundation in 1992, which initially conducted a Freedom Summer–styled voter registration campaign that same year.[4] This generation of third wave feminism credits previous generations for women-centered social and political advances. This acknowledgment, however, took the form of seeming ungratefulness and historical amnesia in Walker's anthology, *To Be Real* (Steinem 1995; Walker 1995). Some contributors voiced a sense of feeling stifled by the previous generation's organizing style and seemed to reduce the third wave's argument to a gripe about feminism as lifestyle dogma. Yet, more recent writings about third wave feminism—particularly Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards's recent book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000)—attempt to define third wave politics and mend the generational rift that arose between some older and younger white feminists. Moreover, *Manifesta* at least gives lip service to the role of women of color, lesbians, and, to a lesser degree, poor women in the third wave women's movement.[5]

The wave model perpetuates the exclusion of women of color from women's movement history and feminist theorizing. Still, as it is so deeply embedded in how we examine the history and future of the women's movement, it remains useful for internal critique. As it is used historically and today, it is too static. To serve a wide range of women's needs, it is

[4] Today, the Third Wave Foundation focuses on inspiring and cultivating feminist activism among women ages fifteen to thirty, who are considered within the demographic of the third wave. Defining the waves of feminism according to generation also raises the question of where women who are older than thirty, but were children during the height of second wave activism, fall in this generational schemata.

[5] Disability as an issue for women is wholly absent from this text, as well as the texts by young Black feminists examined here.

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imperative that the wave model includes women of color's resistance to gender violence.

What to do with our mothers' gardens?

If we proceed with this idea of third wave feminism in its most obvious form, that of denoting generations of feminism, what is the relationship between Black feminists of differing generations? Does a generational rift exist between them? One aspect of the generational tensions between feminists in general is the frustration that older feminists feel at watching younger women reinvent the wheels of social change. Michele Wallace, in retrospect, recognized the irritation of her mother and other women of her mother's generation. In her essay "To Hell and Back," Wallace writes of the late 1960s: "My thesis had been that I and my generation were reinventing youth, danger, sex, love, blackness, and fun. But there had always been just beneath the surface a persistent countermelody, . . . what I might also call my mother's line, a deep suspicion that I was reinventing nothing, but rather making a fool of myself in precisely the manner that untold generations of young women before me had done" (1997, 11). Other than this autobiographical insight by Wallace, few sources speak of conflicts or distinctions between Black feminists of different generations.

In interviews with Black feminists who participated in 1970s feminist activism, some voiced a mix of disappointment and understanding at young Black women's seeming lack of interest in feminism.[6] Their understanding came from intimate knowledge of the struggle, name-calling, and painful awakening around claiming feminism as a political stance. Simultaneously, older Black feminists also seemed disappointed that young Black women could appear to turn their backs on the foundations of Black feminist activism, which made possible, at the very least, a few societal gains for the next generation.

The few articles about Black feminism that have made it into the mainstream press either lament the lack of formal Black feminist organizations

[6] For another research project on the history of Black feminist organizations, I conducted twenty-two oral history interviews with Black feminists active during the 1970s about their organizations (Springer in press). The last question I posed to them was on their thoughts about Black feminist activism today. This question was not specifically about young Black women, but some of my interviewees did wonder cynically, "What Black feminism?" as if young women had not picked up the torch. Others who I interviewed spoke positively in terms of continuing their activism and working with young Black women who they encountered daily to nurture a Black feminist politic.

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or pick up where *Essence* left off in the 1970s—questioning the need for feminism in Black women's lives.[7] As an example of the questioning of the existence of Black feminism on the organizational level, the most recent, high-profile article is Kristal Brent Zook's (1995) essay "A Manifesto of Sorts for a Black Feminist Movement," which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. She calls Black women to task for their failure to organize on the behalf of Black women and for serving instead as auxiliaries to male-centered causes like the Million Man March or the "Endangered Black Male" crusades of figures such as O. J. Simpson, Tupac Shakur, and Mike Tyson. Zook also voices frustration with an older generation that continues to define leadership as male-centered and rooted in traditions such as NAACP conventions and benefit fashion shows.[8]

Jones, Morgan, and Chambers all address the question of generation—along with the benefits and drawbacks of being born after the 1960s and 1970s social movements that drastically altered the sociopolitical landscape of racial and sexual politics. They give credit to the Civil Rights, women's, and Black nationalist movements for the place of privilege that those movements put some of us in, in terms of opportunities. Yet, they also recognize the complacency that such awe-inspiring heroes encouraged in Generation X.[9] Chambers recalls being a fifth grader and watching documentaries about Black history:

> It seemed that all the big black battles were over by the time I was born. . . . Watching footage of the bus boycotts, the sit-ins, and the marches . . . I would wonder if I would have been brave. My brother and I used to say, "No way were we sitting on the back of the bus!" but the look my mother would give us told me that we had no idea what we would or wouldn't have done. Deep down inside, I wondered. As bad as those times were, I wished sometimes

[7] As Cheryl Hicks (2001) notes, *Essence* is interesting in this regard as it was founded and continues to be published by African-American men, though several African-American women have served as editor-in-chief.

[8] Barbara Ransby criticizes Zook, claiming that Zook "distorted and obscured more about black feminism than she revealed" (2000, n. 1). Though she does not elucidate this claim, I believe that Ransby is referring to the lack of attention that Zook pays to grassroots, decentralized Black feminist organizing in the interest of raising compelling questions about the invisibility of a national Black feminist activism (2000).

[9] Generation X consists of people born between 1961 and 1981. Unlike the wave model, this bracketing of generations adapts to the age of the members of the generation. That is, baby boomers, regardless of how old they are, remain baby boomers. Those born between 1961 and 1981, though getting older, remain within that particular social designation of Generation X.

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> that there was some sort of protest or something that I could get involved with. (Chambers 1996, 52)

Chambers lived with both parents until her father left the family when she was ten years old. At the time of Chambers's reminiscence, her parents had always provided the basics for her and her brother, and the fact that they had always lived in a house with a yard is a significant marker of the class security that she felt as a child. Chambers's parents instituted a "Black History Day" in their home before Black History Month came into existence, so their daughter had an early sense of the sacrifices they made, particularly her mother, but felt none of those barriers herself. Chambers's memories of contemplating what she would have done during the height of the Civil Rights movement is the luxury of a generation that benefited from that particular struggle.

Is contemplation of the past a luxury of middle-class ascendancy? Or do past struggles at least provide the room to dream about middle- or upper-class status? Morgan views successful social movements, in terms of the sometimes temporary gains of the Civil Rights movement, as having a lulling effect on Generation X. The introduction to Morgan's book is entitled "Dress Up." In it, she recalls envying her mother's generation of women, not because their lives were easy but because of the simultaneous emergence of the women's movement and dissemination of ideas about independence and self-fulfillment at that time. Women of her mother's generation also had the cultural explosion of Black women's literature to affirm their existence and the circumstances of "being black, female and surviving" (Morgan 1999, 19). Morgan was ten years old when Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow was not enuf* premiered in New York. When her mother refused to take her, a young Joan tried every trick in her arsenal—from whining, to singing "the Five Stairsteps' 'O-o-h child things are going to get easier' over and over again—attitudinal and loud—until I was two seconds shy of an ass whooping" (Morgan 1999, 19). But when she was older Morgan understood that "the play held crucial parts of her [mother]—parts she needed to share with her husband and not her ten-year-old daughter" (Morgan 1999, 20).

In this retelling we see a nod to the previous generation of women who, whether they identified as feminist or not, made possible Morgan's self-described position as a hip-hop feminist. When she attends the twentieth anniversary run of *for colored girls* in Manhattan, Morgan hopes that it will reveal "the secrets of black womanhood" that she thought her mother withheld when she saw the play (Morgan 1999, 21). This was

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not the case. She says, "As a child of the post–Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul hip-hop generation my struggle songs consisted of the same notes but they were infused with distinctly different rhythms" (1999, 21–22). In realizing that she was waiting for someone to write a *for colored girls* for her generation, Morgan calls to task her own complacency, as well as that of her generation. She cautions that "relying on older heads to redefine the struggle to encompass our generation's issues is not only lazy but dangerous. Consider our foremothers' contributions a bad-ass bolt of cloth. We've got to fashion the gear to our own liking" (22). Linking generational style and politics, Morgan calls upon the hip-hop generation to create a language and culture that signifies more than a lifestyle but also a political stance worthy of definition.

By describing herself as "a child of the *post*–Civil Rights, *post*-feminist, *post*-soul hip-hop generation," Morgan is not implying that, as a society, we are somehow finished with the struggle for civil or women's rights. The popular press's use of the term *postfeminist* signifies a uniquely liberated, sexy, young woman who believes that feminism is dead or all the battles have been won. Morgan uses the prefix *post* to signal the end of a particular era of tactics and action. She in no way indicates that the goals or hopes of those movements were fulfilled or are no longer relevant to current generations. She does openly recognize that "we are the daughters of feminist privilege" (Morgan 1999, 59). The "we" means college-educated, middle-class Black girls who believe that there is nothing we cannot achieve because we are women, though sexism and racism might fight us every step of the way. Morgan attempts to craft a collective identity for a new generation of thinkers and organizers. This is a unifying move meant to reach out to women like Chambers who long for significant struggles like those of past eras, as well as to those who feel as though the movements of the 1960s were failures because of conservative backlash, without taking into account our own lack of political vigilance.

Jones issues a similar call to action for the post–Civil Rights, postfeminist generation. Though the subtitle of her book only mentions race, sex, and hair, she is also class-conscious, either explicitly or implicitly, in the forty-four essays that make up her book. About the differences between generations, Jones parallels Morgan in her observations of the cultural production of the 1970s:

> The renaissance of fiction by black women in the seventies, we caught that too. Those books made us feel less invisible, though their stories were far from our own lives as big-city girls; girls who took ballet and were carted off to Planned Parenthood in high school so as not

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> to risk that baby that Mom, not Mama, warned would have "ruined our lives." College was expected. The southern ghosts of popular black women's fiction, the hardships and abuse worn like purple hearts, the clipped wings were not ours. We had burdens of our own. Glass ceilings at the office and in the art world, media and beauty industries that saw us as substandard, the color and hair wars that continued to sap our energy. We wanted to hear about these. (1994, 133–34)

As young white feminists are seeking to step outside of what they consider rigid lifestyle instructions of their feminist foremothers (e.g., stylistic and political), young Black women are attempting to stretch beyond the awe-inspiring legendary work of women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta Scott King, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Barbara Smith, bell hooks, and Angela Davis. Their work cannot be matched. When Jones poses the question, "Do you know who speaks through you?" (1994, 26), she poses a rhetorical question that recognizes the significance of history in giving current struggles meaning.

Morgan and Jones exhort the post–Civil Rights, postfeminist, hip-hop generation to pay homage to past struggles but not to rest on our ivory tower degrees. Both recognize the class implications of being exposed to Black feminists' texts as assigned reading in college. Morgan, while recognizing historical reasons for Black women's lack of engagement with feminism—for example, racism in the women's movement, feminism's alleged irrelevancy to Black lives—believes that what it comes down to is that Black women are "misguidedly over-protective, hopelessly male-identified, and all too often self-sacrificing" (Morgan 1999, 55). She interprets homecoming parades for Tyson on his release from prison after serving a sentence for sexual assault and blind support for conservative Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas as knee-jerk reactions to centuries of racist violence. However, jumping to the defense of Black men—even when Black *women* are the victims of male violence—does nothing for current and future generations struggling against gender bias within the Black community. Critiquing popular culture and writing openly from a Black feminist perspective in periodicals, such as the hip-hop magazine *Vibe* and the *Village Voice,* Morgan and Jones most likely reach a mix of middle-class Blacks and white readerships. Still, in their writings they reference a continuum of Black and women's struggle, overlaying historical context onto contemporary manifestations of racism and sexism, that can be useful for articulating a vision for attacking battering, rape, and gender violence in the Black community.

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Strongblackwomen/Bulletproof Divas

"Some writers write to tell the world things, others of us write to find something out," Jones commented to a reporter for the *Boston Herald* (Young 1994, 20). Morgan writes that we, Black women, need to take an honest look at ourselves and then tell the truth about it (Morgan 1999, 23). Jones, Morgan, and Chambers want to tell the truth about, in part, the myths that circumscribe the lives of Black women. Yet, similar to some Black Panther Party women's critique of feminism, Morgan raises the culpability of Black women in keeping these myths alive (The Movement 1969). All three women dissect external messages from white society about beauty and how these messages wreak havoc with Black women's self-esteem. These authors also pry apart the layers of self-hatred that work to smother Black women within the Black community. The solutions they offer all involve, to some degree, letting go of the past and opening up to a future as fallible human beings and not women of mythical proportions.

Morgan situates the standard of the strongblackwoman in the history of slavery and the ways that Black women were expected to persevere under any circumstances. Referencing Wallace's explanation of the myths of the superwoman, the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire, Morgan contends that these myths have metamorphosed into the contemporary figures of, among others, the "Ghetto Bitch . . . Hoochie Mama . . . Skeezer . . . Too independent . . . Don't need no man . . . [and] Waiting to Exhale" women (Morgan 1999, 100). She believes that the older myths justifying slaveowners' brutality against Black women metamorphosed into contemporary conservative welfare myths. We have internalized new myths and have been indiscriminate in crafting our identities from them.[10] At one point in her life, Morgan begins to feel like she is suffocating under the burden of trying always to appear in control and strong. A friend diagnoses her as succumbing to "strongblackwoman" syndrome. The motto of the strongblackwoman? "No matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity" (Morgan 1999, 72).

Morgan writes "strongblackwoman" as one word and abbreviates it to SBW, signifying the transformation of a stereotype into an accepted and recognizable identity trait for Black women. This linguistic move solidifies the idea of "strong," "black," and "woman" as nonseparable parts of a seemingly cohesive identity. In this title, there is no room for being just

[10] Radford-Hill makes a similar observation. In her book *Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment,* she claims that Black women have been experiencing a crisis in identity since 1965, roughly coinciding with the publication of the Moynihan Report, which demonized Black women as the root cause of Black "pathology" (2000, xx).

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one of the three identities at any given time. There is the expectation in the Black community that Black women will be all three, *at all times.* This is not a new concept. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century crusaders trumpeted the strongblackwoman as a model for "lifting as we climb," but Wallace and contributors to Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* (1970) deconstructed this model in the 1970s. Morgan wants to take apart the strongblackwoman image for what it is: a way for Black women to deny emotional, psychic, and even physical pain, all the while appearing to keep it together—just like our mothers appeared to do.

Once when she was about thirteen years old, Chambers told her mother that she was depressed. Her mother gave her a scolding about being ungrateful for all that she had, and she let Veronica know that depression was a "white girls'" domain. Black women were strong and did not get depressed, and, her mother added, Veronica would not be able to count on the world to make her happy (Chambers 1996, 72).

As much as Chambers's mother warns against the realities of a racist and sexist world, she can never fully explain *why* these realities exist. This is not a personal failure, but the inability of adult, Black Americans to explain a number of social realities to their children. The worsening of poverty in Black communities, the continued degradation of women, the rescinding of civil rights gained in the 1960s, and the lack of a clear course of action from Black leaders (or the lack of Black leaders, period) are equally incomprehensible to children, as well as to adults living in a so-called democracy.

After a series of struggles and achievements—including abuse at the hands of her father and stepmother, putting herself through Simon's Rock College (entering at the age of sixteen), recognition as one of *Glamour* magazine's Top Ten College Women of 1990, and several successful magazine internships—Chambers burns out. She goes through a period of not eating and not sleeping, though she is exhausted. She keeps this information from her mother because she believes "depression was absolutely not allowed." She likens Black women to magicians, "masters of emotional sleight of hand. The closer you get, the less you can see. It was true of my mother. It is also true of me" (Chambers 1996, 73).

Veronica lived with an aunt at the time of her depression, and it is she who reports to Veronica's mother that something is amiss with her daughter. When Veronica does open up to her mother about her exhaustion and depression, she learns that her mother always assumed that everything was fine. Her mother was so busy worrying about her brother, who was not doing well in school and would later deal drugs and end up in jail,

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that she was just happy not to have to worry about Veronica. This conversation, Chambers's "coming out" to her mother as *not* always strong, begins her process of letting go of the strongblackwoman image. She is aided in this process by a group of college sistah-friends with whom she can relax and speak freely, peppering her language with affectionate "chile, pleases," "girlfriends," "sis's," and "flygirls" (Chambers 1996, 145). Through them and a better relationship with her mother, Chambers is able to recapture a feeling that she had not had since her childhood days of playing double Dutch in Brooklyn, New York. Of those days she says, "There is a space between the two ropes where nothing is better than being a black girl. The helix encircles you and protects you and there you are strong. I wish she'd [Chambers's mother] let me show her. I could teach her how it feels" (Chambers 1996, 7).

The solutions that Morgan, Jones, and Chambers offer to fighting strongblackwoman syndrome are not unlike those that Black feminists in the 1970s offered. In addition to fighting the racist and sexist implications of this myth, Morgan and Jones call for redefinition. Morgan calls it her "Memo of Retirement." In it she addresses white people, people in her life who are overdependent on her to comfort them, and men who expect her to support them unequivocally without having needs of her own. She resolves, "The fake 'Fine' and compulsory smile? Gone. Deaded. Don't look for it. . . . Some days I really am an evil black woman" (Morgan 1999, 85). Ultimately, when Morgan has her bout with depression, she leaves New York and moves to San Francisco for the winter. There she allows herself to fall apart with people who are not afraid of her fragility and do not expect her to be a strongblackwoman.

Many women, particularly women of color, do not have the resources to take a winter sabbatical. Yet, the more accessible aspect of Morgan's cure for depression is "claiming the right to imperfections and vulnerabilities" (Morgan 1999, 110). Across classes, Black women are taught to hide their imperfections for fear of being a discredit to the race or vilified as welfare queens. Perhaps more challenging than finding the monetary resources to take a mental health break is finding those people, female or male, with whom a Black woman can be less than strong.

Jones, though more casual in her approach, calls for redefinition of self as key to recuperating an image of Black women that is not detrimental to our individual and collective well-being. She advocates the creation of the "Bulletproof Diva," defining not only what she is but also what she is *not*. I quote extensively from Jones to demonstrate the range of experience that she allows for in this redefinition:

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> Consider this a narrative in which we invent our own heroine, the Bulletproof Diva. A woman whose sense of dignity and self cannot be denied; who, though she may live in a war zone like Brownsville, goes out everyday greased, pressed, and dressed, with hair faded and braided and freeze-dried and spit-curled and wrapped and locked and cut to a sexy baldie (so she is all eyes and lips) and piled ten inches high and colored siren red, cobalt blue, and flaming yellow. She is fine and she knows it. She *has* to know it because who else will. . . . A Bulletproof Diva is not, I repeat, *not* that tired stereotype, the emasculating black bitch too hard for love or piety. It's safe to assume that a Bulletproof Diva is whoever you make her—corporate girl, teen mom, or the combination—as long as she has the lip and nerve, *and as long as she uses that lip and nerve to raise up herself and the world.* (Jones 1994, 3; emphasis mine)

Morgan's "Memo of Retirement" and Jones's definition of the Bulletproof Diva do not advocate dropping out of politics or individualism. Rather they remind us of the road that Black women have traveled to get to this point in our collective history. They open up the possibility of self-preservation and community activism as intersecting, reinforcing objectives on the road to Black liberation.

Another aspect of Black women's relationships is how Black women relate to one another. Young Black women writers both highlight the support they feel from other Black women and bear witness to the misguided power that Black women, sharing similar experiences around racism and sexism, exert over one another to wound in unfathomable ways. Competition, vying for status, and degraded self-worth can be Black women's worst interpersonal enemies. Morgan, Chambers, and Jones heed Audre Lorde's call in her essay "Eye to Eye" (1984) for Black women to face how we treat one another and what that says about how we feel about ourselves.

Chambers recalls encounters with other Black girls that, while not unusual, emphasize the ways that African-American women try to hold one another back, from calling Chambers a "sellout" to accusing her of "talking white" because she takes her education seriously. Morgan, in her chapter entitled "Chickenhead Envy," cogently calls out the behavior of said Chickenheads (Morgan 1999, 185–86).[11] To her credit, she is also

[11] A "chickenhead" is a woman who is a materialist, dresses in barely there outfits ("skankwear"), and, according to Morgan, is adept at stroking the male ego (185). She is also calculating, cunning, and savvy when it comes to getting what she wants—all acceptable traits for men in white, capitalist patriarchy but wholly unacceptable for Black women.

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self-reflective, exploring what so-called Chickenheads reflect back to Black women who are independent and ambitious. Morgan is initiating much-needed dialogue about Black women's culpability in our own oppression and how we oppress one another, especially in the areas of class, color, and sexual orientation. Morgan and Chambers, in fact, disrupt the notion that there is a unified Black sisterhood. While that may be the ideal, these authors point out how Black sisterhood is sometimes far from the reality of our relationships.

For all the emphasis on truth telling and exploring the totality of Black women's lives, the writers explored here are noticeably silent on issues of heterosexism, homophobia in the Black community, and Black women's sexuality in general. Jones and Morgan cogently delve into the history of stereotyping Black women as hypersexual and animalistic, yet there is no discussion of what a positive Black female sexuality would look like. Instead, Black women's (hetero)sexuality is alluded to in their musing on "fine brothers" and dating mores. Black women's sexuality is something to be repressed, except on a surface level of relationships with Black men.

Chambers's only mention of her own sexuality, for example, discusses her fear of an unwanted pregnancy derailing her educational and career goals. This deprioritizing of teen sexuality sheds light on her mother's understated reaction to Veronica's first menstrual cycle. Rather than celebrating her step into young womanhood, her mother makes sure Veronica knows how *not* to get pregnant. In her later potentially sexual encounters with young men, Chambers can only call on the experiences of friends raised by single mothers, as she was, and friends who were single mothers. Of flirting and potential intimate involvements, Chambers says, "No guy ever said a word to me that didn't sound like a lie. The answer [to sex] was always no" (Chambers 1996, 70–71). While access to her sexuality is by no means dependent on engaging in sexual relations with anyone, blanket denials of her sexual self vis-à-vis young men also deny Chambers access to her own sexual agency. Even an avocation of abstinence would be an exertion of sexual agency.

Given the abundance of writing by African-American lesbians and their influence on Black feminist theory, the lack of attention to heterosexism is a step backward in moving a Black feminist agenda forward. In her chapter on "The F-Word," Morgan declares her allegiance to feminism because she feels feminism claimed her. The most she says about lesbians or heterosexism is a toned-down rebuttal to a man who said she must just need the right man, "as if I'd consider being mistaken for a lesbian an insult instead of an inaccuracy" (Morgan 1999, 42). Yet, in the context

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of these three texts, examining heterosexuality as a construct is ignored. Instead, within the texts it is a given that they are "straight girls."

The absence of frank discussions about sexuality is an odd repression that barely even acknowledges the authors' own sexuality, much less the variability of human sexuality. This is a noticeable elision given their attentive focus on the complexity of Black women's identities. This omission, or tentative dance, around Black women's sexuality leaves one to conclude that sexual stereotypes have been so debilitating that refuting them only results in the negation of a fuller spectrum for Black female sexual expression. When Black women, for example Alice Walker, Michele Wallace, and Rebecca Walker, frankly discuss their own and Black women's sexuality—be they heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender—they run a constant threat of censure inside and outside the Black community through the deployment of degrading, historically rooted stereotypes of licentious Black female sexuality.

In "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality," Evelyn Hammonds makes critical note of Black feminist theorizing on Black women's sexuality. In particular, she observes that "historically, Black women have reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourse on race and sex and this image [Black women as empty space] with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility" (Hammonds 1997, 171). Hammonds later calls not only for intervention that disrupts negative stereotypes about Black women's sexuality but also for critical engagement between Black heterosexual women and Black lesbians to develop a fuller Black feminist praxis around sexuality.

In light of the historical, strategic use of silence around Black women's sexuality by nineteenth-century reformers and the contemporary maligning of Black women such as Anita Hill and Lani Guinier, it is not surprising that Morgan, Jones, and Chambers skirt the issue of Black women's sexuality. The challenge that comes from analyzing their work is, as Hammonds (1997) suggests, the disruption of stereotypes but also the frank discussion of Black women's relationship to their sexual lives through consciousness-raising at all age levels.

The brothas

The recurring point of contention that Black women have with feminism is its impact on Black male/female relationships. Many times, Black feminists in the 1970s spent so much time reaffirming their commitment to Black men and the Black community that their gender critiques and actions to end sexism fell by the wayside. Thus it is incumbent on young Black

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feminist writers to tread a line between—to apply the Combahee River Collective Statement to the present—struggling with Black men *against* racism but also struggling with Black men *about* sexism (Combahee River Collective 1986, 12). Chambers, Jones, and Morgan do this to varying degrees by writing about Black men as fathers, as mothers' sons, as biological brothers, as spiritual/artistic brothers, as potential lovers, and as lifetime partners. In their personal and political examination of their lives, these writers show that the love Black women feel for Black men is sometimes diluted by the mutual disrespect and mistrust engendered by slavery and kept alive through women's and men's sustained patriarchal notions about gender.

Black fathers make brief appearances in these texts. Both Morgan's and Chambers's fathers left their families when they were young, and Jones's parents (writers Hettie Jones and Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones) divorced. The emphasis that the Black community and media have placed on Black men's role in raising their sons has resulted, Morgan contends, in "precious little attention [being paid to] the significant role Black men play in shaping their daughters' ideas about themselves and love" (Morgan 1999, 123). More than a dismissal of the role of fathers, the pain these women experience around the father-daughter relationship slips in and out of their narratives. This pain is unresolved and, therefore, unspoken and untheorized. Morgan, in her chapter entitled "babymother," does attempt to address men's rights to choose, or not to choose, fatherhood as a reproductive rights issue with which feminists must deal if we desire equality. However, the reader is left to wonder how much of Morgan's anxiety about men's reproductive rights is linked to the emotional and political fallout of her own father's absence. Such a revelation would do much of the professed work of feminist theory by connecting theory and personal experience.

The physical or emotional absence of fathers in a number of Black homes allows both Chambers and Morgan to confront Black women about the significant differences in the ways that they rear girl children and boy children. Chambers knew from an early age that her mother and her mother's closest friends, also immigrants from Panama, prized their boy children while girls were an afterthought. "'And Veronica,' they would say eventually. 'She's fine. All A's as usual,'" her mother would say in a sad voice that Veronica interpreted as a display of her mother's overriding concern for her brother, Malcolm (Chambers 1996, 46–47). Malcolm began exhibiting behavioral problems after their father left. Chambers is consistently aware of sexist ideologies and their impact on girls. However, when lamenting her brother's drug problem and incarceration, Chambers

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appears resistant to considering his problems to result from sexist and racist ideologies as well. The endangered Black male dialogue of the late 1980s and 1990s was problematic, but a broader political analysis of Black men's vulnerability and subsequent understanding of her brother's life under white supremacy are buried under Chambers's sibling rivalry.

Morgan offers a fuller analysis of the disparities in how Black women love their sons and raise their daughters, perhaps because her examination focuses more on the connections between sons and the lovers/partners/husbands they become. This is the closest that any of these authors comes to lobbing a generational grenade and assigning culpability for perpetuating the strongblackwoman and endangeredblackmale roles, which are compatible only in that they encourage an enabler/dependent relationship. Morgan wonders how older women can teach their daughters to be independent and ambitious and then comment that they are too strong willed to be acceptable to any man. Morgan also notes that these are the same women who loved their sons but did not teach young men about mutuality in relationships.

The doppelgänger to this portrayal of Black mothers is, according to Morgan, those women who maintain "all men are dogs" (Morgan 1999, 137). This might be a defensive stance to pass on to daughters, but what message does this impart to their sons about self-worth? And what behavior do mothers condone or abet if they think men are meant to have many girlfriends, to be "playas"? Women who believe their sons can *do* no wrong and those who believe their sons can only *be* wrong, and therefore need constant protection, pass along a fatalistic stance that ignores all the Black men who are, Morgan notes, "taking care of their kids, working and contributing to their communities" (1999, 131).

The writers examined here clearly are conflicted about how Black women and Black men relate to one another. Jones recalls the Black men who responded to her feminist performance group's work as artistic and intellectual compatriots. Yet in her chapter "Open Letter to a Brother," she ponders the ways that sexual liberation enabled Black men to reinforce negative myths about themselves, resulting in what she calls "the Dog Syndrome." Offering much-needed critiques of Black masculinity, Jones seeks to delve deeper into how Black men's lack of access to political and economic power became so entrenched in obtaining sexual power. The Dog Syndrome is in fact, according to Jones, "black male impotence masquerading as power" (1994, 217).

Jones's and Morgan's essays, read with Chambers's more personal backdrop, begin to offer a direction for open discussion in the Black community about Black masculinity and femininity, Black men and Black

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women. If generational politics come into play in Black feminist thought for these women, it is in putting contemporary tensions into historical perspective. Rather than blaming the past for the distrust that plagues Black women and men, younger Black feminists are, read in conjunction, asking Black men to forgo atonement for the past and take responsibility for male privilege in the present. Being a Black man in U.S. society is much more complex than adopting a pose and maintaining it. Yet, critically, these Black feminists, Morgan in particular, are offering complementary suggestions for Black women to check their behavior and expectations of men and relationships. How do we participate in our own oppression and that of future generations? What is our stake in maintaining gender relations that can only lead to continued trauma?

Keepin' it real: Old school analysis and new school music

There is no guarantee that the work of Chambers, Morgan, or Jones will reach those young people who need it the most—young people who will not be exposed to Black feminist theory and thought in college classrooms. Though their writing appears in free publications in major cities, what guarantees that a young Black woman on her way to work or school in Manhattan will stop and pick up the *Village Voice* and find Black feminism within its pages? Moreover, these writers' regional focus—they all live and work in New York City—also raises questions about the reach of young Black feminist theorizing geographically.

Ideally, by even daring to write about gender and the Black community, these writers give organizers and educators a springboard. Certain modes of resistance have lost their power; for example, Washington, D.C., marches have become more of a C-SPAN spectacle than the powerful form of radical agitation that the March on Washington was in 1963. Moreover, as we see with some protests against globalization, the state apparatus has become quite adept at shutting down direct action before it even starts. One reason that young people focus on writing and music as forms of protest—not that these are new—is because we need fresh modes for developing collective consciousness.

It is up to those of us with resources and commitment to take these writings and synthesize them into programs that appeal to the next generation, which needs them the most. I propose a project fusing music and intellectualism in much the same way that Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions did with the resurgence of Black cultural nationalism in the early 1990s. Music is one of the most accessible educational tools left untapped.

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How might educators and those who work closely with young people use a compact disc containing hip-hop, R&B, and rap songs along with an educator's guide to readings and discussion questions about gender and African Americans? How many more people would Black feminism reach if, instead of defending against what Black feminism is *not*, we offered Black feminist visions for the future? In the appendix is a list of songs and readings that I propose for this purpose. For example, Lauryn Hill's song "Doo-Wop (That Thing)" from her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* persuasively takes to task men and women for ill behavior in relationships. With its refrain "How you gon' win when you ain't right within?" Hill's song, and others like it, are prime moments for discussion and education around gender in Black communities.

Another, more recent, example is India Arie's song "Video," from her album *Acoustic Soul*. In it she disavows the image of the "video ho" and makes the bold claim that she is the center of her own world: "I will always be the India Arie." This song could easily be paired with a reading and/or discussion of Morgan's "Hip-Hop Feminist" or "Flygirls, Bitches, and Hos" chapters to provoke debate about Black artists' political responsibilities, if they have any, and Black women's agency in participating in music video culture.

Most of the songs I cite fall under the "neosoul" genre. Christopher John Farley describes neosoul artists as those who, "like song-stylist Erykah Badu . . . combine a palpable respect for and understanding of the classic soul of the '60s and '70s with a healthy appetite for '90s sonic experimentation and boundary crossing. . . . They tend to write lyrics that are more oblique and yet more socially and emotionally relevant than those of gangsta rappers" (Farley 1998). This is not to exclude the different forms of rap from gender analysis. Indeed, many rap tunes are ripe for analysis.[12] However, if we want to move forward on an agenda for gender consciousness in the Black community, it is also important to note those moments of critique *and* pleasure in popular music.

Additionally, all of these songs are not "feel-good" or positive vibe songs, but they are rich for prompting talk about sexism, men's and women's roles, and masculinity/femininity in Black America. Though I do not know the political stances of rapper Eve, Jill Scott, Lauryn Hill, or Badu, it is not unusual for Black female singers and rappers, like Queen

[12] At this writing, rapper Ludacris's song, "Area Codes," is in high rotation on urban radio stations. With the refrain, "I got hoes in different area codes," it is worth bearing in mind the tenuous connections between rap as a musical genre and hip-hop as a political stance.

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Latifah has, to disavow the feminist label while espousing feminist principles in their music. Nevertheless, if we wait for positive, feminist songs to hit the R&B or rap airwaves, we will never make the interventions so desperately needed among young Black people—not to mention those in the dominant culture who take sexist representations as representative of African-American culture.

Young Black feminists are not uniform in political thought, so it would be dishonest to assert that Black women still feel the need to apologize for engaging feminist politics. Yet, in linking with the work of feminist foremothers, contemporary, young Black feminist writers continue to explain feminism's relevance to Black communities. Far from reinventing the feminist wheel, young Black feminists are building on the legacy left by nineteenth-century abolitionists, antilynching crusaders, club women, Civil Rights organizers, Black Nationalist revolutionaries, and 1970s Black feminists. They are not inserting themselves into the third wave paradigm as much as they are continuing the work of a history of Black race women concerned with gender issues. These three writers in particular also have in common with their ancestors the gift of literacy and the privilege of education.

Sheila Radford-Hill's *Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment* advocates an "authentic feminism." This is not another brand of feminism but a call for Black feminism not to "fall in love with the sound of its own voice" and return to an applied feminism (Radford-Hill 2000, xxi). Young Black feminist writers might, in fact, need to fall in love with the sounds of their own voices. In a discriminatory society that continues to marginalize the theorizing of women of color, who but ourselves will honor our words as we continue the legacy of struggle to end racism, sexism, heterosexism, ablism, and classism? The key to that honoring, as Chambers, Morgan, and Jones note in their writing and as the hip-hop generation insists, is to keep it real.

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Appendix
Music and Readings for "Gender Talk" in Black Communities

Songs
Gender/Male-Female Relationships

"Doo-Wop (That Thing)," Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn*

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Hill (1998)
"Tyrone," Erykah Badu, *Live* (1997)
"No Scrubs," TLC, *Fanmail* (1999)
"Bills, Bills, Bills," Destiny's Child, *The Writing's on the Wall* (1999)
"Your Child," Mary J. Blige, *Mary* (2000)
"Exclusively" and "Gettin' in the Way," Jill Scott, *Who Is Jill Scott?* (2000)
"Independent Woman. Part 1," Destiny's Child, *Charlie's Angels: Music from the Motion Picture* (2000)

Black Women's Self-Image

"Visions of You" and "No More Rain (in This Cloud)," Angie Stone, *Black Diamond* (1999)
"Deep Inside," Mary J. Blige, *Mary* (2000)
"Video" and "Strength, Courage and Wisdom," India Arie, *Acoustic Soul* (2001)

Suggested Companion/Background Readings

Morgan 1999: "Hip-hop Feminist," "strongblackwoman," "strongblackwomen-n-endangeredblackmen: this is not a love story," and "from fly-girls to bitches and hos."
Jones 1994: "Gold Digging the Skeezers," "This Is Faith," "Faded Attraction," "Make Self-Love," "Open Letter to a Brother," "Drop Dead Fine," "Brother Jon," and "The Signifying Monkees."

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