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## LIFTING AS WE CLIMB: BLACK WOMEN'S ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING AND SUSTAINING BLACK POWER, 18TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

Alexis Cathcart

*Winner of the Virginia Van Der Veer Hamilton Award*

**B**lack women have demonstrated a lifelong commitment to radical change by embracing multiple roles in constructing and sustaining the concepts, ideologies, and practices of Black Power. Black Power, articulated in 1966 by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) in Greenwood, Mississippi, signaled a new phase in the Black Freedom Struggle.<sup>1</sup> After the passage of civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s, Black Americans experienced the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement, the unrelenting violence of federal, state, and local law enforcement, and continued exclusion from political, social, and economic spaces. The radical politics of Black Power coalesced into a broad-based sociopolitical movement, embraced by people north and south, that saw benefit in complete revolution over mediocre reform. The principles of Black Power affirmed racial uplift and pride, self-definition, community, and political power—especially in areas where Black people held the majority. Frustrated with the racist, imperialist American system, countless Black Americans rallied around these concepts, including the right to armed self-defense against white violence. Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, define Black Power:

It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society.<sup>2</sup>

“

**Having suffered the unceasing effects of triple jeopardy<sup>5</sup>—racism, sexism, and class exploitation—Black women have collectively and persistently fought for the liberation of the Black diaspora through ideals and practices that strengthened concepts of Black Power in the late 20th century.**

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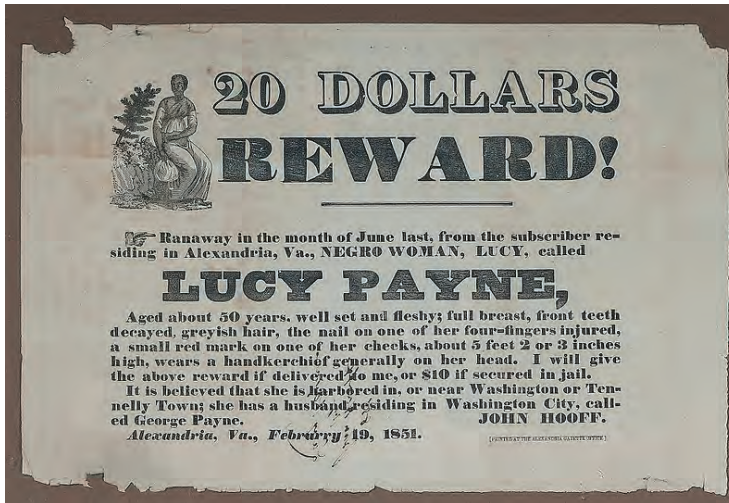
Furthermore, Ture and Hamilton conclude that Black Power is Afro-Americans’ “full participation in the decision-making process affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people.”<sup>3</sup> Applying the far-reaching appeal and ambiguity of Black Power ideology to resistance and activism throughout history displays the epic lineage of Black Power in the protracted Black Freedom Struggle—which was developed, strengthened, and sustained by Black women. The fluidity of Black Power allow for its use among a wide variety of activists with different solutions to end racial oppression.

Stretching the concept of Black Power back to the Revolutionary Age and extending it to the present “expands

historical understanding of Black Power politics by exposing its precursors, influences, overlaps, and coexistence with other activist traditions.”<sup>4</sup> Since the 18th century, Black women have practiced tenets of Black Power through their escaping of bondage, writings, lectures, grassroots organizing, and leadership. Having suffered the unceasing effects of triple jeopardy<sup>5</sup>—racism, sexism, and class exploitation—Black women have collectively and persistently fought for the liberation of the Black diaspora through ideals and practices that strengthened concepts of Black Power in the late 20th century. To be sure, Black women are not a monolith. While they shared similarities in their efforts to free the diaspora, Black women have approached and thought about these issues in many ways. Nonetheless, Black Power can be found in the radical politics of Black Nationalist women *and* the conservative nature of 19th century Black Club Women. Their diverse experiences and ideas add to our understanding of direct action and intentional work. The acknowledgement of a common thread amongst Black women activists shows the continuity and evolution of ideas and depicts a long line of resistance, racial uplift, and racial pride that has been ubiquitous in the history of Black women in the United States. Demanding self-determination and defining freedom through their own unique experiences, Black women have led the way in developing theory, mobilizing, and organizing the struggle for full and equal citizenship in the US. An emphasis on Black women activists helps to shatter the pervasive and one-sided view of women on the margins of the Black Freedom Struggle. Operating as abolitionists, local organizers, courageous writers, international mobilizers, trailblazing mentors, and charismatic leaders, Black women have been and continue to be the critical mass in the liberation of all people.

Afro-American women have played an invaluable role in the foundation and construction of the United States. As such,

Black women were critical in the emancipation of enslaved Black Americans. Since the eve of the U.S. Revolutionary War, and prior, Black women have visualized a society where they and their families could escape the ubiquitous pressure and violence of slavery and white supremacy. They desired a life in which they were independent and free from restrictions. Despite the inherent risks and consequences, enslaved Black women possessed a revolutionary spirit that allowed them to chase freedom and advance their liberation.<sup>6</sup> Black women were not content with slavery and protested it every chance they got, especially through escaping. They yearned for a life without bondage and took theirs and their families’ liberation into their own hands. Fugitive enslaved women were determined to claim their independence and autonomy by any means necessary, thus commencing a strong foundation for Black Power. In *Running from Bondage*, historian Karen Cook Bell challenges the lack of representation of Black women in accounts of Revolutionary America and positions fugitive enslaved Black women in the center of the abolitionist movement during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Revolutionary War “created spaces for them to invoke the same philosophical arguments of liberty that white revolutionaries made in their own fierce struggle against oppression”<sup>7</sup>, but the war was not the beginning of their struggle for liberation, nor would it be the end. By emphasizing enslaved Black women’s resistance in this era, Bell highlights the agency of these women and their integral role in the emancipation of Afro-Americans. Fugitive enslaved Black women resisted an oppressive system. They demanded autonomy for their lives, movements, and bodies and created spaces for expressions of freedom. These courageous women “displayed a radical consciousness that challenged the prevailing belief that enslaved women could not gain their freedom through subversive action.”<sup>8</sup> Confronted with obstacles of political and social invisibility and the absence of



Fugitive Slave Advertisement, 1851. Printed at the Alexandria Gazette Office, Alexandria, VA. Wikimedia Commons

a significant movement with formal organizations and leaders to direct them, fugitive Black women, through their escaping, began constructing the ideology and framework that activists in the Black Power movement would study and learn from.

Violently surveilled and repressed, ostensibly free Black Americans in the 19th century faced new and continuing forms of restriction, confinement, and viciousness from white citizens. Black women of this period, experiencing antiblack racism, economic exploitation, and prejudice based on their sex, challenged their ascribed position and that of Black people collectively. The prevailing culture of oppression made it difficult for Black women to empower themselves or Black people in the community; however, that did not stop women like Maria Stewart, Harriet Wilson, and Harriet Jacobs from addressing issues that plagued Black women specifically and the Black community generally. These Black women challenged racist and sexist beliefs by tying the progress of Black women to the progress of the entire Black community. Abolitionist and women's rights activist Maria Stewart, delivering lectures to crowds of white and black men and women in 1832, spoke confidently about the ills of

slavery in the South and challenged racial oppression in the North. Emboldened by her personal experiences, Stewart powerfully advocated for the creation of strong, self-sufficient economic and educational institutions in African American communities and supported Black women's participation in all aspects of community building.<sup>9</sup> Similar to Stewart, Harriet Wilson, the author of *Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), used her voice as nominally free Black woman to place a critical eye upon white abolitionists of the North and northern racism. In her writings, Wilson asserted the importance of independence from the white community. Boldly, she challenged prevailing systems that endorsed prejudice against Black women particularly and Black people generally.<sup>10</sup> Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), utilized her life experiences as an enslaved woman and a domestic worker to build discourse around the "social, political, and economic consequences of Black womanhood" and actively involved herself with the abolition movement before the launch of the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> During the war, she used her celebrity to raise money for black refugees and subsequently worked to improve the living conditions of recently-freed enslaved people.<sup>12</sup> These women, along with many others, confronted racist and sexist ideologies as they worked towards racial uplift, independence, and self-determination for Black people. Through the dreams, intellect, and experiences of Black women and their subsequent lectures and writings, the cultural framework of Black Power was being shaped. Black women continued to add to the foundations, mobility, and success of Black Power that would gain popularity a century later.

The end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the proliferation of new and evolving forms of racialized exclusion and violent repression urged Black women forward as they continued to fight for human rights and the sociopolitical uplift of Black women, men, and children. Black women began developing



Arizona Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in 1909. Wikimedia Commons

the values and beliefs of the Black Freedom Movement, especially Black Power, through their understanding that the liberation of Black women meant the liberation of the entire Black diaspora. Their leadership and activism sought to “encompass the simultaneous realities of race, gender, and class, and eradicate all forms of oppression that accompany multi-axis identities.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to lectures and texts, late 19th-century Black women activists contributed to collective movements, including the Anti-lynching Movement, and birthed ones of their own, such as the Black Women’s Club Movement. Womanist scholar and activist Melina Abdullah, in her essay “The Emergence of a Black Feminist Leadership Model: African-American Women and Political Activism in the Nineteenth Century”, contends that Black women practice a unique form of leadership that allows them to “take on a radical approach—favoring fundamental transformation over limited reform.”<sup>14</sup> The anti-lynching movement, prompted by increased white violence and lynching following the end of Reconstruction, was led by Black women and men who challenged white mob violence. At the center of this movement was activist and journalist Ida B. Wells. Wells employed her journalistic capabilities as a means of advocating for the social and political empowerment of Black people and challenging and eliminating the myths of

the Black rapist.<sup>15</sup> She used the lynching of her friends, the burning down of her newspaper office, and threats of bodily harm to inspire her investigations into the frequency of racial terror, specifically lynching. In her newspaper, *The Free Speech*, Wells’ writings exposed southern white violence and sought to compel the public to stand up against lynching. Black women began to organize around Wells and her campaign—leading to the launch of the Black Women’s Club movement and their heavy participation in the anti-lynching crusade.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most importantly, Wells encouraged Black Americans to arm themselves as a means of self-defense and supported economic boycotts of white businesses that discriminated against Afro-Americans.<sup>17</sup> Wells’ investigations, speeches, and written publications confronted racial terror and ensured that critical history would not be lost for future generations as they continued the fight for Black liberation.

In addition to contributing to larger movements, Black women created movements of their own. Abdullah argues that the Black Women’s Club movement was not an apolitical reiteration of clubs formed by their white contemporaries. On the contrary, it was a vehicle to center Black womanhood and intellect and enact social services meant to assess and meet the needs of Black women and the general community.<sup>18</sup> Organizations like the Colored Women’s League (1829) and the National Association of Colored Women’s Club (1896) – a combination of several clubs– battled to change public policy in a way that advanced the needs of Black women and the Black collective. They saw their organizations in terms of gender and race, viewing their women’s movement as a way to uplift Black women, men, and children. Facing sexism in race-based movements and racism in sex-based movements, Black club women served as the bridge connecting Black empowerment and women’s liberation. The leadership of the Black Women’s Club movement came primarily from the middle class—including women such as Josephine St. Pierre



Ruffin, suffragist, publisher, and the wife of a Massachusetts judge; and educator Fannie Barrier Williams, who emphasized the need for the most capable of the race in the Club movement. During their tenure, club women were often seen as elitist in their attitudes towards the masses; however, their familiarity with racism in the US linked them with working-class Black Americans.<sup>19</sup> Black women in the 19th century were essential in constructing the beginnings of Black Power through their efforts to create and sustain organizations and movements that centered solutions to the economic, social, and political oppression of the Black community. Utilizing the power of their voices to rally and organize Black people across the nation, the hard work and determination of these women continued to lay the groundwork for future Black liberation movements.

Twentieth-century Black women, encompassing the knowledge of their foremothers, continued to give voice to concerns dealing with race, gender, and class exploitation in the US and beyond. Historian Ashley Farmer in *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* demonstrates that “black women consistently positioned themselves on the organizational front lines of black nationalist projects and groups before and during the Black Power era.”<sup>20</sup> Early twentieth-century Black women mobilized and organized around concepts such as racial pride, self-determination, black nationhood, and internationalism—contributing to the foundations of Black Power that were more than a century in the making. Activist and journalist Amy Jacques Garvey, wife to the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Marcus Garvey, was dedicated to racial uplift, self-reliance, and nationhood. She emphasized the unique role of Black women in the UNIA and the importance of Black Nationalist activism at home and abroad. Garvey published editorials urging Black women to participate in the Pan-African movement and addressed



Claudia Jones, likely during her time in the CPUSA. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

issues that affected the Black diaspora internationally.<sup>21</sup> In the 1925 issue of *The Negro World*, Garvey proudly declared the role of Black women in activism and leadership stating that “the wide-awake woman is forging ahead prepared for all emergencies, and ready to answer any call, even if it be to face the cannons on the battlefield.”<sup>22</sup> Comparable to Garvey, Claudia Jones, joining the Communist Party USA in 1936, consistently stood against race, class, and gender exploitation, linked struggles of Black Americans to struggles of Black people internationally, and advocated for the concept of Black nationhood. Jones encouraged the liberation of working class women through Black Nationalism and the rejection of prevailing false definitions of Black womanhood.<sup>23</sup>

In one of her most important essays, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Women” (1949), Jones argues for the inclusion of gender along with race and class in the work for justice. As scholar and activist Angela Davis recounts, “Claudia Jones was very much a Communist—a dedicated Communist who believed that socialism held the only promise of liberation for Black women, Black people as a whole and indeed for the multi-racial working class”.<sup>24</sup> In the ivory tower of academia, Merze Tate, a professor at Howard University, dissented from leading international relations scholars and their efforts to maintain and expand white supremacy globally. Tate and the Howard School critiqued the “truths” of racial science and its role in sustaining imperialism.<sup>25</sup> Analyzing the relationship of American racism and imperialism, Tate argued that in order to understand U.S. power, one had to understand what power was and how it was exerted internationally.<sup>26</sup> Black women theorized and supported radical democratic politics that were conscious of and responsive to the interrelated effects of racism, capitalism, sexism, and imperialism. These women were part of a Black Left that laid a considerable amount of groundwork for the classic Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

The culture and politics of Black Power gained traction in the late twentieth century, but Black women have long been practitioners of what is now called Black Power. The latter half of the 1960s and the early 1970s saw mass support for a new movement meant to empower Black Americans and the Black diaspora globally. Black Power challenged institutional racism with vigor and pushed for Black self-determination in politics, economics, education, and culture, by and for Black communities not yet free from oppression despite civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965.<sup>27</sup> Acutely aware of the absence of support from the federal government, Afro-American women led grassroots efforts that centered Black Power in the struggle for self-determination. In Cambridge, Maryland,

Gloria Richardson—emerging from a family background of activism—demanded racial equality and the full attainment of civil and human rights for Black Americans. As the first Black woman to lead a prolonged grassroots movement outside of the Deep South, Richardson organized and led the Cambridge Movement on Maryland’s Eastern Shore.<sup>28</sup> Active in the early 1960s, Richardson headed demonstrations that centered issues such as jobs, healthcare access, and housing. She departed from the nonviolent activism of the Civil Rights Movement and boldly contended that self-defense could end further violence from white citizens towards Black Americans. An influence to rising Black Power activists like Jamil Al-Amin (H. Rap Brown) and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), her work resulted in “The Treaty of Cambridge” marking federal intervention into local civil rights affairs.<sup>29</sup> In Central Alabama, leader and activist Lilian McGill served various, indispensable roles in the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). The LCFO’s (later the Lowndes County Freedom Party) mission consisted of ending the violent disenfranchisement of Black citizens, forming an independent political party, and obtaining political control of rural and majority Black Lowndes County, Alabama.<sup>30</sup> Radicalized through her personal experiences, McGill became an invaluable asset to the movement as a fundraiser, spokesperson, and successful organizer. She operated in leadership circles and participated in executive decision-making. McGill spoke out against poverty and the lack of federal intervention in the violence propagated against Black Americans.<sup>31</sup> Richardson and McGill were leaders in their respective struggles for Black liberation and robustly advocated for self-determination and self-defense—major principles of Black Power as it hit the mainstream in the late 1960s.

During the Black Power era, Black women generated Black Power by organizing around bread and butter issues, marshaling against poverty, and advocating for education,

family, and neighborhood. While some women joined popular Black Power organizations like the Black Panther Party, many women, including public housing tenants, operated outside of these organizations. However, these women gave rise to, contributed to, and sustained elements of Black Power.<sup>32</sup> Public housing activists such as Goldie Baker, Marian Johnson, and Shirley Wise worked individually and with local community organizations to engender political power, economic security, self-respect, community control and self-determination in their urban neighborhoods. Historian Rhonda Y. Williams accurately writes,

Their [Black women] activist ethos in many ways echoed—and in some cases, preceded—the myriad ideologies and initiatives of the Black Power era. Yet because these grassroots black women, many of them low-income, neither jibed with the popular and simplistic media-cultivated images of armed black men, nor joined nationally known freedom organizations or black militant groups, their economic and political activism has remained relatively invisible in narratives of Black power.<sup>33</sup>

Black nuns of the mid-1960s also incorporated Black Power ideology in their advocating for political, economic, and social control of Black communities. Oblate Sister Judith, Sister Mary Paraclete Young, and Sister Mary Roger Thibodeaux, along with many others, opened orders, schools, and orphanages that served the Black community generally and its children specifically. They taught self-respect and self-identity and contended that Black Power, after its popular use in the late 1960s, aligned with their vision and gave a name to what they had been practicing for years.<sup>34</sup> Uniting around issues of poverty and women's welfare, organizations founded and led by Black women such as Mother Rescuers from Poverty led by Margaret McCarty and Black Women



Black Panther Party Women. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Concerned about Urban Problems led by Salima Marriot, “viewed their daily struggles for material well-being, representation, autonomy, and respect as part of a quest for not only citizenship rights and self-determination, but also as a matter of human rights.”<sup>35</sup> Black women activists engendered, vocalized, and supported tenants of Black Power in order to liberate Black people and eradicate social injustices broadly.

Black women activists during this period used their multidimensional ideas of liberation and Black womanhood to “reshape popular perceptions of Black women’s role in political mobilization, masculinist ideas of Black liberation, and the meaning of Black Power.”<sup>36</sup> Farmer writes that women Black Power activists produced “competing models of Black womanhood...to advocate Black Power tenants and assert the primacy of women in political organizations.”<sup>37</sup> Black women activists in the second half of the twentieth century followed the lead of their Black founding mothers in articulating and advancing their approaches to liberate the Black masses. The success of the Black Power movement can be attributed to the contributions of Black women inside of prominent organizations. In the Black Panther Party (BPP), founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland,



CA in 1966, "Black women made up the majority of its membership, by 60 percent, and some powerfully steered the organization."<sup>38</sup> Female leaders including Kathleen Cleaver, the BPP communications chairperson; Elaine Brown, the only female chairperson to lead the party; and Ericka Huggins, who ran the party's Oakland Community School critically shaped the success of the BPP. Black women of the party also organized community survival programs such as free breakfast for schoolchildren and access to free medical care for poor and working class Black people.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the culmination of success for the Black Power movement and its organizations meant a powerful countermovement by the state. Rising state-sanctioned violence from law enforcement, the criminalization of protest and subsequent incarceration of popular Black Power leaders, and federal repression through counterintelligence programs all lent a hand in discrediting Black Power organizations and its leaders. Despite attempts to silence Black Power activists, Black women such as Angela Davis and Assata Shakur continued to critique and challenge white authority from the courtroom and the confines of prison walls.

Often meant to be invisible to the public, but highly visible when it serves the agenda of the state, the courtroom and the prison were utilized by Black Power activists as a means to publicly challenge white supremacy and engender Black Power in the face of heightened state violence and repression.<sup>40</sup> Anti-prison activist and scholar, Angela Davis, charged with arming an escape by male prisoners, connected prison to chattel slavery. She argued, along with other activists, that all Black Americans were enslaved and confined by white supremacy whether inside prison walls or outside of them. Davis equated the attempted prison escape to a slave rebellion and used the courtroom as a means to spread the insurgent politics of Black Power, while simultaneously challenging the courtroom's authority as an instrument of

the white elite.<sup>41</sup> She emphasized the collective struggle of Black people to take attention away from individual crime and placed focus on the structural and historical violence in American society and its harmful effects on Black Americans. Davis's efforts demonstrate the significance of Black women to the Black Power movement. She continued to build upon the efforts of Black women activists before her to provoke tenants of Black Power as a means to liberate Black political prisoners and Black people internationally.

Assata Shakur, another high-profile Black woman defendant of the 1970s, was an influential activist and a member of the Black Liberation Army. Wrongfully convicted of killing a state trooper on the New Jersey Turnpike in 1970, Shakur employed written word from her imprisonment to revitalize Black Power and the struggle to liberate Black people globally. Scholar Lisa Corrigan in, *Prison Power: How Prison Influenced the Movement for Black Liberation*, emphasizes how imprisoned Black Power activists centered prison writings in regenerating Black Power in its new phase. After federal repression and the demise of Black Revolutionary leaders and groups, political prisoners invented a vernacular from their confinement that challenged attempts to silence them and other activists during this time. The use of "a black vernacular steeped in street talk, Third World populism, intersectional analyses of power, and gender performance that utilized irony, hyperbole, anecdote, and history" became a vehicle for political prisoners to critique and challenge the state, place themselves in a broader context of the historical confinement of Black Americans, and redefine and renew Black Power in its evolving era.<sup>42</sup> *Assata: An Autobiography* helped to fortify Black Power in a time of decline. Shakur employed Black history, cultural nationalism, self-defense, and Third World solidarity to criticize the state and reclaim dignity for herself, the Black Power movement, and Black people generally. As the Black Power movement was forced out of the view of

mainstream white America, Black women activists continued to mobilize and organize under the tenets of Black Power when responding to racial inequalities and imprisonment—underscoring the mobility of the movement after its prime.

Black women have historically served on the front-line in the fight for the liberation of the Black diaspora. Although their contributions are frequently overlooked, their power, resilience, and courage cannot be overstated. Black women have a unique position from which to understand the intersections of race, gender, and class and the women highlighted throughout this essay are connected by an intricate network of Black Power activism that spans several generations. Black women have been intellectual and organizational producers of the protracted struggle for freedom rights—the intersection of civil and human rights Black Americans have demanded since Emancipation and prior.<sup>43</sup> Black women resisted slavery. They spoke out against racism. They founded clubs to improve life for Black Americans. They worked in journalism, supported education, pushed for meaningful political power, organized against economic exploitation, and much, much more. They formed the foundation of modern Black freedom movements and today they create and lead global socio-political movements

such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Black women today, including Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, founders of BLM, Congresswoman Cori Bush, activist Tamika Mallory, politician and voting rights activist Stacey Abrams, amongst a plethora of other Black women, all fight for an equitable and safe world for Black people in the United States and globally. They struggle for a world free from the brutality and violence of the criminal justice system, they fight against poverty, and they challenge the continued disenfranchisement of Black and other people of color. Black women activists continue traditions of global anti-imperialist solidarity, intersectionality, self-determination, and self-definition. The ethos of Black Power moves through these women and others who build upon a legacy of valiant women like Maria Stewart and Assata Shakur. Even as they are marginalized within both women’s and racial justice movements, Black women continue to overcome the triple binds of racism, sexism, and classism. They persevere to provide rich, vibrant voices to the chorus of American freedom, justice, and independence based in reality as opposed to fantasy and myth. Black women lead the way in challenging America’s racial and political landscape to embrace justice, equity, and equal opportunity for everyone.

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