



DUCHESS HARRIS

BLACK
FEMINIST
POLITICS

FROM KENNEDY TO TRUMP



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This book is lovingly dedicated to Jon V. Thomas, M.D., M.B.A.

We met on October 10, 1993. It was a crisp autumn Sunday. We went for brunch and to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. On the day that we met, I told you that I'd write a book about Black women. You talked about your belief in the harmony of athletic, intellectual, and artistic pursuits. Most women would have been impressed, but I was a myopic 24-year-old Ph.D. student who had never dated anyone who didn't love poetry. You sensed my hesitation, and later that day, you gave me a collection of Toni Morrison's essays and a Maya Angelou poem.

I reflect back on the twenty-five years of our relationship and marvel at how I almost ignored the guy who didn't love poetry. At the time, I considered myself a premier student. What I didn't know was that a poetry lesson could be learned from a scientist. It wasn't until I saw you running in marathons, in your garden, at the piano, in the operating room, and playing with our children that I actually knew what poetry was. It's quite simple:

You are poetry in motion.

Jon, Austin, Avi, Zach, and Duch. Together we are JAAZD.

FOREWORD

Isabella Baumfree was born a slave in Ulster County, New York, in 1797. After having been sold several times and her last owner was quite cruel, Isabella escaped in 1826. Friends later bought her freedom. In 1843, Isabelle Baumfree changed her name to Sojourner Truth, in recognition of her religious and abolitionist activities. Sojourner Truth was among a small group of free, Black, feminist-abolitionists in the North in the early nineteenth century (McClain and Tauber 2017: 174). This group also included Maria Stewart (1803–1879), born a free Black but at some point became an indentured servant until she was sixteen and later became an abolitionist and lecturer, and Frances E. Watkins Harper (1825–1911), a free Black abolitionist, suffragist, author, and poet (McClain and Tauber 2017: 174). Truth began to connect the issue of the abolition of slavery with women's rights during the nineteenth century. Truth was probably the first to highlight the complexities of the Black women's race and gender identities.

In 1851, the Women's Rights Convention was held in Akron, Ohio, and Sojourner Truth addressed the audience. She emphasized the important difference between white women and Black women in terms of their relationships to white men in her legendary "Ain't I a Woman" speech. Part of her speech specifically addresses the differences in how white women and treated relative to Black women—

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

In 1989, 138 years after Truth's speech, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Law Professor at Columbia University Law School, put a name to the complexity of Black women's lives that Sojourner Truth identified in the nineteenth century. She coined the term "intersectionality" in a paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," published in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8) as a way to help explain the oppression of African-American women.

Professor Harris reminds us that the ideas articulated by Truth were an early form of Black Feminism, and that the issues she identified in the lives of Black women still need to be addressed. Just as white Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott did not understand or care about the plight of Black women, Harris identifies that white feminist for the most part still do not recognize or, in some instances, care about the issues of importance to Black women or how the lives of white women and Black women diverge in experiences. For those not familiar with many of the Black feminist writers, Harris introduces readers to the work of Michelle Wallace, whose book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, that I enjoyed reading in 1979 when it was published; the poet Ntozake Shange, whose play *When Colored Girls Consider Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, which was turned into a Broadway play; Alice Walker author of *The Color Purple*, also made into a movie and a Broadway play; Anita Hill's accusations of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas that pushed the issue into the public debate; the Combahee River Collective; and, among many others, the women who founded the Black Lives Matters Movement. She situates these writers within the US presidents that were in office at the time and discusses the political environment in which these women wrote and were politically active.

Harris' historical and current view of the power of Black women and the distinctiveness of Black Feminism demonstrates that contrary to popular myth, Black women do not shy from feminism, but they embrace their own particular form of feminism—Black Feminism. This is a significant update on a very important book, one that has stood the test of time.

Durham, NC, USA

Paula D. McClain
Duke University

REFERENCE

McClain, Paula D., and Steven C. Tauber. 2017. *American Government in Black and White: Diversity and Democracy*, 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The Departure of Michelle Obama from the White House and the Need for Black Feminism	1
2	A History of Black American Feminism	13
3	Black Women's Relationships with Party Politics	37
4	The '90s in Context: A History of Black Women in American Politics	81
5	Doubting the Democrats: Current Disenchantment and Political Futures	137
6	The State of Black Women in Politics Under the First Black President	155
7	Your President Is (a) White (Supremacist): Post Obama and Black Feminist Politics	183
8	Conclusion: Reclaiming Our Time—Black Feminist Politics in the Trump Era	193

Appendix A	197
Appendix B	201
Appendix C	205
Bibliography	227
Index	239



CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Departure of Michelle Obama from the White House and the Need for Black Feminism

2017 was a monumental year for Black women in America due to two important events: First Lady Michelle Obama left the White House, and it was the 40th anniversary of the Combahee River Collective Statement.

When I first published *Black Feminist Politics* in 2009 and 2011, the cover art was Faith Ringgold's "The Purple Quilt." In "The Purple Quilt," panels of text from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* reinforce portraits of characters found in the novel. In hindsight, I would have chosen Ringgold's "The Flag is Bleeding." Ringgold has long used her art to voice her opinions on racism and gender inequality. In 1967, she created a series of paintings, "The American People," focused on racial conflict and discrimination. "The Flag is Bleeding," number 18 in the series, depicts an African-American man standing next to a white couple. Although the three seem united, the African-American man's wound indicates otherwise. I love this work of art because its significance is not solely about who is represented in the flag. When I share "The Flag is Bleeding" in the classroom, I often ask students, "Who do you think is missing, and what do you think Ringgold is trying to say about America?"

Many Americans are missing, but my principal concern is the absence of the Black woman. I think Ringgold is trying to say that Black women are often invisible in America's political narrative, despite the fact that we are integral to its very fabric.

In the wee hours of the morning on Wednesday, November 9, 2016, we found out that the next president of the United States A would be Donald J. Trump. As a demographic, Black women supported him less than any

other group at a mere four percent. The inverse of this equation is that Black women voted for Democratic presidential nominee and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a whopping 94%. Notice I said “voted for.” I didn’t say that we were #WithHer, because many of us weren’t. The main reason? Feminism—that is to say, *white* feminism—has historically taken credit for Black women’s ideas and achievements while at the same time writing them out of narratives, failing to welcome them at the metaphorical (and often literal) table. In this way, Hillary Clinton was no different from most white feminists. For many Black women voters, she simply was the lesser of two evils.

In *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton*, I noted that Vijay Prashad wrote that once Bill Clinton was sworn into office in 1993, “The braying of the right was so abhorrent and hypocritical that Bill Clinton gained some measure of forgiveness from those who were otherwise livid with him. It was in this context that Toni Morrison said that he was being treated like a Black man: given no quarter, shown no mercy, but treated as guilty as charged without any consideration or process.” Prashad explained how things changed between 1998 and 2008, when Hillary Clinton first ran for president:

But now, finally Bill Clinton has given us some honesty. He has opened his heart during this primary season, joining Hillary Clinton in pandering to the Old South, the hard core racist bloc that was never reconciled to Civil Rights, that continues to blame Blacks for the vivisections of their economic fortunes. It is this bloc that handed Hillary Clinton the primaries of Pennsylvania, Indiana, West Virginia, and Kentucky. After her loss in the South Carolina primary, where the Democratic electorate is substantially Black, Hillary Clinton’s husband, Bill, told the press, “Jesse Jackson won South Carolina in 1984 and 1988. Jackson ran a good campaign and Obama ran a good campaign here.”¹

It was after these remarks were made that I predicted that Toni Morrison would take back Bill Clinton’s invitation into the Black family, and indeed she did. Some say that it’s unfair to entangle Hillary with the actions of her husband, but elite white feminism teaches us that marrying a president is the best way for a woman to become a presidential candidate.

¹Prashad, Vijay. (2008). “The Revelation of Bill Clinton.” Zcommentaries. <https://zcomm.org/zcommentary/the-revelation-of-bill-clinton-by-vijay-prashad/>.

Hillary's pandering to the Old South in 2008 might have been forgiven by some once the Obamas campaigned for her, but an early colossal mistake—one underscoring that her feminism was largely for white women—was treating the women from #BlackLivesMatter with dismissive condescension in 2016. When Ashley Williams confronted Clinton during a fund-raiser in February of that year—a fund-raiser for which she had paid the \$500 ticket—to ask why, in 1996, Clinton had defended her husband's crime bill by denigrating Black communities by referring to some kids within them as “super-predators.” The super-predator image and Clinton's crime bill are largely considered to be the precursors to the current and escalating epidemic of the mass incarceration of Black people, and Williams demanded during the fund-raiser that Clinton explain herself and apologize. Clinton's response? “Well, can I talk? And then maybe you can listen to what I say.”²

By August 2016, the tensions between the Clinton campaign and Black Lives Matter activists had escalated. Many BLM activists and people of color generally were deeply dissatisfied when Clinton spoke publicly in response to the July shooting in Dallas, in which five police officers were killed and nine were wounded. Following the shooting, she met with police chiefs from around the country and went on record as saying that the Dallas officers “represent officers who get up every day, put on their uniforms, kiss their families goodbye and risk their lives on behalf of our communities.”³ Meanwhile, BLM activists were urging her to be clear about her positions regarding aggressive policing and mass incarceration. Clinton, speaking to the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, seemed to be keenly aware that she was on a tightrope, one that would leave nearly everyone dissatisfied. “I'm talking about criminal justice reform the day after a horrific attack on police officers,” she said. “I'm talking about courageous honorable police officers just a few days after officer-involved killings in Louisiana and Minnesota.... I know that just by saying all these things together, I may upset some people.”

²Scott, Eugene. (2016, February 25). “Black Lives Matter Protestors Confront Clinton at Fundraiser.” CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/25/politics/hillary-clinton-black-lives-matter-whichhillary/index.html>.

³McCammon, Sarah. (2016, August 19). “Between Police and Black Lives Matter, Hillary Clinton Walking a Fine Line.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/19/490622277/between-police-and-black-lives-matter-hillary-clinton-walking-a-fine-line>.

Within weeks, the BLM-Clinton relationship would simmer into a boil.

When activists were not allowed into a campaign event in New Hampshire (the campaign said the local fire marshal prevented them from allowing more people into the venue), Clinton scheduled a meeting to discuss concerns with the activists, who included Daunasia Yancey, founder of Boston's Black Lives Matter chapter. Far from assuming a posture of listening, Clinton instead assumed the posture so familiar to white feminist leaders: The white woman knows best. CNN's Dan Merica described Clinton's attitude in the encounter as follows:

Throughout the 15-minute conversation, Clinton disagreed with the three activists from Black Lives Matter who had planned to publicly press the 2016 candidate on issues on [sic] mass incarceration.... The 2016 candidate even gave suggestions to the activists, telling them that without a concrete plan their movement will get nothing but "lip service from as many white people as you can pack into Yankee Stadium and a million more like it."⁴

In the weeks following the encounter, Yancey told the media that at no point during the meeting did she hear "a reflection on (Clinton's) part in perpetuating white supremacist violence."⁵ That reflection, in fact, never came during the campaign, nor in any post-mortems of it once Trump won the election. Black women might have been disappointed, but they were hardly surprised.

What did occur in the postmortem, however, was an analysis of the ways in which white women failed to show up for Clinton. Former Slate editor L. V. Anderson (who is white) argued that white women decided that defending their position of power as white people was more important than defending their reproductive rights, their sexual autonomy, their access to health care, family leave, and child care.⁶ White women bought into Trump's lies about immigrant rapists and decided they'd

⁴Merica, Dan. (2015, August 18). "Black Lives Matter Videos, Clinton Campaign Reveals Details of Meeting." CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/18/politics/hillary-clinton-black-lives-matter-meeting/index.html>.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Anderson, L. V. (2016, November 9). "White Women Sold Out the Sisterhood and the World by Voting for Trump." *Slate*. http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/11/09/white_women_sold_out_the_sisterhood_and_the_world_by_voting_for_trump.html.

rather have the respect of their angry white fathers, brothers, and husbands than the respect of literally everyone else in the world.

The bifurcations among women as expressed in the 2016 election are important to the intellectual project of American Studies, which centers the question of gender. Anderson wrote,

The results of the election indicate[d] that most white women don't consider themselves part of the coalition of non-white, non-straight, non-male voters who were supposed to carry Clinton to a comfortable victory. Most white women still identify more with white men than they do with Black women, Latina women, Muslim women, transwomen, and every other woman who will have good reason to fear for her physical safety under a Trump regime. And while it's nonwhite and queer women who have the most to lose under Trump, white women will have to live with the consequences of their own actions in a country without a right to abortion, without access to health insurance, without an adequate family leave policy, and with a head of state who values them only insofar as he wants to fuck them.⁷

Education was also a great divide, for women as well as for men. The president-elect won 62% of white women without college degrees; Secretary of State Clinton, 34%. "Class shapes gender identity," says Nancy Isenberg, the author of *White Trash*, which examined how elites have derided rural, working-class Americans from the colonial era to this day. "I think a lot of people who support Trump think of themselves as being disinherited. They resent the fact that everything they believe in is mocked by the media elite, and Hollywood. That resentment is shared by men and women."⁸

While Clinton might have made token appearances in blue-collar communities, it could hardly be argued that Clinton was "in touch" with the 99%. Journalist Liza Featherstone noted that the campaign endlessly touted endorsements from the ranks of celebrity one-percenters, especially women. In the end, Clinton enjoyed a gender advantage only among the college-educated. Among white women without college degrees, Clinton lost to Trump by 28 points. Featherstone sarcastically

⁷Ibid.

⁸Chira, Susan. (2016, November 12). "The Myth of Female Solidarity." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/opinion/the-myth-of-female-solidarity.html>.

commented, “It was almost as if waitresses in Ohio didn’t care that [*Vogue* editor-in-chief] Anna Wintour was #WithHer.”⁹ All the talk about angry white men glossed over the fact that they were married to angry white women. This is also why class analysis is critical to the discipline of American Studies. Salamishah Tillet, an associate professor of English and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania reflected, “It’s not like Black people or Latino people aren’t sexist and patriarchal. But when we thought about ourselves and collective best interest, we voted for Clinton.”¹⁰

As a Black feminist, I know that I can’t “lean in” to a democracy that was built on a bridge called my back. Race is a central dimension of US social, political, cultural, and economic life. The prevailing concepts of citizenship, community, freedom, and individuality in the USA contain within them deep fissures, erasures, and conflicts that depend upon particular constructions of race and racial difference. To move “past race” at this historical moment would be to ignore these conflicts and, in effect, to defuse ongoing struggles for social justice. In stressing the continuing significance of race, we take our cues from the rich and generative scholarship in African-American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, Native American and Indigenous Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, Queer Studies, critical race theory, cultural studies, and transnational, postcolonial and diaspora studies. We also take our cues from outside the academy, specifically from Black Lives Matter, a movement that insists that we need and deserve an elaborate strategy to eradicate both white supremacy and implicit bias toward it. We must reckon with the anti-Blackness of America’s history that led to this political moment.

When I first published *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton* in 2008, there wasn’t much scholarship on the Combahee River Collective. I mention the Collective here because of its centrality to my own thought and scholarship, as well as to the core concerns of this book. The very notion of Black feminism as something discrete

⁹Featherstone, Liza. (2016, November 12). “Elite White Feminism Gave Us Trump. It Needs to Die.” Verso Books Blog. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2936-elite-white-feminism-gave-us-trump-it-needs-to-die>.

¹⁰Chira, Susan. (2016, November 12). “The Myth of Female Solidarity.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/opinion/the-myth-of-female-solidarity.html>.

and unique compared to white feminism—indeed, as something that had to arise because white feminism neither invited nor embraced it (and, in fact, often actively worked against it)—can be traced back to Combahee, as is detailed extensively and exquisitely in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s 2017 book, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and The Combahee River Collective*. In *How We Get Free*, Taylor interviews Collective founders and members Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier about the birth of Combahee “as a radical alternative to the National Black Feminist Organization,” which itself was a response to what Black feminists believed was the failure of white feminist organizations to adequately respond to racism. Combahee was also, she contends, intended to “creat[e] new entry points into activism for Black and Brown women who would have otherwise been ignored” in and by male-dominated Black and Brown liberation groups, such as the Black Panther Party. Combahee’s founding principles, articulated in the Combahee River Collective Statement, presaged what we now refer to as intersectionality, understanding what white feminism has never fully grasped: that a feminist theory and practice concerned only with gender will never be of interest or value to Black women. As you read further in this book, keep this idea in mind as you think about what, exactly, Black feminism is.¹¹

BLACK FEMINIST POLITICS IN A POST-OBAMA PRESIDENCY

The core beliefs and values of Black feminism originally articulated by Combahee and that have been and continue to find new expressions through Black Lives Matter, and other social movements have only become more urgent since the previous edition of this book was published. Indeed, the vision of the women of Combahee could hardly be more relevant to this moment in which the president openly scorns and denigrates people of color (referring to Black urban communities as “ghettos” during his campaign being just one example) and rode into office despite a long, extensively documented history of

¹¹Yamahtta Taylor, Keeanga. (2017). *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago: Haymarket.

discrimination based on race and ethnicity.¹² Like Bill and Hillary Clinton, he bought into the notion of young Black “super-predators,” even before the Clintons did; in 1989, upon the arrest of the “Central Park Five,” he bought full-page ads in newspapers calling for law and order and expressing his support for the death penalty as a way to achieve social stability.¹³ And once in office, he made it clear that his “police state” views had hardly changed; in fact, they’d become entrenched in the ensuing years. Six months after being sworn into office, Trump addressed a crowd of police officers on Long Island, saying that he authorized and encouraged them to not be “too nice” with suspects, especially gang members. “Like when you guys put somebody in the car, and you’re protecting their head, you know, the way you put your hand over [their head], I said, ‘You can take the hand away, O.K.’”¹⁴ Though Black women had done their best to keep him out of office, it was obvious that the work that would be required to cope with and survive the Trump administration was only just beginning.

Over 40 years after the Combahee River Collective Statement, and as movements like Black Lives Matter and the Dreamers remind us, America is still failing to provide an equal playing field for all people. And when it comes to electoral politics, even “progressive” leaders too often leave out those whose lives fall at the intersections of discrimination, such as poor black women or undocumented LGBTQ youth. Under the Trump administration, these groups are meanwhile overtly targeted for discriminatory treatment. Despite the continued abuses against marginalized people, it’s important to remember that Black feminist thinkers and activists have been dreaming and fighting for nuanced solutions to systemic oppression for many years, and their work deserves our attention and consideration as we discern how best to respond to the present moment. There is no need to reinvent the wheel: The tenets of Black feminism offer us a clear, sturdy foundation upon which to carry forward the work of progressive politics in a post-Obama society in which our very lives are threatened daily.

¹²Desjardins, Lisa. (2017, August 22). “Every Moment in Trump’s Charged Relationship with Race.” PBS Newshour. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/every-moment-donald-trumps-long-complicated-history-race>.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Rosenthal, Brian. (2017, July 29). “Police Criticize Trump for Telling Officers Not to Be ‘Too Nice’ with Suspects.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/29/nyregion/trump-police-too-nice.html>.

What are those tenets? Standing in sharp contrast to a modern version of “trickle-down” social justice where those with the most power have their interests addressed first, the Combahee River Collective instead argued the reverse: that those who are most marginalized and disenfranchised in society should be centered, and through lifting up the most disenfranchised, everyone’s standard of living would in turn improve. Black women have long known that America’s destiny is inseparable from how it treats us and the nation ignores this truth at its peril.

Though she is no longer First Lady, Michelle Obama certainly embodied this form of feminism in the White House, a subject that certainly deserves more critical scholarship than it has received to date. Instead, Obama’s feminism has all too often been interpreted through a white feminist lens, one in which white women feel authorized and compelled to critique Obama’s priorities and motives. “Are fashion and body-toning tips all we can expect from one of the most highly educated First Ladies in history?” asked Leslie Morgan Steiner, author of *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*. She continued by adding that she had “read enough bland dogma on home-grown vegetables and aerobic exercise to last...several lifetimes.”¹⁵

Rebecca Walker, who writes about culture, identity and motherhood, remarked that such white questioning of Obama’s choices was “tedious.” Beyond tedious, such questioning and critique of Black feminists’ choices and priorities expose white women’s lack of familiarity with and understanding of the concerns that are most central to Black women’s lives.

This void in white women’s understanding of Black women and Black feminism isn’t limited to wider society. I see it in my own classroom each year. I teach a course on Black Feminist Thought. My syllabus includes Angela Davis, Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde, Psyche Forson-Williams, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Williams, Beverly Guy Sheftall, Paula Giddings, Ann duCille, Adrienne Davis, Cathy J. Cohen, Evelyn M. Hammonds, Joy James, Stanlie M. James, Carol Boyce Davies, Cheryl A. Wall, and the late, great June Jordan. This list is hardly exhaustive, but even my students who are majoring in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies are unfamiliar with

¹⁵Morgan Steiner, Leslie. (Undated). “Michelle Obama: Powerful or Just Popular?” ModernMom. <https://www.modernmom.com/47ebc4d2-3b36-11e3-be8a-bc764c04a41e.html>.

these luminaries. If white feminists were familiar with these texts, they might understand that Black women have been able to define our own feminism within the context of US racism for 200 years.

Encouraging young white women to learn about Black feminism is one of the best parts of my job, because they're hungry to learn and in the paths of Black feminists they see—often with wonder—that we have mapped out a viable path to liberation. It's a road map we made by walking, and it's one that is well-traveled by Black feminists. It's up to the Black women of my generation to pass this map down, teaching the daughters of our contemporaries that the feminism they grew up with ain't like ours, but it can be. Black, Latina, Asian, and Native American feminists have been grappling with complex questions about gender, race, class, and sexuality for decades and, in their own lives, for centuries. We know that when intersectional feminist leadership can be enacted in practice, it brings important changes about which issues are centered.

We also know that such enactment in practice is not easy and is, in fact, often painful. In the earliest feminist responses to the Trump administration and, in particular, that administration's entrenched sexism, we saw how, yet again, Black women were often marginalized, left out entirely, and then discredited or ridiculed or silenced (or, more often, all three) when they critiqued "mainstream" feminist responses. No event was more indicative of this than the Women's March that was organized as a response to Trump's election and inauguration. As white women donned pink "pussy hats" and claimed their space in Washington, DC, Black women who brought all of their concerns to the march often found themselves and their messages to be ignored. S. T. Holloway, for example, wrote about attending the 2017 Women's March as a black woman and why her experience there caused her not to attend in 2018: "[I]n a sea of thousands, at an event billed as a means of advancing the causes affecting all women, the first and last time I heard 'Black Lives Matter' chanted was when my two girlfriends and I began the chant," she recalled. "About 40 to 50 others joined in, a comparatively pathetic response to the previous chorus given to the other chants.... It represented the continued neglect, dismissal and disregard of the issues affecting black women and other women of color."¹⁶

¹⁶Holloway, S. T. (2018, January 19). "Why This Black Girl Will Not Be Returning to the Women's March." HuffPost. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-this-black-girl-will-not-be-returning-to-the-womens-march_us_5a3c1216e4b0b0e5a7a0bd4b.

We can see this disregard on the part of white women in their voting patterns today, from the 57% of white women who voted for Trump—as opposed to the 89% of black women, 66% of Latina women, and 65% of Asian women who voted against him¹⁷—to the 63% of white women in the 2017 Alabama Senate special election who voted for Roy Moore, an alleged serial pedophile who would be comfortable jettisoning black Americans’ basic human rights under the 14th, 15th, and 24th Amendments, as well as women’s right to vote.¹⁸ In that same election, 98% of black women voted against Moore and his extremist racism and misogyny in favor of Doug Jones, turning a Senate seat in Alabama blue for the first time in 25 years.¹⁹

It seems that although “sisterhood is powerful,” as the 1970 feminist anthology of the same name would proclaim, sisterhood that excludes so many of its sisters constitutes a failed revolution. Treva Lindsey, Associate Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University, argued in an op-ed for theGrio, “Black women show up and show out for candidates who rarely address our needs through tackling racial, gender, economic, and sexual injustice.” While the GOP, argues Lindsey, is more anti-black and anti-poor than ever, even to the extent of publicly embracing white nationalism, “The Democratic Party [also] continues to largely ignore the specific demands of black women while resting upon symbolic and empty gestures of inclusion and attempting to shore up more support among the white working class.”²⁰

Leading black feminists today like Black Lives Matter co-founders Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors; trans icons Janet Mock, Cece McDonald, and Laverne Cox; author Roxane Gay; *The Body Is Not An Apology* social movement founder and writer Sonya Renee Taylor; and former Bernie Sanders national press secretary and political commentator

¹⁷CNN. Exit Poll, November 23, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls>.

¹⁸Kaczynski, Andrew. (2017, December 11). “Roy Moore in 2011: Getting Rid of Amendments After 10th Would ‘Eliminate Many Problems.’” CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/10/politics/kfile-roy-moore-aroostook-watchmen/index.html>.

¹⁹Nilsen, Ella. (2017, December 13). “Doug Jones Is the First Democrat to Win an Alabama Senate Seat in 25 Years.” VOX. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/12/13/16770668/doug-jones-roy-moore-alabama-senate>.

²⁰Lindsey, Treva. (2017, December 18). “Just a Reminder: Black Women Saved Alabama, but Not for the Reasons You Think.” TheGrio. <https://thegrio.com/2017/12/18/alabama-black-women-voters/>.

Symone Sanders are all leading the charge in embracing Black feminism that is intersectional, considers issues of power, access, and disenfranchisement in nuanced, layered ways, and ultimately offers a higher bar to which to hold US politics.

Writes Lindsey, “Black women, and more specifically black feminists, have been trying for over a hundred years to get white feminists to address the pervasiveness of anti-blackness among white women and to proactively divest from and destroy white supremacy.... The fact that damn near everyone benefits from our ‘voting’ except black women speaks volumes about how we are marginalized even when we use our vote to push back against injustice. Until more black feminists are in office and black feminist policies are the status quo,” adds Lindsey, “we are doomed to repeat this alarming trend.”²¹

If progressives want to retake Congress in 2018, which will also likely be the only way a Trump impeachment sees the light of day, they will, with humility and grace, need to embrace the contributions of Black feminism at the national level, not as a tokenizing move to win black and brown votes but to understand and address the multifaceted forms of injustice keeping so many people from living their dreams. Crucially, this injustice also keeps marginalized groups from going out to the polls, whether they’re physically barred from doing so or are too disillusioned to do so given the long history of empty promises from Democrats seeking to coax their votes.

Black feminists, and other feminists of color, have been strategizing around how to combat multiple forms of structural disadvantage for decades. It’s time that existing (mostly white, mostly male) Democratic leadership finally study what they have to say, genuinely invite them to the table, and make room for a shift.

I initially wrote this book as a history, one intended to restore Black women’s narratives to histories of twentieth-century feminist politics, giving Black women their rightful place in that canon. In this third edition of *Black Feminist Politics*, that goal seems even more urgent to me, and I feel compelled to extend to you an invitation: Read this book to (re)consider Black feminism. Use it to inform your own praxis and to move ever closer toward an embodiment of the kind of feminism that Black feminists have developed and practiced throughout their history. Insist upon a feminism that centers Black and Brown women and that credits them for their contributions.

²¹ Ibid.



CHAPTER 2

A History of Black American Feminism

Black power, the women's movement, and feminist organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and the Combahee River Collective all contributed to the emergence of a new voice for Black women in American politics and social life in the second half of the twentieth century. But the disintegration of the Combahee River Collective coincided with a conservative backlash, an era that saw the rise and fall of Vanessa Williams as Miss America and which set the stage for the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings. The roots of the conservative backlash that had such a detrimental effect on Black women can be traced to the major ideological shift that occurred in social welfare discourse during the 1960s and the supposedly liberal, progressive Kennedy administration. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program had been driven ideologically by gender and class frameworks, but as a result of the social turbulence and political forces of the sixties, the discourse surrounding social welfare came to be dominated by race, with gender and class as supporting ideological frameworks.

The early part of the 1960s marked a renewed social consciousness of issues surrounding poverty. One prominent example of the heightened awareness of economic issues and class is embodied in the popularity of Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America*, which described the plight of millions of poor Americans. Harrington's book challenged a number of contemporary notions about American affluence, and though it was not an immediate bestseller, *The Other America* was read widely within academic and policy circles, attracting many favorable reviews and

sparking strong interest in research about poverty. Harrington’s book attracted the attention of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In fact, the actual use of the word “poverty” to describe socio-economic conditions of the poor did not appear in the Congressional Record or the Public Papers of the President until 1964.

There was an explosion of Americans on public assistance during the 1960s and into the early 1970s.¹ Payment to families on AFDC grew from less than \$1 billion in 1960 to \$6 billion by 1972. The majority of this growth occurred as a result of a massive influx of new enrollees into the AFDC program. In 1960, 3.1 million people were enrolled in AFDC; by 1969, this number had nearly doubled to 6.1 million. The annual increases between 1966 and 1969 are tallied in the following chart (Table 2.1):

Table 2.1 % increase
in AFDC recipients

	1966	1967	1968	1969
% increase in AFDC recipients	4.5	11.7	13.25	17.7

By 1974, AFDC rolls ballooned to 10.8 million recipients.

This dramatic increase in social welfare spending reflected a paradox for a number of policy-makers, in that it occurred as the country was experiencing an extended period of economic prosperity. As one social services administrator noted, for the first time the expansion occurred in both good and bad years, seemingly unrelated to the state of the economy. Poverty had declined sharply throughout the 1960s. In 1959, 40 million people, almost a quarter of the American population, were living below the poverty level. By 1969, that number declined to 12.2% of the population, or 24 million individuals. Additionally, this decline was sharpest for non-white populations; in 1959, 56.2% of non-whites were in poverty, but by 1969, the number had dropped to 31.1%. Demographically, it should be noted that there was a significant change in the racial makeup of the new AFDC participants. The huge expansion

¹US Department of Health and Human Services. (2001, March 1). “Indicators of Welfare Dependence: Annual Report to Congress.” Accessed on May 20, 2018, from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/indicators-welfare-dependence-annual-report-congress-2001/aid-families-dependent-children-afdc-and-temporary-assistance-needy-families-tanf>.