10 U.S. BLACK FEMINISM IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

Black women scholars and professionals cannot afford to ignore the straits of our sisters who are acquainted with the immediacy of oppression in a way many of us are not. The process of empowerment cannot be simplistically defined in accordance with our own particular class interests. We must learn to lift as we climb.
—Angela Davis 1989, 9

Within U.S. Black feminism, race, class gender, and sexuality constitute mutually constructing systems of oppression (Davis 1981; Smith 1983; Lorde 1984; Crenshaw 1991). Intersectional paradigms make two important contributions to understanding the connections between knowledge and empowerment. For one, they stimulate new interpretations of African-American women's experiences. Much of the work on U.S. Black women reported in earlier chapters relies on intersectional paradigms of some sort. For example, African-American women's confinement to domestic work revealed how race and gender influenced Black women's social class experiences. Similarly, the sexual politics of Black womanhood that shaped Black women's experiences with pornography, prostitution, and rape relied upon racist, sexist, and heterosexist ideologies to construct Black women's sexualities as deviant. Not only do intersectional paradigms prove useful in explaining U.S. Black women's experiences, such paradigms suggest that intersecting oppressions also shape the experiences of other groups as well. Puerto Ricans, U.S. White men, Asian American gays and lesbians, U.S. White women, and other historically identifiable groups all have distinctive histories that reflect their unique placement in intersecting oppressions (Andersen and Collins 1998).

Intersectional paradigms make a second important contribution to untangling the relationships between knowledge and empowerment—they shed new light on how domination is organized. The term *matrix of domination* describes this over-

all social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained. In the United States, such domination has occurred through schools, housing, employment, government, and other social institutions that regulate the actual patterns of intersecting oppressions that Black women encounter. Just as intersecting oppressions take on historically specific forms that change in response to human actions—racial segregation persists, but not in the forms that it took in prior historical eras—so the shape of domination itself changes.

As the particular form assumed by intersecting oppressions in one social location, any matrix of domination can be seen as an historically specific organization of power in which social groups are embedded and which they aim to influence. When Maria Stewart asked, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" (Richardson 1987), her query focused on the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism for one period of time, the early 1800s, and in one social location, the United States. When Angela Davis counsels that privileged Black women not "ignore the straits of our sisters who are acquainted with the immediacy of oppression in a way many of us are not," she stresses the need for new ways of conceptualizing oppression and activism that take class differences of a global matrix of domination into account. All contexts of domination incorporate some combination of intersecting oppressions, and considerable variability exists from one matrix of domination to the next as to how oppression and activism will be organized. For example, as Senegalese feminists (Imam et al. 1997), Black American feminists (Guy-Sheftall 1995b), and Black British feminists (Mirza 1997) all point out, social institutions in Senegal, the United States, and the United Kingdom reflect intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Yet social relations within these three nation-states differ: Domination is structured differently in Senegal, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Thus, regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of a matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities.

Placing U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences shows how intersectional paradigms can be especially important for rethinking the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society. Claims that systems of race, social class, gender, and sexuality form mutually constructing features of social organization foster a basic rethinking of U.S. social institutions. For example, using intersecting paradigms to investigate U.S. Black women's experiences challenges deeply held beliefs that work and family constitute separate spheres of social organization. Since U.S. Black women's experiences have never fit the logic of work in the public sphere juxtaposed to family obligations in the private sphere, these categories lose meaning. As the persistent racial discrimination in schooling, housing, jobs, and public services indicates, Black women's experiences certainly challenge U.S. class ideologies claiming that individual merit is all that matters in determining social

rewards. The sexual politics of Black womanhood reveals the fallacy of assuming that gender affects all women in the same way—race and class matter greatly. U.S. Black women's activism, especially its dual commitment to struggles for group survival and to institutional transformation, suggests that understandings of the political should be rethought. Thus, by using intersectional paradigms to explain both the U.S. matrix of domination and Black women's individual and collective agency within it, Black feminist thought helps reconceptualize social relations of domination and resistance.

Nation and Nationalism

Despite these contributions, U.S. Black feminist thought must continue to develop even more complex analyses of intersecting oppressions—how such oppressions are organized, their effect on group composition and history, their influence on individual consciousness, and, most importantly, collective strategies of resistance. Moving from race, class, and gender to generate analyses that include heterosexism as a system of oppression certainly constitutes a step in the right direction. But U.S. Black feminism will remain hindered in its goal of fostering Black women's empowerment in a context of social justice unless it incorporates more comprehensive analyses of how nation can constitute another form of oppression (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Race, class, gender, and sexuality all remain closely intertwined with nation. In exploring these connections, it is important to distinguish among the terms nation, nation-state, and nationalism. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they refer to different things. A *nation* consists of a collection of people who have come to believe that they have been shaped by a common past and are destined to share a common future. That belief is usually nurtured by common cultural characteristics, such as language and customs; a well-defined geographic territory; the belief in a common history or origin; the belief that closer ties exist among members of the nation than with outsiders; a sense of difference from groups around them; and a shared hostility toward outsider groups. *Nationalism* is a political ideology that is expressed by any group that self-defines as a distinctive people or nation. Nationalist ideologies strive to foster beliefs and practices which permit a people or nation to control its own destiny. When any one group acquires sufficient state power that allows it to realize its goals, it controls a *nation-state*.

In the United States, because affluent White men control government and industry, public policies usually benefit this group. In other words, despite the U.S. Constitution's stated commitment to equality of all American citizens, historically, the differential treatment of U.S. Blacks, women, the working class, and other subordinated groups meant that the United States operated as a nation-state that disproportionately benefited affluent White men. Because this group controls schools, the news media, and other social institutions that legitimate what

counts as truth, it possesses the authority to obscure its own power and to redefine its own special interests as being national interests. In response to this situation, U.S. Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and other similar groups have often themselves embraced nationalist ideologies. Because such ideologies stress solidarity and resistance, such ideologies have effectively been used in challenging U.S. state policies.

Women are important within nationalist philosophies, whether the nationalism is forwarded by dominant groups who wield nation-state power, or by subordinated groups who use nationalist ideologies to challenge their oppression. Groups on both sides of state power view the women in their group in particular ways. Because women are capable of becoming mothers, women are central to three elements in nationalist thinking, namely, issues of sexuality and fertility, of motherhood, and of being symbols of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). In the United States, all women experience the peculiar situation of being responsible for reproducing the nation-state's population, passing on an American national culture, and accepting the role of being inscribed with that same national culture. But within the U.S. matrix of domination, this entire process is racialized, is organized in class-specific ways, and has varying impact on women of diverse sexualities. Women are differentially evaluated based on their perceived value to give birth to the right kind of children, pass on appropriate American family values, and become worthy symbols of the nation. Black women, White women, Latinas, Native American women, and Asian American women all occupy different positions within gender, class, race, and nation as intersecting systems of power.

Because American citizenship is so often taken for granted among U.S. Black women, we often have difficulty seeing not only how deeply nationalistic U.S. society actually is, but how its nationalisms affect us. African-American women encounter differential treatment based on our perceived value as giving birth to the wrong race of children, as unable to socialize them properly because we bring them into bad family structures, and as unworthy symbols for U.S. patriotism. This treatment is based, in part, on ideologies that view U.S. Black women as the Other, the mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and jezebels who mark the boundaries of normality for American women overall. African-American women and many others typically have difficulty seeing the assumptions that underlie this situation because American nation-state policies obscure how American national interests in actuality are special interests. These same assumptions also limit understanding of how U.S. nationalism operates globally. In this context, working exclusively within prevailing nationalistic assumptions fosters views of the U.S. matrix of domination where the effects of nationalism become difficult to see, let alone resist, because they seem so everyday and taken for granted.

One important assumption that affects African-American women is how ideas about family influence understandings of American national identity. Just as ideas about sexuality permeate multiple systems of oppression (see Chapter 6), ideas about family perform a similar function (Collins 1998c).

Similarly, ideas about motherhood become especially important to American national identity. Whereas all women are assigned the duty of reproducing the national group's population, and of passing on a national culture while simultaneously being inscribed with that same national culture, in the United States, these ideas about race, class, motherhood, and citizenship influence public policies. For example, U.S. population policies broadly defined aim to discourage Black women from having children, claiming that Black women make poor mothers and that their children end up receiving handouts from the state (Roberts 1997). In contrast, middle-class White women are encouraged to increase their fertility, and are assisted by a dazzling array of new reproductive technologies in the quest for the healthy White baby (Hartouni 1997). Working-class White women are encouraged to deliver healthy White babies, but place them for adoption with more worthy middle-class families (Collins 1999a). The fertility of undocumented women of color is seen as a threat to the nation-state, especially if such women's children gain citizenship and apply for public services (Chang 1994). Women thus emerge as being much more important to U.S. nation-state policies than is popularly believed.

Despite the contributions of incorporating ideas about motherhood and nation within U.S. Black feminist thought, the emphasis remains on U.S. *domestic* policies. U.S. Black feminist thought contains considerable work that assesses how U.S. educational, employment, taxation, and social welfare policies affect African-American women's lives. This is important scholarship, yet in the absence of studies that examine U.S. Black women in a global context, such work can foster the assumption that U.S. *foreign* policy is not important for African-American women. Stopping analysis at the U.S. border thus functions to contain U.S. Black feminist thought to Black women's interactions with groups that are already in the United States—Black men, White women, other racial/ethnic populations—groups that already hold American citizenship or that aspire to attain it.

Shifting to a global analysis not only reveals new dimensions of U.S. Black women's experiences in the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society, but it also illuminates how a transnational matrix of domination presents certain challenges for women of African descent. Intersecting oppressions do not stop at U.S. borders. Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation constitute global phenomena that have a particular organization in the United States. Nested within this U.S. version are distinctive group histories characterized by a unique combination of factors. U.S. Black women's experiences constitute one such group history that can be seen in the context of the particular social movements within the United States, the domestic policies of varying levels of U.S. government, and a global matrix of domination affecting women of African descent in general. Black women in Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom, Botswana, Brazil, and other nation-states are similarly located. They encounter the contours of local social movements, the policies of their nation-states, and the same global matrix of domination in which

U.S. Black women are situated. All of these groups of women thus are positioned with situations of domination that are characterized by intersecting oppressions, yet their angle of vision on domination will vary greatly.

Shifting to a transnational context also brings women's rights activities to the forefront of discussion (Lindsey 1980). In a transnational context, women in African, Latin American, and Asian nations have not sat idly by, waiting for middle-class, White women from North American and Western European nation-states to tell them what to do. Instead, using the United Nations as a vehicle, women from quite diverse backgrounds have identified gender oppression as a major theme affecting women transnationally (see, e.g., *Rights of Women* 1998). These women are not just "theorizing" about oppression; their theory emerges from within the practical terrain of activism.

Within this broad transnational context, women of African descent have a distinctive, shared legacy that in turn is part of a global women's movement. At the same time, due to the peculiar combination of the legacy of African cultures, a history of racial oppressions organized via slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, and an emerging global racism that, assisted by modern technology, moves across national borders with dizzying speed, women of African descent encounter particular issues. For example, just as African-American women constitute one of the poorest groups within the United States, so do Black women in Brazil. Similarly, in the context of global women's poverty, women in Africa remain among the poorest. In this sense, women of African descent share much with women's rights struggles globally, but do so through particular Black diasporic experiences characterized by substantial heterogeneity.

Despite the national barriers that separate women of African descent, Black women's experiences demonstrate marked similarities that "illustrate how the persistence of the legacy of colonialism with its racial/ethnic, sexist and class biases has resulted in a system of 'global gendered apartheid'—a global economic system characterized by the exploitation of the labour of women of colour everywhere" (Antrobus 1995, 55). In this context, as social theorist Obioma Nnaemeka points out, "as people of African descent, our attention should not be solely on how blacks in Africa and those in the African Diaspora are *related with* each another, but also on how they *relate to* each other" (1998b, 377). One task, then, lies in stimulating dialogue across the very real limitations of national boundaries, to develop new ways of relating to one another, in order to unpack the interconnectedness of Black women's experiences.

Black Women in Transnational Context

In 1981, U.S. Black feminist theorist Barbara Smith identified her definition of what it meant to be radical: "What *I* really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing

with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think *that* is really radical because it has never been done before" (Smith and Smith 1981, 126). Whereas U.S. Black feminism has traveled some distance toward Smith's vision of radicalism, coalitions among U.S. Black women and among women of African descent differentially placed in "gendered global apartheid" face some tough questions. Such coalitions must attend not only to different histories, they must be aware of the varying strengths and limitations that groups bring to social justice efforts. Women of African descent thus remain differentially placed within an overarching matrix of "global gendered apartheid" organized via a plethora of distinct nation-state politics. As a result, dialogues among Black women across national boundaries remain difficult. But they are necessary because they promise to shed light on current issues within U.S. Black feminism that now appear to be "American" yet may be better understood in transnational context.

Placing African-American women's experiences in a transnational context simultaneously provides a new angle of vision on U.S. Black feminism as a social justice project and decenters the White/Black binary that has long plagued U.S. feminism. Within the U.S. White/Black framework, U.S. Black feminism can be seen only as a derivative movement. African-American women who self-define as Black feminists can be accused of being "White" identified, as if no independent Black feminist consciousness is possible. Refracted through the lens of U.S. race relations that sees Blacks as sidekicks, followers, and dependent beings, this interpretation has surface validity. Within assumptions that one need not consider anything outside U.S. national borders, these Black/White dialogues become intensified and can work to drown out other issues. When these debates are taken to their logical extreme, U.S. feminism can become one huge discussion about identity—as Black and White women, why can't we get along?

Placing U.S. Black women's experiences in a transnational context shifts this understanding of U.S. Black feminism. Instead of being White feminism in blackface, the core themes of U.S. Black feminism resemble similar issues raised by women of African descent elsewhere. Issues that are of great concern to U.S. Black women explored in earlier chapters—work and family, negative controlling images, struggles for self-definition in cultural contexts that deny Black women agency, sexual politics that make Black women vulnerable to sex work, rape, and media objectification, and understandings of motherwork within Black women's politics—find different meanings in a transnational context. As Andree Nicola McLaughlin points out, "The proliferation of Black women's organizations in the last decade signals a global phenomenon. Such organized political activity on the part of self-identified 'Black women' reflects a burgeoning, intercontinental Black women's consciousness movement" (1995, 73). Rather than being a White-identified anomaly within U.S. Black community development efforts, U.S. Black feminism can better be seen as part of an "intercontinental Black women's consciousness movement" that addresses the common concerns of women of African descent.

If common concerns link women of African descent transnationally, why

don't more U.S. Black women see them? Certainly U.S. school curricula dedicated to glorifying American history and culture as well as a U.S. media that substitute news entertainment for serious coverage of global issues leave all U.S. citizens, including African-American women, ignorant of major world issues. But another important factor concerns U.S. Black women's relationships with two groups most closely aligned with African-American women's interests. Via their control over U.S. feminism and Black intellectual discourse, respectively, White American women and Black American men constitute two groups with which and through which African-American women construct U.S. Black feminism. Both groups may be well meaning, and in fact may express deep-seated concern for Black women's issues. But both groups find it difficult to get out of the way and encourage a fully articulated, Black feminist agenda where Black women are in charge.

Some strands of White Western feminism have been tireless in raising women's issues in defense of women who remain suppressed and therefore unable to speak for themselves. This is important work and often leads to valuable coalitions among First and Third World women. Yet the kinds of coalitions among groups such as these can become problematic. Because the groups remain so unequal in power, this inequality can foster a pseudo-maternalism among White women reminiscent of how U.S. middle-class social workers approached working-class, immigrant women in prior eras. The much-bandied-about accusation of racism in the women's movement may be much less about the racial attitudes of individual White women than it is about the unwillingness or inability of some Western White feminists to share power. These conflicts remain muted when the power differences among women are vast—the case when the interests of poor, rural, non-American Black women are championed by Western feminists. Yet when the power differentials shrink—the case of Black American and White American women who are seemingly equal under U.S. law—relationships become much more contentious.

U.S. Black men exercise a different kind of control. Here discourses of Black nationalism with their implicit counsel of a racial solidarity built on unquestioned support of African-American men stifles dialogue. Whereas the majority of African-Americans would most likely not identify themselves as "Black nationalists," most do ascribe to many of the basic tenets of Black nationalist–influenced ideologies that counsel Black self-determination (Franklin 1992). The historical viciousness and deeply entrenched nature of White supremacy in the United States makes this a rational response. Blacks may be the ones who are accused of "holding" onto race, but it is White Americans who move out of neighborhoods when Blacks move in. White Americans are the ones who want affirmative action programs in higher education dismantled, even if such efforts effectively bar African-American access to elite colleges. It is White Americans whose failure to vote for Black candidates forces civil rights organizations to remain embroiled in

legal battles to find ways of ensuring Black representation under the rubric of American democracy. In this context, Black nationalism is not irrational—it has been essential for Black progress. However, despite their contributions, not all Black nationalisms are the same. But they do seem to share one common feature, namely, a norm of racial solidarity based on Black women's unquestioned support of Black men without extracting a similar commitment on the part of Black men to Black women. In contrast to White women's maternalism, U.S. Black women are encouraged to embrace a Black paternalism, one where Black men reclaim their manhood because Black women "let them be men."

Not only are both of these political responses unacceptable, the energy required to deal with both White women and Black men leaves little left over to engage in dialogue with other groups, both within the United States and transnationally. But a U.S. Black feminism that does not do so runs the risk of quickly running out of steam. It is important to remember that just as African-American women are neither African nor American, neither is U.S. Black feminism. Instead, it occupies its own space that reflects the privileges of U.S. citizenship juxtaposed to the second-class nature of that citizenship. However, while U.S. Black feminism occupies this location between Americaness—the struggles with White feminists and with Black men—and women of African descent globally, the lion's share of its attention has been directed at American groups. As a result, U.S. Black feminism has been preoccupied with responding to the issues raised by American groups. The task now lies in fleshing out dialogues and coalitions with Black women who live elsewhere in the Black diaspora, keeping in mind that intersecting oppressions have left a path of common challenges that are differently organized and resisted.

In the context of a global gendered apartheid, women of African descent share many qualities. One concerns the similarities that characterize contemporary Black women's organizing, much of which has been influenced by Black nationalist ideologies. In the post–World War II era of national independence and liberation movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, Black women actively participated in these anticolonialist and antiracist struggles, many of which relied on nationalist philosophies. In the global context of antiracist struggles, Black women have participated in activist struggles of all sorts (Terborg-Penn 1986). Many Black-run nation-states of the postcolonial era could not have been formed without women's efforts. For example, Black women were prominent in protracted anticolonial struggles against the Portuguese in both Mozambique and Angola. Black South African women have long engaged in political activism, much of it confrontational, that resulted in the successful overthrow of apartheid. Whereas other anticolonial efforts were more peaceful, they nonetheless relied on Black women's actions. Within the United States, Black women's participation in civil rights and Black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s reflected similar patterns (Crawford et al. 1990). In the U.S. context,

the goal was not to form an independent nation-state, but rather to reform the existing one. U.S. political institutions required transformation so that rights of American citizenship would be fully extended to Black women and other historically disenfranchised groups.

These initial emphases on anticolonialist and antiracist agendas have since given way to new sets of issues. In particular, this transnational Black women's consciousness movement remains focused on how Black women's poverty becomes reorganized in conjunction with new institutional power arrangements of neocolonialism (the transnational context) and racial resegregation (the U.S. context). For example, African women have engaged in diverse types of liberation struggles, many of which brought new constitutional guarantees and legal freedoms ensuring women's rights. Women in South Africa, for example, now enjoy some of the most comprehensive constitutional protections anywhere. Yet despite these protracted anticolonial struggles, women in South Africa remain disproportionately poor and often have difficulty exercising the rights that they have earned. Similarly, African-American women who participated in the civil rights and Black power movements stimulated newfound political protections for all U.S. Black women, with many developing a Black feminist consciousness in the process. Despite the legal protections provided under these new political arrangements, Black women in both South Africa and the United States remain disproportionately poor.

Placing U.S. Black feminism within the context of global gendered apartheid provides new insights into U.S. Black feminist practices and thought. Expanding the process of self-definition described in Chapter 5 beyond individual and group identity for African-American women suggests that the transnational context would greatly aid U.S. Black women's struggles for group survival and institutional transformation. Self-defined Black diasporic feminisms require links among U.S. Black feminism and feminisms expressed by women of African descent as well as ties with transnational women's rights activism.

Developing this Black diasporic perspective among African-American women can be more difficult than one thinks, especially given the limited contact with Black women from the United Kingdom, Senegal, Brazil, and other nation-states, as well as the historically insular view of the world that permeates U.S. society. The absence of strong transnational organizations among Black women means that this type of Black feminist agenda is at its early stages. For example, in her arguments that this Black diasporic feminism be called *Africana womanism,* Clenora Hudson-Weems (1998) rejects both *African feminism* and *Black feminism* by asserting that both terms remain aligned with White, middle-class feminism. White women remain at the center, she suggests, even in global discussions of Black women's concerns. In response, Obioma Nnaemeka places the blame not on the rhetorical strategies of naming, but on the actual politics that limit Black women's ability to generate such an agenda:

> One can argue that the deficiency of African feminism and Black feminism respectively in addressing the full range of black women's experience arises more from their relationship one to the other than their relationship to white, middle-class feminism. (Nnaemeka 1998a, 21)

Despite these difficulties, it is important to investigate the potential and actual connections among U.S. Black feminism, African feminisms, and other feminisms advanced by women of African descent. Since this is obviously a very large task, one way of approaching it lies in examining selected challenges that have been identified by women of African descent transnationally. Stated differently, despite differences in how Black women encounter and respond to these common challenges, certain themes serve as a common agenda that characterizes Black women's concerns.

Unfortunately, the many structural barriers that impede Black women's access to education, housing, employment, and health care make it difficult for many to express self-defined women's agendas. In this regard, films made by women of African descent remain important. For example, *Femmes Aux Yeux Ouverts (Women with Open Eyes),* a 1994 documentary from Togo, remains exemplary in how it highlights the sophisticated political analyses and actions taken by African women themselves. In this film, Togolese women speak of how their eyes had formerly been closed but how their political consciousness as women is changing. Similarly, *Everyone's Child,* a 1996 film made in Zimbabwe, examines the devastating effects of AIDS on one African adolescent girl. As one of four siblings orphaned by losing her mother to AIDS, the girl tries to hold the family together. Out of desperation, she is forced into sex work until family members recognize that she and other children in her situation belong to everyone. The strength of *Femmes Aux Yeux Ouverts, Everyone's Child,* and similar film projects lies in their ability to transcend the limits of literacy. The issues raised by both films speak not just to and for many African women, they also raise issues familiar to U.S. Black women as well.

More common, however, is a pattern where women of African descent throughout the diaspora often begin defining our feminism in opposition to that advanced by middle-class, White Western women. This approach reproduces yet another binary, yet gathering together these dissident statements can also help identify points of convergence. At the 1992 conference on Women in Africa and African Development held in Nigeria, Olabisi Aina, a Nigerian social scientist, shared her thoughts on what she perceived as being the differences distinguishing African women's feminism from that of the West:

> The African woman today is concerned not only with overcoming the problems of foreign domination/rule, but also with the specific, immediate needs of surviving famine, hunger, drought, disease, and war. To be empowered, African women, unlike their Western sisters, are struggling not just to attain political power but also to be empowered by gaining

> access to a good education and the professions, among other things. Many of the issues which are of concern to the African feminist are often left out of the Western feminist agenda. (Aina 1998, 75)

Whereas Olabisi Aina cannot speak for all women in a nation-state as large as Nigeria, let alone a continent as large and diverse as Africa, her effort to identify some defining features of a common agenda of African women provides a starting point for discussion. In many ways, she describes the types of struggles that preoccupy African-American women. For example, U.S. Black women are also engaged in overcoming problems of foreign rule and war, but the "foreigners" in the U.S. context are the police. This issue of misuse of police authority against African-Americans, especially against Black men, reemerges as an important concern of U.S. Black women (Davis 1997). The women interviewed by Leith Mullings (1997) who feared for their children's lives in Harlem certainly feel as though they live in a war zone. U.S. Black women's citizenship status that provides a safety net of social services is designed to protect African-American women from the "immediate needs of surviving famine [and] hunger." There is no famine, but as the growing numbers of families who visit soup kitchens suggest, there may be hunger. Efforts to dismantle the social welfare state whose purpose has been to provide food, housing, education, and health care for those who could not afford these services preoccupy Black feminist agendas (Lubiano 1992; Brewer 1994). Disease is also a factor, with African-American women's health identified as an important issue among Black women activists (White 1994). Aina's list can be used to compare the situation of African-American women with Nigerian women, but this is not its best use. Instead, her comments provide a useful starting point for developing an intercontinental Black women's consciousness that identifies how women of African descent encounter different configurations of common challenges such as these.

Common Differences

Positioning African-American women within a transnational context suggests that U.S. Black women occupy a both/and status regarding U.S. feminism, Black diasporic feminisms, and transnational women's rights activism. On some dimensions, U.S. Black feminism resembles that of women within and from Black diasporic societies, while on other dimensions, it remains distinctively American. Collectively, these common areas of concern link the feminisms of women of African descent within a broader transnational context. They also provide a useful starting point for examining the common differences that characterize an intercontinental Black women's consciousness movement, one responding to intersecting oppressions that are differently organized via a global matrix of domination.

On the one hand, intersections of race and gender that frame the category

"Black women" generate a shared set of challenges for all women of African descent, however differentially placed in other social hierarchies we may be. For example, not all Black women are poor, but Black women as a collectivity remain disproportionately poor. On the other hand, differences among Black women reflecting our diverse histories suggest that experiences with poverty will be far more complex than currently imagined. African-American women may be disproportionately poor, but Black women's poverty in the United States is organized differently from that confronting women of African descent transnationally. Despite the similarity of concerns, Black women in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Canada, and other places experience these concerns differently and, as a result, organize in response to them differently.

Transnationally, women's advocates have aimed to use existing human rights laws to develop a women's rights agenda. In a workbook designed to be used by women of varying levels of literacy, the International Women's Tribune Centre identifies six areas of human rights laws that can be used to protect women's rights: women and education; women and employment; women and marriage; women refugees; sexual exploitation and trafficking; and women and torture (*Rights of Women* 1998, 19–54). They then move on to redefine women's human rights as encompassing six areas of concern: violence against women; housing, land and property; reproductive rights; environmental rights; women with disabilities; and sexual orientation rights (55–76). Even a cursory glance at this list reveals that these issues deemed important for women are also significant for women of African descent. What is also noteworthy is how and why some issues receive greater attention within U.S. Black feminism, while others remain muted or even invisible. A fully developed analysis of all six areas of human rights as well as the six areas of women's rights is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, a brief discussion of two issues sheds light on how exploring patterns of common differences among women of African descent might benefit a transnational Black women's consciousness movement.

Black Women's Poverty

Understandings of Black women's poverty illustrate these interconnections of race, gender, class, and nation. Whereas Black women's poverty takes similar forms globally and ultimately stems from a common source, the specific causes of U.S. Black women's poverty and that of women of African descent who are citizens of other nation-states or who are in the United States but lack American citizenship demonstrate how issues of national citizenship and nation-state policies matter. For one, the interconnections of U.S. domestic and foreign policy contribute differently to Black women's poverty. Especially critical of the "development" model imposed upon the Third World, Canadian feminist Angela Miles claims that categories such as development obscure some important linkages

among women in First World countries and those in Third World countries. As Miles points out:

> In the process it is becoming clear that what we call "development issues" in the "third world," such as housing, education, health, child care, and poverty, are called "social issues" in the "first world." These are not qualitatively different phenomena as "development" definitions imply, but shared political issues that constitute a potential basis for common political struggle. Global feminisms are the result of this common struggle grounded in diverse local realities. (Miles 1998, 169)

U.S. foreign and domestic policies of the 1980s illustrate how the interconnections between "development issues" and "social issues" represent two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, Black women in so-called developing areas of Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean point to the effects of structural adjustment policies as a major cause of the growing poverty among Black women. Introduced in the 1980s to alleviate the debt crisis of Third World nation-states, these policies fostered cuts in public services and subsidies to basic goods (food and fuel); increases in the price of transportation, housing, water, electricity, and medicines; privatization of government assets; and trade liberalization and devaluation of the currency. In this sense, these policies can be seen as deeply "raced" because these restrictions were targeted toward people of color.

Structural adjustment policies had two main objectives that in turn had a special impact on women. First, via cuts in government expenditures on social services, these policies aimed to reduce consumption. These actions jeopardized jobs in sectors in which women predominate and assumed that women would fill the gaps created by these cuts. Second, the policies aimed to increase production. Based on assumptions about a ready supply of cheap female labor, the policies incorporated women into capitalist market relations in especially exploitative ways. Both of these objectives devalue women's work in the household as well as in the labor force (Antrobus 1995). In this regard, policies of structural adjustment are deeply gendered, based as they are on an assumption that justifies exploitation of women's time and labor, both in the household and in the workplace.

The consequences of structural adjustment policies have been devastating. For entire populations, they have led to increasing unemployment, poverty, social disintegration, and violence. The poor have suffered the most—and poor women, children, and elderly more than anyone else (Antrobus 1995, 57). These policies relied upon media images designed to mask the culpability of policymakers whose decisions brought about such results. One such image was the portrayal of Black women's poverty in fatalistic terms that suggested the problem was so immense that very little could be done to remedy it. African feminist Ama Ada Aidoo decries the ways in which African women's poverty is portrayed in the media:

> The image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western photojournalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand. (Aidoo 1998, 39)

This image constructs African women either as too far gone to be worthy of aid or as passive recipients of government handouts. Significantly, the one area of agency allowed Black women lies in their sexuality and reproductive capacities—if African women are in fact "breeding too many children," then it is perfectly acceptable for Western nation-states to refuse to "pick up the tab."

Aidoo's description might seem uncomfortably familiar to African-American women, for despite its culturally specific content—poor U.S. Black women are rarely portrayed as "half-naked" with "flies buzzing around the faces of her children"—they have been depicted in a similar fashion. During the same period when Black women in "developing" nations castigated structural adjustment policies, U.S. Black feminists blamed the social policies of the Reagan administration as a major factor in fostering African-American women's poverty (Brewer 1994). Domestic social welfare policies of the 1980s and into the 1990s painted African-American women as unworthy citizens and stripped them of entitlements by blaming African-American women for creating both their own poverty and that of African-Americans (Collins 1989).

Reminiscent of Aidoo's African woman with a "permanent begging bowl in her hand," U.S. Black women's depiction as "welfare queens" served a similar purpose (Lubiano 1992). In both cases, the poverty of Black children was traced back to the sexuality and reproductive capacities of their mothers. But whereas African women's poverty was deemed permanent and thus unresponsive to aid, African-American women were deemed unworthy recipients of aid that maintained their status as permanent beggars. In both cases, the best action was to let them starve.

Black Women and Mother-Child Families

Another important and related issue that links the feminisms of women of African descent concerns how to be effective mothers, especially in the context of changing work and family responsibilities. U.S. Black women's motherwork, particularly efforts to successfully combine bloodmother, othermother, and community othermother responsibilities with the need to generate independent income, resonates with similar struggles engaged in by women transnationally. More important, issues of motherhood, work, and family responsibilities

remain closely bundled in explaining Black women's poverty globally. Describing the poverty of women in the Caribbean, Peggy Antrobus points to the significance that low-paid and unpaid work has in influencing Black women's economic position:

> Women's poverty has its foundation in the fact that much of the work of women in the household, in subsistence agriculture and in the community is either unwaged or poorly paid for . . . the large amount of unwaged work that working-class or poor women do condemns them to a cycle of poverty, be it in rural or urban areas. One cannot understand poverty and exploitation without considering the impact of women's unwaged work on the economic system. (Antrobus 1995, 56)

Antrobus's observations resonate with earlier discussions of how U.S. Black women challenge prevailing U.S. understandings of income-generating work, unpaid family labor, and Black women's motherwork. Black women's poverty across diverse societies remains associated with their responsibility for children, often without sufficient male support.

One outcome of Black women's efforts to negotiate work, family, and motherhood is the emergence of Black mother-child families as a growing global phenomenon. Situating mother-child families in the context of the global political economy highlights the significance of advanced capitalism for understanding mother-child families in transnational context (Mencher and Okongwu 1993). In particular, important connections characterize the stage of capitalist development encountered by any group of people and the patterns of family organization that emerge within that group. Massive global economic restructuring since World War II suggests that shifting patterns of industrial development, their accompanying race- and gender-segmented labor markets, and associated outcomes such as migration, urbanization, and ghettoization all affect families. This literature has been used to examine issues of African-American political economy overall (see, e.g., Squires 1994), yet, despite its significance, it remains underutilized in regard to distinctive patterns of U.S. Black family organization. Historically higher rates of U.S. Black mother-child families and the accelerated increase of African-American mother-child families in the 1960s and 1970s may be better explained by attending to industrial and labor market patterns than to attributes of Black culture (Billingsley 1992).

Placing mother-child families maintained by Black women in African, Caribbean, Latin America, North American, and European nation-states in the context of global capitalist development demonstrates that this household formation emerges within groups that face similar political and economic challenges (Mencher and Okongwu 1993). One such challenge concerns how to adapt to the race- and gender-segmented labor markets that result from agribusiness, industrial flight, mechanization, and other workplace changes. The effects of diverse industrial patterns on household and family organization in the

Caribbean provides one view of how the intersections of race and class foster specific patterns of family organization (see, e.g., Momsen 1993). In these cases, the industrial mix characterizing an island's employment base produces gender-segmented labor markets. For example, in locales characterized by heavy industries that rely on male labor (e.g., oil refineries), rates of female-headedness are likely to be lower than in places whose industrial base relies more heavily on female labor (e.g., the garment industry). When men cannot get jobs and women can, men migrate, leaving their wives, girlfriends, and children behind.

Gender-specific patterns of migration arise in response to the creation and/or flight of economic opportunities in home communities. Moreover, industrial policy works with national policies concerning immigration. Work and family patterns among Mexican men and women who migrated to Mexican/U.S. border towns in the early 1980s reveal the complex ways in which industrial and immigration policies foster female-headed family households. One striking feature of this migration stream is that families migrated as units when they could no longer subsist within the capitalist market economies that incorporated their villages. While family groups migrated as units, employers on the Mexican side of the border hired women but not men. As a result, women and children remained in Mexico while men migrated into the United States in search of work. Over time, many men failed to return to their families left at the borders, leaving an increase in mother-child families in towns housing these border industries. In this case, employment policies on both sides of the Mexican/U.S. border fostered the emergence of female-headed households among a population previously lacking this form of family organization (Fernandez-Kelly 1983).

In some cases, national policies are overtly tied to the industrial policies that in turn stimulate increasing numbers of single mothers. Patterns of household formation under apartheid among Black South Africans are revealing in this regard. South African labor policies prior to apartheid's formal end in 1990 routinely fostered family dissolution (Martin 1984). Men and women were explicitly recruited to race- and gender-segmented labor markets that relied on their separation for profitability. For example, men in mining were expected to leave their wives and children and live in dormitories. The pass laws that proved so unpopular with Black South Africans emerged in part to regulate where male workers could work and live. In contrast, women were either left behind in the so-called homelands or forced to migrate to cities in search of domestic work to supplement inadequate male incomes. Neglected in this harsh system of labor regulation were Black South African children. Often they were forced to live illegally with their mothers in cities, were left in the "homelands," or were in other ways legally separated from their mothers (Kuzwayo 1985).

These combinations of economic opportunity and gender-specific responsibilities for Black women often result in recurring patterns of poverty that bear remarkable similarity from one culture to the next. Peggy Antrobus describes the cycle of poverty as it operates in Caribbean settings:

> The majority of the poor are women. While many of them have large families, they are not poor *because* they have many children. In fact, the reverse is true. They may have many children because they are poor, which means they have very limited options in terms of education, training and employment, and see children as a source of wealth, perhaps the only source of affirmation. For many, the cycle starts with early motherhood, while they are still at school. With the failure of the baby's father to support their child, the women often turn for support to other men, who leave her with yet more children. And so the cycle is repeated. Serial mating in the Caribbean has to be seen as a survival strategy. We have to thus consider women's poverty in the context of massive unemployment and the inability of many men to support their children. (Antrobus 1995, 56)

Descriptions of Black male-female relationships in many U.S. inner cities bear close resemblance to Antrobus's rendition of Caribbean societies. For example, rates of infant mortality in some Black inner-city neighborhoods match those of developing countries. In this regard, poor U.S. Black women, especially those in inner-city neighborhoods, may share more with women in the Caribbean and other Third World nations than with middle-class White and Black women in the United States (Brewer 1995).

These cases of how mother-child families respond to the race- and gender-segmented labor markets created by advanced, global capitalist development suggest that these factors may be more important in explaining family household structures in African-American communities than has commonly been believed to be the case (Collins 1997). The rapid increase in U.S. Black mother-child families in the 1960s and 1970s reflects industrial policies, labor market reorganization, and government policies (Brewer 1988, 1994). William Julius Wilson's (1987, 1996) work remains exemplary in linking patterns of family organization to the changing contours of economic opportunities in Black urban neighborhoods. Whereas Wilson has been criticized for his seeming neglect of contemporary institutionalized racism, his work highlights how growing joblessness among Black men in the 1960s and 1970s correlates with (but does not necessarily cause) increasing rates of African-American mother-child families. His work documents how the emergence of mother-child families among working-class African-Americans can be attributed in part to a changing political economy that disadvantaged U.S. Blacks. Whereas Wilson assumes a background of capitalist development and encourages greater attention to its effects, Rose Brewer (1995) criticizes capitalist development itself. Claiming that U.S. Black workers and families are at the center of a global economic restructuring process that has race- and gender-specific dimensions, Brewer points out, "There is not enough money in central cities to sustain either growth or two-parent family formation (1995, p. 167)."

Overall, the status of mother-child families in inner-city neighborhoods can be seen as an advanced case of what happens when male joblessness within an urban context becomes coupled with the absence of social welfare state supports or—the case for African-Americans—declining social welfare state supports. The myriad of social problems associated with Black women's poverty and Black women's responsibilities in caring for children—violence, drugs, adolescent pregnancy, and school dropout rates—transcend the U.S. context. Instead, U.S. Black women's experiences are an American version of an important transnational phenomenon.

Groups, Coalitions, and Transversal Politics

The complexities of African-American women's group experiences challenge simple hierarchies that routinely label affluent White men as global oppressors, poor Black women as powerless victims, with other groups arrayed in between. Instead, race, gender, class, citizenship status, sexuality, and age shape any group's social location in the transnational matrix of domination. These locations in turn frame group participation in a wide range of activities. Because groups occupying different positions display varying expressions of power, they have distinctive patterns of participation in shaping domination and resistance. Coming to terms with these diverse group histories provides a new foundation for developing a transversal politics.

Originally coined by Italian feminists, transversal politics emphasizes coalition building that takes into account the specific positions of "political actors." As Nira Yuval-Davis describes it, "Transversal dialogue should be based on the principles of rooting and shifting—that is, being centered in one's own experience while being empathetic to the differential positioning of the partners in the dialogue . . . the boundaries of the dialogue would be determined by the message rather than its messengers" (1997, 88). Within this framework, African-American women and other comparable groups constitute "political actors" or "messengers" aiming to craft a Black feminist "message." Within the assumptions of transversalism, participants bring with them a "rooting" in their own particular group histories, but at the same time realize that in order to engage in dialogue across multiple markers of difference, they must "shift" from their own centers.[1]

This recognition of how the experiences of Black women in Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, Europe, and Latin America demonstrate common differences generates several important issues concerning the contours and potential effectiveness of transversal politics. First, transversal politics requires a basic rethinking of cognitive frameworks used to understand the world and to change it. Transversal politics requires rejecting the binary thinking that has been so central to oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. Under such models, one must be one thing or the other—Black women are poor *either* because they are Black or because they are women. One is either a racist or an

antiracist individual, a sexist person or not, an oppressor group or oppressed one. In contrast, transversal politics requires *both/and* thinking. In such frameworks, all individuals and groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. Within U.S. history, for example, White women have been penalized by their gender but privileged by their race and citizenship status. Similarly, Black heterosexual women have been penalized by both race and gender yet privileged by their sexuality and citizenship status. In a transnational context, U.S. Black women are privileged by their citizenship yet disadvantaged by their gender. Depending on the context, individuals and groups may be alternately oppressors in some settings, oppressed in others, or simultaneously oppressing and oppressed in still others.

A second and related issue associated with transversal politics concerns definitions of how social groups are organized and maintained. Long-standing views of group organization see groups as fixed, unchanging, and with clear-cut boundaries. In contrast, the view advanced here retains historically constructed groups, but perceives these groups as being much more fluid. U.S. Black women's experiences illustrate this fluidity. Just as each individual African-American woman has a unique biography that reflects her experiences within intersecting oppressions, the experiences of U.S. Black women as a collectivity reflect a similar process.[2] Group boundaries are not fixed. Within the U.S. context, this more fluid notion of groups suggests that African-American women as a collectivity encounter a particular configuration of race, class, and gender politics that, while overlapping with those of some groups, resembling those of others, and differing from still others, remains distinctive to Black women. U.S. Black women's placement in a transnational context suggests a similar set of relationships. Thus, as an historically identifiable population, U.S. Black women are simultaneously privileged and penalized within a matrix of domination. Within any matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions, any specific social location where such systems meet or intersect generates distinctive group histories.

A third requirement of transversal politics concerns the internal dynamics of groups. For U.S. Black women, engaging in processes of group self-definition requires confronting the entire constellation of our history, not just a selective reading of it. Via these internal dialogues, African-American women potentially take one important step toward transversal politics. These private conversations required for group self-definitions can be affirming. For example, the safe spaces that African-American women carve out for self-definitions has been designed to protect Black women from external assaults. The mirrors that Black women hold up to one another in such spaces can be affirming. But the existence of these spaces does not mean that ugliness does not occur in safe spaces. As Black lesbians point out, safe spaces are safer for some than for others.

Moreover, what quickly becomes apparent is that these internal processes of self-definition cannot continue indefinitely without engaging in relationships with other groups. Since groups are not hermetically sealed entities, coming to

terms with a particular group history leads to the realization that groups can neither define themselves in isolation nor resist social injustice on their own. At best, each group possesses a partial perspective on its own experiences and on those of other groups. The critical self-reflection and community organizing accomplished via coming to terms with one's own group history builds the foundation for effective coalition. For example, it's not enough to see that "Nigerian and U.S. Black women have been victimized" and to build an alliance solely on the foundation of shared victimization. The reality is that while Black women's victimization in these two settings may be similar, it is not the same. Instead, coalitions are built via recognition of one's own group position and seeing how the social location of groups has been constructed in conjunction with one another. Empathy, not sympathy, becomes the basis of coalition.

This recognition stimulates a fourth issue associated with transversal politics, namely, recognizing that group histories are relational. It is important to remember that U.S. Black women's group history remains interdependent with those of other groups—patterns characterizing one group's experiences are intimately linked to those of other groups. For example, in the U.S. context, the social construction of U.S. White womanhood as pure, fragile, and in need of protection from the assaults of "violent" African-American men required the use of differential patterns of institutionalized sexual violence against both African-American women and men. The transnational context reveals similar contradictions. U.S. Black women may encounter state violence within the United States, but U.S. nation-state foreign policies inflict comparable violence upon women outside U.S. borders. Both domestically and transnationally, through threats of violence or actual violence, groups actively police each other to ensure that domination is maintained.

Examining these interdependent group histories often reveals painful contradictions. It becomes more difficult, for example, for U.S. White women to retain moral credibility as survivors of sexual violence without simultaneously condemning the benefits that accompany racial violence enacted on their behalf. Similarly, claims by some African-American men that racial oppression is more fundamental than gender oppression sound hollow in a context of shirked responsibility for their violence against African-American women. Both cases reflect how White women and African-American men *both* experience the victimization that can serve as a foundation for building empathy with other groups, *and* bear some responsibility for systemic violence targeted to other groups. These examples suggest that moral positions as survivors of one expression of systemic violence become eroded in the absence of accepting responsibility for other expressions of systemic violence.

This recognition of relational group histories leads to a fifth issue associated with transversal politics, namely, the acknowledgment that coalitions with some groups are not possible. This is because while group experiences are interdependent, they are not equivalent. Even though, for example, U.S. White men and

African-American women both have group histories that reflect patterns of privilege and oppression, these groups are far from equal in the transnational matrix of domination. Instead, each group reflects a distinctive constellation of victimization, access to positions of authority, unearned benefits, and traditions of resistance. While the histories of both groups reflect all dimensions, the patterns within each group will differ based on the overall placement of the group in relation to other race/gender groups, as well as variations within the group stemming from class, citizenship status, sexuality, and age.

In this sense, the histories of U.S. White men and African-American women are linked, socially construct each other, share certain features, but are not equivalent. White men clearly have power over African-American women, but the relationship between the groups is more complex than a simple hierarchy of White male privilege that victimizes African-American women. The relationship between the two groups is certainly this, but it is much more than simply this. Because of this complexity, coalitions with some groups of White men are necessary for some issues, but virtually impossible on others. Women of African descent from and within Black diasporic societies share comparable crosscutting relationships. In this model, there are no absolute oppressors or victims. Instead, historically constructed categories create intersecting and crosscutting group histories that provide changing patterns of group participation in domination and resistance to it.

This non-equivalency fosters a final important dimension of transversal politics—the dynamic nature of coalitions. Coalitions ebb and flow based on the perceived saliency of issues to group members. This non-equivalency of group experience means that groups find some oppressions more salient than others. Patterns of common differences among U.S. Black women and women within and from Black diasporic societies speak to the saliency of one form of oppression over another across different social settings. Race, class, and gender represent the three axes of oppression that African-American women routinely identify as being most important to them. But these systems and the economic, political, and ideological conditions that support them may not be seen as the most fundamental oppressions by women of African descent transnationally. This is one important feature of the matrix of domination—whereas all systems operate in framing the experiences of Black women transnationally, different configurations of such systems have saliency for Black women differently placed within them.

Overall, Black feminist knowledge and the transversal politics that might guide Black women's activism share important features. Both rely on paradigms of intersectionality to conceptualize intersecting oppressions and group behavior in resisting them. Both are collaboratively constructed, making it virtually impossible to extract either from actual power relations. Both exhibit moments of collaboration and confrontation necessary for constructing knowledge and building coalitions. Despite the tensions between sameness (race/gender intersections) and difference (class, citizenship, sexuality, and age) that distinguish the experiences of Black women in the Caribbean, the United States, Africa, Latin America, and Europe, it is important to recognize that women of African descent remain differentially placed within an overarching transnational context characterized by a global gendered apartheid. As a result, dialogues among African-American women and other historically identifiable oppressed groups should benefit from the multiple angles of vision that accompany multiple group standpoints. These dialogues not only promise to shed light on current issues within U.S. Black feminism, they potentially inform new directions for transversal politics.