The Creation of an African-American Counterpublic: The Impact of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality on Black Radicalism during the Black Freedom Movement, 1965-1981

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Introduction:

For cultural critic Harold Cruse, the mid-1960s constituted a turning point for the development of black political thought in the United States. In Cruse’s seminal work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, where he famously delivered a devastating critique of black political thinkers, he argued, “The Negro movement is at an impasse precisely because it lacks a real functional corps of intellectuals able to confront and deal perceptively with American realities on a level that social conditions demand.”¹ In 1967, Cruse’s statement was at least half correct. The black movement definitely seemed to be at the crossroads. By this time, the black political mood had shifted from the dominant liberal-integrationist visions that black Americans such as Martin Luther King, Jr. had once advocated to the nationalist-tinged black power idea that Stokely Carmichael had popularized a year earlier. Black Americans in Newark violently responded to an incident of police brutality in July of that year.² The revolutionary nationalist Black Panther Party had taken its place as one of the leading black political organizations in the United States.

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Even the title of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s newly published book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* posed the question of uncertainty for the movement. But was the black movement at an impasse because of its lack of intellectuals?

Cruse’s claim that the black movement lacked “a real functional corps of intellectuals able to confront and deal perceptively with Americans realities…” may be too far reaching and is too grounded in his own political sympathies. Cruse structured his argument in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* around a critical analysis of the integrationist/nationalist dichotomy. He criticized integrationists on a variety of fronts including their tendency to turn a blind eye to intracommunal relations within a class-stratified black community. Cruse also criticized black power advocates for their failure to develop adequate theories grounded in black history. Cruse demanded black activists engage in cultural activism based upon the black American experience. Cruse’s conclusions led him to paint a bleak picture of black political thought during this period:

It was historically unfortunate that the American Negro created no social theorists to back up his long line of activist leaders, charismatic deliverers, black redemptionists, and moral suasionists. With a few perceptive and original thinkers, the Negro movement conceivably could long ago have aided in reversing the backsliding of the United States towards the moral negation of its great promise as a new nation of nations. Instead the American Negro has, unwittingly, been forced to share in many of the corrupted values of the society—not enough, to be sure, to cancel out completely his inherent potential for social change. However, the intellectual horizons of the black

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4 Cruse, 13, 557.

5 For his elaboration on the importance of cultural activism see Cruse, 96-111.
intelligentsia have been so narrowed in scope and banalized by the American corrosion that Negro creativity has been diminishing since the 1920s.\(^6\)

While Cruse contributed the concept of cultural political activism to the debate regarding black political thought during the 1960s, he underestimated black activist-intellectuals’ abilities to express and test new ideas and to build and retain the intellectual energy needed for the Black Freedom Movement to move forward. Stokely Carmichael and political scientist Charles V. Hamilton published their explanation of black power, entitled *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, in 1967 where they aspired to outline Carmichael’s vision of a black power politics grounded in black American’s political experiences and based upon political experimentation. They also included a rebuke of interracial politics and integration that would have made Cruse agree, at least momentarily. In King’s book, *Where Do We Go From Here*, he too questioned white Americans’ and the Federal Government’s commitment to racial justice and couched his outline for black political action in America’s tortured history of race relations.

To be fair, Cruse did acknowledge his rush to publish *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* in his fear of the work losing a sense of relevancy. While we may criticize Cruse for his haste, we cannot fault him for his inability to render correct predictions. Since *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* appeared during the height of the production of what sociologist Steven Steinberg calls the “scholarship of confrontation,” Cruse could not have foreseen the proliferation of complex, yet imperfect, visions of black freedom

\(^6\) Cruse, 565.
and liberation. He could not have anticipated the wave of intellectual work that black feminists produced criticizing black and white men, as well as white feminists, from various ideological stripes. Ultimately Cruse’s willingness to raise questions about black activist-intellectuals’ politics in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* was significant during this period because he took his contemporaries seriously. Maybe the state of black intellectuals was not so bleak as Cruse would suggest?

This thesis analyzes the role that black radical activist-intellectuals played in creating and articulating the values, discourses, and rhetoric of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Feminist Movements. In this study I will argue that one should view these formations as intellectual and discursive movements where participants and organizations consciously imagined and developed new ways of analyzing American society. Moreover, black radical activist-intellectuals created movement institutions and a variety of forms of texts including speeches, fiction, non-fiction works, poetry, manifestos, and organizational publications that transmitted their political values and

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7 Steinberg’s “scholarship of confrontation” refers to the number of publications that black radicals produced in response to American race relations during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Steven Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), x, 69-70.

8 This study draws upon Lynda Mead’s definition and insights regarding discourse: “‘discourse’ is used…to specify a particular form of language with its own rules and conventions and institutions within which the discourse is produced and circulated. In this way, it is possible to speak of a medical discourse…which refers to the special language of medicine, the form of knowledge it produces…” Lynda Mead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 4. This study also assumes that language can be used as a way to exclude and discipline individuals who do not fit into established parameters of discourse. See Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971 & 1972). Rhetoric, in the context of this thesis, refers to the manner in which an individual seeks to persuade others. This includes the use of metaphors, tropes, and symbols in conveying one’s message. See James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005), 6-27; Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1996), 35-36.
visions. In doing so, various black radicals such as the male leadership of the Black Panther Party, Martin Luther King, Jr. and black feminists contributed to the formation of a modern black counterpublic. Counterpublics, according to philosopher Nancy Fraser, are public spheres created and inhabited by “subordinated social groups” where “members…invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” and contest “the exclusionary norms” of the American public.⁹ Thus, this thesis maintains that one should see the post-war Black Freedom Movement as a clash of ideas, not just between black activists and the supporters of de jure and de facto racial oppression, but also among and within black counterpublics vying for legitimacy in the larger black American public as well.¹⁰ So, as I acknowledge the ideological diversity and potentially constraining nature of the black counterpublic, I consider the Panthers’, King’s, and black feminists’ counterpublics as three distinct publics within a larger African-American counterpublic. By analyzing their texts—speeches, political writings, and on occasion interviews—I will demonstrate how certain discourses and rhetorical expressions served as sites of contestation. This study ultimately assumes that the practices of constructing ideologies, political discourse and

⁹ This study takes the term “counterpublic” from Nancy Fraser’s “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Social Text, No. 25/26 (1990), 61 & 67. In his comprehensive survey of 20th century black political thought, Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies, political scientist Michael C. Dawson locates the formation of the black American counterpublic in the 19th century with the establishment of institutions and publications such as the Negro Convention movement and Frederick Douglass’s North Star. Michael C. Dawson, Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 51.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, I conceive of this intellectual movement developing and unfolding from 1965-1981.
arguments, and debating means and ends to their movements supplied vital energy to their movements.

This examination also contends that categorizing and dichotomizing the various strains of black political thought during this period is insufficient; one must take into account how these subjects drew on particular discourses of difference—race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality—and rhetorical styles to construct and articulate their visions. The Black Panthers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and black feminists such as Frances Beal often used particular ideas about class, gender, sexuality, and nationalism to create and deliver their political arguments. While many female black activist-intellectuals confronted hegemonic ideas of gender and sexuality, many male black activist-intellectuals such as the Panthers, Maulana Karenga’s cultural nationalist organization, US, and King tapped into dominant American notions of class, gender, sexuality, and nation. Thus, by using class, gender, sexuality, and nation as lenses of analysis, we can see how oft-perceived divergent ideologies drew from and negotiated, dominant American political discourse and interacted with one another. To understand how these thinkers constructed and expressed themselves, we must analyze their public texts—public speeches, writings and interviews.

This study covers a broad range of black activist-intellectuals and incorporates the insights from a number of scholars who theorize the discursive aspects of difference. Chapter 1, “Black Power Must be Viewed as a Projection of Sovereignty,” will investigate the Panther male leadership’s—Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver—collective political imagination. In this chapter, I argue that this group of black
male activist-intellectuals (re)imagined the black community as a dispersed black colony, gendered citizenship within their imagined nation, and engaged in militarized heterosexuality as a way of demonizing their opponents. This chapter builds upon Nikhil Pal Singh’s interpretation of Cleaver’s term, the “projection of sovereignty” by elaborating on the concept as a “process of categorization.” I maintain that Singh’s interpretation of the Panthers’ projection of sovereignty is limited because he only focuses on the Panthers’ guerrilla political theater. I also contend that their projection of sovereignty included the Panthers’ gendered notions of citizenship in their efforts to categorize members of the dispersed black colony. Here, I employ Cynthia Enloe’s concept of “patriarchal nationalism” to illustrate the manner in which the Panthers represented black women in their texts. This chapter also draws upon Joane Nagel’s “militarized heterosexuality” to discuss the methods in which the Panthers distinguished themselves from their adversaries.

Chapter 2, “Building the World House: How Martin Luther King, Jr. Transcended Civic and Racial Nationalism,” analyzes how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. incorporated the rhetoric of black “racial nationalism”—black power discourse—into his political arguments between 1966 and 1968 as his thought evolved from his rhetoric of

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“civic nationalism”—the liberal integrationist-based “beloved community”—to his radical democratic socialist idea of the “world house.” This chapter draws from Gary Gerstle’s concepts of civic and racial nationalism as a basis for conceiving King’s political position in between and beyond liberal-integrationist and black power. I will demonstrate that Gerstle’s conception of King as a civic nationalist is incomplete because King appropriated certain aspects of black power discourse such as its idea of liberation. King also seemed to accept the masculinism embedded in the Black Power Movement. Ultimately, I will argue that King transcended both civic and racial nationalism as King’s thought and expression changed over time.

The final chapter—“‘A Determination to Touch and Unify’: Black Women’s Creation and Use of a Black Feminist Emancipatory Discourse”—examines how black women such as novelist Toni Cade Bambara, civil rights attorney Pauli Murray, and activist Mary Ann Weathers sought to construct what feminist philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain calls an “emancipatory” discourse that could liberate all black Americans.


15 Historian Steve Estes defines masculinism in his work on black masculinity during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement: “Masculinism embraces the notion that men are more powerful than women, that they should have control over their own lives and authority over others. Masculinist rhetoric uses the traditional power wielded by men to woo supporters and attack opponents. Steve Estes, I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

16 Civic nationalism, as Gerstle characterizes in his book American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century comprises America’s core political ideals—fundamental equality for all human beings, one’s inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, democratic government based upon the consent of the governed, and “a kind of democratic universalism that can take root anywhere.” Racial nationalism, according to Gerstle, is the alternative political discourse that “conceives of America in ethnoracial terms, as a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherited fitness in self-government.” See Gary Gerstle, American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). 4.
During the 1970s, black feminists confronted discourses and counterpublics competing for their allegiance. Many disputed black male nationalists’ and American policy makers’ negative stereotypes of black women as “castrating matriarchs” or the source of black plight. They also contested the feminist notion of “sisterhood” by arguing for more complex approaches to analyzing American society and organizing women for social change. Alternative methods of societal analysis, according to black feminists such as activist-intellectual Frances Beal, accounted for the relationship between the various forms of difference such as race, gender, and sexuality with power. However, black women’s intellectual, discursive, and rhetorical practices were not merely reactionary and oppositional. This chapter culminates in an examination of black women’s comprehensive visions for social change during the 1970s.¹⁷

Despite the persistent growth of Civil Rights and Black Power historiography, little scholarship on the Civil Rights and Black Power Eras (1945-1975) focuses on the intellectual and discursive aspects of the various movement formations.¹⁸ And an even smaller amount interrogates the ways in which black activist-intellectuals used and


contended with categories of difference in their political expressions. Concentrating on these issues not only serves to fill this gap, it pushes scholars and laypeople to consider participants in the movement as not merely activists following leaders or working anonymously in political organizations, but as conscious intellectuals. Many were not intellectuals in the traditional sense. But in response to America’s history of racial oppression, black radical activist-intellectuals come to resemble what Antonio Gramsci called “organic intellectuals.”

Although some black activist-intellectuals acquired formal educational training, many of the activist-intellectuals considered in this thesis created their knowledge from operating within their local milieu, their cumulative experiences in the movement, and the political discourses prevailing during their unique moment. In their abilities to draw from their experience and the wealth of knowledge produced and reproduced by other activist-intellectuals in their counterpublics, they successfully constructed alternative societal analyses and emancipatory “languages of dissent” that simultaneously critiqued American society and advanced radical theories for social change.

19 Nikhil Pal Singh’s Black is a Country is instructive for understanding how various African Americans drew on discourses of race and nation in their struggles for freedom. Robin D.G. Kelley successfully presents an overview of the “freedom dreams” of various black feminists in Freedom Dreams. However, no scholarly analysis of the Panthers has considered how the Panther leadership gendered and sexualized their ideas of citizenship and political rhetoric. Thomas Jackson’s From Civil Rights to Human Rights is the most comprehensive analysis of King’s political thought to date. However, he is more focused on demonstrating King’s radicalism throughout his life rather than exploring his nuanced, and often gendered, shifts in political expression.


This thesis uses an array of primary and secondary sources to analyze the impact of difference on the discourse and rhetoric of post-war black radicalism. This analysis engages the public texts of Panther leaders such as Newton, Seale, and Cleaver, Martin Luther King, Jr., and various black women such as novelist and activist Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and lesser known women such as activist Linda LaRue. These texts include speeches, sermons, interviews, and published books. This study does not seek to reconstruct the biographies of these subjects exclusively as much as to interrogate the intellectual and imaginary landscape of black radicals at the time.
Chapter One:

“Black Power Must Be Viewed as a Projection of Sovereignty”: Class, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation in the Black Panther Party’s Radical Political Discourse and Rhetoric

On May 2, 1967, a caravan of cars arrived at the California state capitol in Sacramento. To the astonishment of Governor Ronald Reagan and other bystanders, a group of black men and women from the Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Self Defense emerged from their vehicles loading ammunition into their rifles and shotguns.¹ As Reagan informed the stationed law enforcement of the appearance of armed blacks, the contingent of Panthers, led by Party Chairman Bobby Seale, marched with their guns in the air to the stairs of the capital building. Upon reaching the stairs, Seale proceeded to fulfill part of the Minister of Defense Huey P. Newton’s instructions. In what looked like a hostile takeover of the capitol, the mission for the Panthers was to protest the murder of Denzil Dowell by local law enforcement and to dramatize the potential negative impact of a gun bill that conservative Republican Donald Mulford planned to introduce to the

state assembly. This gun bill would prohibit the Panthers from executing their armed
patrols of the Oakland Police Department. Thus, with guns in hand and in front of a
mesmerized press, Bobby Seale and the Panthers delivered a message, authored by
Newton, to the black community on behalf of the new revolutionary vanguard of the
Black Freedom Movement and to the United States on behalf of the dispersed black
communities of America. In Newton’s “Mandate Number One,” he did not just intend to
inform black Americans of Mulford’s attempt to curtail the rights of Panthers, he also
notified the black community that they were next in line—after the Japanese during
World War II and the Vietnamese—to feel the brunt of American imperialism.
Ultimately, this message was a clarion call for the black communities of America, in
Newton’s words read aloud by Seale, to “…rise up as one man to halt the progression of
a trend that leads inevitably to their total destruction.”

The Panthers’ march on the capitol marked a significant moment in the history of
the Party. Founded in the North Oakland poverty center in October 1966, Huey P.
Newton and Bobby Seale searched for ways to organize black men in the Oakland black
community for political action. The spring 1967 protest attracted the attention needed to
mobilize the black communities in Oakland and America to their cause. The Panthers
armed march captured the imaginations of urban black Americans and stirred the anxiety
of white politicians and law enforcement. As Newton remarked in his book,
*Revolutionary Suicide*, the event proved to be a “turning point in police perceptions” and

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3 Seale, 59.
“even those who did not hear the complete message saw the arms, and this conveyed
enough to Black people.”

Within months, Panther membership ballooned and the Party
grew from a local group to a national organization. It seemed, for that moment, that
Malcolm X’s prophecy of armed black men standing up for their communities had come
to pass.

The 1967 protest also represented a bolder expression of black nationalism in the
United States. While Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael only spoke of defending black
communities in previous years, the Panthers launched a preemptive (rhetorical) strike on
the American political establishment. They used their weapons to dramatize the

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4 Ibid., 150.

5 According to scholars Judson L. Jeffries and Ryan Nissim-Sabat, the Panthers created chapters in over
thirty cities. See Judson L. Jeffries, ed. Comrades: A Local History of The Black Panther Party

6 While there are various strains of black nationalism, the task of defining and characterizing the varieties
of black nationalism has proven to be a difficult task. As a result, many scholars have contested the
academic definitions of black nationalism. Political Scientist Dean E. Robinson divides the black
nationalist tradition into two periods—“classical” and “modern.” The black nationalists active during the
classical period (1850-1925), such as Martin Delany, advocated for a separate black nation-state. Many
black nationalists during this era also drew from white Christian discourses of civilization to support their
arguments. Historian Patrick Rael also argues that black nationalism during the Antebellum period was an
northern, urban, and bourgeois phenomenon and included the aspirations of black Americans to create their
own independent institutions. Black nationalism during Robinson’s “modern” period (1926 to the present)
included a diverse range of ideologies and tactics that included the formation of a black nation-state,
creation of black social, political, and cultural institutions, as well as community control of local
institutions and social agencies. The same could be illustrated when examining black power since Stokely
Carmichael ambiguously defined the concept in 1966. Consequently, black power discourse was a flexible
concept that accommodated a variety of political outlooks. Dean E. Robinson, Black Nationalism in
American Politics and Thought (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2, 20;
Patrick Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North (Chapel Hill: The University of

7 It should be noted that the Panthers were not the only group to employ the use of weapons in their
activism. In fact, there is a long tradition of armed self-defense among black Americans in their struggles
for civil and human rights. See Timothy Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of
Black Power (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Lance Hill, The Deacons for
Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina
government’s impending action against the Party and the black community in general. Their willingness to use weapons, either as an organizing tool, as a means to defend themselves, or as a threat against their adversaries, underscored the gravity of their nationalist politics. The contingent of Panthers at the California state capitol risked their lives for the cause of the black nation, their “imagined community.” The Panthers forced state authorities to take them seriously with their use of vitriolic rhetoric, guns, and armed patrols, which threatened to disrupt their social and political order.

Newton’s “Mandate Number One” read aloud at the 1967 protest also revealed the gendered nature of the Panthers’ nationalist discourse. The last sentence in “Mandate Number One” is revealing: “We believe that the Black communities of America must rise up as one man to halt the progression of a trend that leads inevitably to their total destruction.” During the first two years of the Panthers’ existence, Cleaver, Seale, and Newton described revolutionary political action—especially the armed self defense of black communities—as a means for black men to assert their masculinity in the face of the dehumanizing, and thus emasculating, conditions of urban poverty and racism. Therefore, Newton’s representation of the Black communities of America as “one man,”

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8 In fact, Newton instructed Seale to return fire if law enforcement fired upon the group. Newton told Seale to “use whatever means necessary to defend himself” in the event of violence. See Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 149; Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983), 7.

9 Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 149.
along with the Panthers’ characterizations of the United States as the “White Mother Country” accentuated their gendered nationalist preoccupations.¹⁰

This chapter interrogates the Panthers’ early ideas of nation, class, gender, and sexuality through an analysis of the Party’s conception of the “black dispersed colony.” For the purposes of this study, I consider Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver collectively as the “mind” of the organization from the beginnings in 1966 through 1969.¹¹ Moreover, they were the most instrumental in creating the Panther counterpublic.¹² Newton and Seale occupied the most prominent positions in the organization.¹³ Newton and Seale appointed Cleaver to oversee the production of the Panthers’ weekly newspaper, *The Black Panther*. Besides the books and essays Cleaver, Seale, and Newton produced, *The Black Panther* served as the organization’s chief instrument for disseminating their ideas. These three organic intellectuals supplied the Panthers with the ideas and language needed to create and articulate the Party’s goals and programs. Significantly, the Panthers’ aspirations for black self-determination as a nation within the United States reflected the discourse of anti-colonialism. In particular, Eldridge Cleaver’s 1968 essay, “The Land Question and Black Liberation,” deployed this

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¹¹ I choose to focus on these three years because this period constituted the organization’s intellectually formative years.

¹² Nikhil Pal Singh also incorporates Fraser’s idea of the counterpublic in an article on the Panthers that he published in an edited collection of the organization. Singh, however, only emphasizes the discursive implications of Fraser’s idea. He contends that scholars should see the Panthers’ counterpublic as explicitly a “counter-nationalism.” See, Jones, 67 & 95.

¹³ Newton and Seale decided that Newton would serve as the Minister of Defense and Seale fulfilled the role of Chairman. Seale, *Seize the Time*, 62.
rhetoric when he called for a United Nations-sponsored plebiscite to allow black Americans (the black dispersed colony) the right to exercise national self-determination. Cleaver linked the Panthers’ conception of black power to anti-colonialism when he argued that “black power must be viewed as a projection of sovereignty, an embryonic sovereignty that black people can focus on and through which they can make distinctions between themselves and their enemies…”

Yet the imagined black nation brought into being through “the projection of sovereignty” took its shape through particular notions of class, gender, and sexuality.

This chapter argues that one cannot understand the Panthers’ nationalism—their projection of sovereignty—without investigating how ideas about gender, sexuality, and class shaped their discourse and rhetoric. The Panthers conceived of citizenship in the black dispersed colony in classed and gendered terms. Initially, they argued that the “brothers on the block”—lower class black men living in cities or the urban “lumpen proletariat”—represented the Panthers’ desired constituency. Their preoccupation with the urban male lumpen did not prevent them from considering black women’s role in the Party and revolution. This chapter argues that the Panthers practiced what scholar Cynthia Enloe calls “patriarchal nationalism” because they initially envisioned women in

14 Scheer, 56. In fact, scholars Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman confirm Cleaver’s projection of sovereignty as a form of nationalism. Spencer and Wollman’s definition of nationalism is similar to Cleaver’s explanation of the projection of sovereignty: “…all forms of nationalism are processes of categorization that create and reproduce enemies, strangers and those who do not fit inside the nation, just as they seek to provide a sense of ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ for those included inside the nation.” Spencer and Wollman, 2.

15 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 81; Seale, 30.
supportive roles. The Panthers heavily emphasized ideas of sexuality in their nationalist discourse and rhetoric.

Recently, there has been increased scholarly interest in the Panthers’ political ideas. Nikhil Pal Singh’s treatment of the Panthers’ radical politics in Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy, successfully highlights the complex subtleties of Panther nationalism. Singh characterizes Cleaver’s formulation of the “projection of sovereignty” as “a form of insurgent visibility and a performance of black anti-citizenship.” His characterization of the Panthers’ politics is significant. However, Singh’s interpretation focuses too much on the performative aspects of the Panthers discourse. For the Panthers, projecting sovereignty represented more than just political theater. The Panthers’ struggles were intellectual and their political discourse and rhetoric reflected their desires to achieve real black self-determination.

The focus on the relationships between class, gender, sexuality, and nation has been minimal in Panther scholarship despite the amount of work published on Panther womanhood and the organization’s gendered politics. Singh’s interpretation of the

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16 Enloe, 62.
17 Singh, 206.
Panthers’ projection of sovereignty also fails to seriously consider whether or not ideas of gender and sexuality affected the Panthers’ rhetorical performances. Steve Estes’s chapter on the Panthers’ masculinist discourse in his book, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*, remains the best treatment of Panther manhood and womanhood to date. Although Estes highlights Newton’s and Cleaver’s gendered rhetoric, he does not question whether their gendered discourse emanated from their ideas about and rhetorical uses of nationalism.

To prove that the Panthers’ projection of sovereignty represented more than performance, this chapter assesses Cleaver’s, Newton’s, and Seale’s conceptions of the black nation as the dispersed black colony and their use of anti-colonial rhetoric. Then, I consider how the Panthers gendered their notions of citizenship and the role that patriarchal nationalism played in the Panther leader’s conceptions of black women’s roles in the movement/nation. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of the Panthers’ militarized heterosexuality. Their militarized heterosexuality included the sexualized depictions of themselves, as black men and women, and especially their enemies. The Panthers engaged in a rhetorical politics of emasculation in their efforts to demonize the state. This discussion of the various aspects of the Panthers’ nationalist imagination contributes to the scholarship of the Black Panther Party, black masculinity during the Black Power Movement, and constructions of black nationalism.
The Black Panthers Imagine the Dispersed Black Colony

Though the Panthers are largely known for their militant stance against police harassment and brutality, they boasted one of the more dynamic critiques of American society in terms of race and class during the late 1960s. In their counterpublic, Seale, Newton, and Cleaver created a political ideology and discourse that drew from a variety of sources which included Marxist-Leninism, black nationalism, Maoism, and Fanonian revolutionary nationalism. The Panthers also tapped into anti-colonial discourse popularized by Malcolm X, Harold Cruse, and Stokely Carmichael during the 1960s that imagined America’s black community as a colonial entity. The discursive and rhetorical revisioning of these spaces was crucial to projecting sovereignty and forming their counterpublic as it created an imagined territory for which the Panthers in particular, and black Americans in general, could base their claims for national liberation.

Nationalists often base their appeals for nationhood on a group’s historical ties to a particular territory. Earlier generations of black nationalists such as Universal Improvement Association’s (UNIA) Marcus Garvey and Nation of Islam’s (NOI) Elijah Muhammad, grounded their nationalist arguments on black Americans’ connections to Africa or their contributions to the economic development of the United States. Cleaver’s

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20 Spencer and Wollman, 86.
conception of projecting sovereignty, however, allowed the Panthers to evade the problems faced by Garvey’s and Muhammad’s nation-building efforts that included black American’s lack of territory and institutional power. Instead Cleaver separated the Panthers’ nationalist ideas from Garvey’s and Muhammad’s by redefining the black community as a colonized and political entity in a manner similar to Malcolm X and Carmichael.

In the 1960s black American intellectual-activists such as Cruse, Malcolm X, and Carmichael joined the chorus in the Third World demanding independence from imperialist powers.\(^{21}\) Drawing from this discursive context, Malcolm X and Carmichael conceived of the areas predominately populated by black Americans as their sovereign space exploited by American imperialism.\(^{22}\) The Panthers sought to build upon Malcolm X’s and Carmichael’s arguments of black urban sovereignty. Assuming racial segregation created multiple black communities in America, Newton, Cleaver, and Seale saw these separate communities as one linked by the history of racial oppression.\(^{23}\) The three Panther leaders crafted rhetorical and discursive arguments emphasizing black American’s colonial past and present as well as their aspirations for black people to assert their sovereignty in the face of racial oppression.

\(^{21}\) According to Singh, forty nations won their independence between the years, 1945-1960. Singh, 184-85.


The Panthers used the language of anti-colonialism as a lens to understand American history and the current status of black Americans in the United States during the late 1960s. Both Newton and Cleaver imagined the historical circumstances of enslavement and subsequent racial oppression as legacies of colonialism. In, “We are Nationalists and Internationalists,” Newton argued that the United States—and the West—colonized black Americans with the “same tools” it used in Latin America, Africa, and Saigon. In 1968 articles, Newton and Cleaver both claimed that Western imperialism, and specifically the United States, used blacks’ labor as raw materials during the period of enslavement and post-slavery racial segregation to further national economic development.  

The Panthers also expressed their arguments against liberal-integrationism in this discourse. Integration, according to Cleaver and Newton, was unrealistic for black Americans because the circumstances of racism and the black person’s status as a perpetual laborer marked them as second-class citizens. Consequently, the Panthers argued that black communities had few options to address their problems. First, as stated in the Panthers’ “Ten Point Plan,” the United States, as a principle member of the United Nations (U.N.), could recognize the Panthers’ call for black communities to vote in a

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25 Here, the Panthers and prominent liberal-integrationist spokespersons such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. disagreed about the merits and meanings of racial integration. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate that King linked the liberal concept of racial integration with the black power notion of liberation. For King, racial integration was a prerequisite for black liberation. See Chapter 2 for a more detailed explanation.
U.N. sponsored plebiscite to determine the status of their nationhood.\textsuperscript{26} This proposal, according to Cleaver, and reminiscent of Malcolm X, would allow black people to decide whether nationhood or integration could solve the race problem in the United States. This point usually goes unnoticed as most Americans focused on what Cleaver designated as the second option for black independence: guerrilla warfare. Newton, Seale, and Cleaver finally contended that black Americans were living within and fighting against the “mother” country from the inside.\textsuperscript{27}

The Panthers also employed anti-colonial rhetoric to describe the agents and the institutions of the state. Newton, Seale and Cleaver often imagined law enforcement as a “occupying force” in black communities.\textsuperscript{28} In, “We are Nationalists and Internationalists,” Newton argued that workers in the federal government’s War on Poverty programs acted as colonial representatives within the black colony.\textsuperscript{29} This facet of the Panthers’ revolutionary nationalist rhetoric was significant because it allowed them to recast the black liberation movement within the United States as one not just for U.S. citizenship, but as a movement that considers the possibilities of black liberation from American imperialism and colonization. Their anti-colonialism also enabled the Panthers

\textsuperscript{26} The tenth point of the Panther program reads: “We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national identity.” Eric Foner, \textit{The Black Panthers Speak}, (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002), 3.


\textsuperscript{28} Seale, 65; Newton, \textit{Revolutionary Suicide}, 120.

\textsuperscript{29} Newton, “We are Nationalists and Internationalists,” 567.
to claim that black Americans should see themselves as part of the wave of liberation movements abroad.

Newton, Cleaver, and Seale frequently expressed solidarity with revolutionary movements abroad in their speeches and writings. The Panthers conveyed this sentiment when Seale proclaimed that the United States was “waging a war of genocide against Vietnam” from the steps of the California capitol in 1967.\textsuperscript{30} In \textit{Soul on Ice}, Cleaver, argued explicitly that black Americans and the Vietnamese fighting American forces in Vietnam shared the same fate. According to Cleaver, if the Vietnamese could ward off American forces, then black Americans could “live in dignity and respect.”\textsuperscript{31} When the revolutionary nationalist organization, Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), criticized the Panthers for openly organizing against law enforcement instead of engaging in an underground political struggle, Newton pointed to the models of revolution that Fidel Castro, Mao Tse-tung, and Fanon carried out or advocated for in Cuba, China, and Algeria.\textsuperscript{32} These examples could be interpreted in the Singhian framework emphasizing the Panthers’ performative anti-citizenship because the Panthers seem to, at least rhetorically, aligned themselves with America’s adversaries. However, I maintain the Panthers’ anti-colonial revolutionary nationalist and internationalist rhetoric highlighted the Panthers’ desires to participate in a global struggle against Western imperialism and

\textsuperscript{30} Seale, 161-62.


for actual black self-determination in the United States. In fact, Newton offered to send “an undetermined number of troops” to aid the National Liberation Front and Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam in their “fight against American imperialism” in 1970.33

The Panthers’ calls for the UN to either recognize the sovereignty of the black dispersed colony or grant black Americans the chance to determine their national status also underscores the argument that the Panthers were not just engaging in performance. By articulating arguments for national self-determination grounded in the discourse of anti-colonialism, the Panthers hoped to elicit enough sympathy from other UN member nations to throw the status of black Americans into question. The Panthers’ attempts to appeal to the UN were not extraordinary since other black organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had also tried to take their fight against racial oppression to the UN. However, unlike the NAACP, the Panthers were not as concerned with using the UN to achieve first-class citizenship in the United States. Instead, their intentions were consistent with their goals of national liberation.34


34 The Panthers effort to draw international attention to the plight of black Americans was the latest attempt by a black organization to involve the UN in the black liberation struggle. The NAACP, National Negro Congress, and the Civil Rights Congress were among many black political organizations who sought redress from the UN. See Carol Anderson, Eyes on the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1945-1955 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Penny Von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).
The Panthers also gendered their arguments for global solidarity among people of color. Newton’s rhetoric in “We are Nationalists and Internationalists” underscored Benedict Anderson’s interpretation of nationalism as “horizontal comradeship.” In the essay, “Nationalists and Internationalists,” Newton contended that the Panthers were “nationalists and internationalists,” not just because they saw the struggles of black Americans and other national groups as merely one in the same, but because they comprised a revolutionary “brotherhood.” Newton and the Panthers essentially argued for inclusion within the international fraternal order of sovereign nations. The Panthers also gendered their rhetorical expressions of group membership and male-female relations within the movement.

“The Brothers and Sisters on the Block”: Gender and Citizenship in the Dispersed Black Colony

The Panthers’ projection of sovereignty included gendered discursive and rhetorical “processes of categorization.” When Newton and Seale founded the organization in 1966, they did so with the intent of enlisting and speaking to a particular segment of the Oakland black community. The portion of the black community that the Panthers wanted to recruit was generally male, and in Marxian terms, the lumpen proletariat. The Panthers disagreed with Fredriech Engels’ and Karl Marx’s argument that

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35 Newton, “We are Nationalists and Internationalists,” 568.
36 Anderson, 7.
37 Spencer and Wollman, 2.
the lumpen was not fit for revolution. Instead, Seale, Newton, and Cleaver concurred with Frantz Fanon’s observations of the alienated and urbanized lumpen leading liberationist movements. In their writings, speeches, and interviews, the Panthers called the lumpen proletariat the “brothers on the block.” When Newton, Seale, and Cleaver spoke of the brothers on the block and/or the black lumpen, they were speaking of and to those lower-class black men who participated in the underground urban economy. While law enforcement agencies and government officials such as Reagan and J. Edgar Hoover perceived this group as essentially criminal, the Panthers, like Fanon, argued that this segment of the black population would become the most revolutionary as the Panthers believed they were representatives of the most oppressed group in the United States. Eventually Cleaver, as the editor and organizer of the Panthers’ newspaper, *The Black Panther*, and Newton and Seale began to include women within this rubric of lumpen. However, the Panthers initial concern for organizing the brothers on the block underscored their gendered notions of association as their conception reflected Anderson’s observation of nationalism as a “deep horizontal comradeship.”

The “brothers on the block” occupied a central position in the Panthers’ aims for building a revolutionary vanguard. Although the “brothers” had the most radical

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39 Fanon’s discussion of the role of the lumpen proletariat can be found in the 1994 edition of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 81.

40 Seale, 30.

41 Anderson, 7.
potential, much of Newton’s affinity for this demographic arose out of his experiences living in Oakland prior to the establishment of the Party. In his book, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton discussed how he could not relate to black college students and their middle-class aspirations. Notions of masculinity emphasizing physical prowess were evident in Newton’s writings about his experiences as his propensity to fight the “hefty guys” as a “lightweight,” gained him membership and elicited prestige among this informal group of men. During Newton’s time as a student in Merritt Junior College in West Oakland, according to Seale in *Seize the Time*, Newton became what he considered a street philosopher who turned the “block” into a space where he could pass on the knowledge that he acquired while attending college and his own reading. These experiences, along with Seale and Newton’s debates with members of the Soul Students Advisory Council at Merritt College over the merits and efficacy of cultural nationalism, drove Newton and Seale to strike out on their own and organize the “brothers.”

The Panthers also believed that the lumpen were the most dangerous class because any powerful group could mobilize the lumpen for, or against, revolutionary change. Seale remarked in *Seize the Time* that Newton thought they had to organize this group so the state would not organize it against the movement. Cleaver concurred with

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42 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 74.

43 Ibid., 75-76. Newton also acknowledged there was a reciprocal effect on his education as he began to study law and law enforcement methods in order to outflank the local police.

44 For more information regarding Newton’s and Seale’s debates with the SSAC, see Seale, 24-34 and Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 71-72.

45 Seale, 30.
Newton’s assertion regarding the importance of the lumpen and/or the “brothers” in the black national liberation movement in a 1969 article appearing in *The Black Panther*. Consistent with his formulation of the projection of sovereignty, Cleaver argued that the lumpen were the “true revolutionaries in the urban centers of the world.” He also distinguished the black lumpen proletariat of the dispersed black colony from the white American lumpen or what he called the “Mother Country Working Class” and the “Mother Country Lumpen.” According to Cleaver, the white working class and the “Mother Country Lumpen,” were foreigners who “belonged to a totally different world.”

The Panthers could not trust either group, Cleaver asserted, because they were susceptible to racist arguments against black Americans. Newton frequently claimed that the Panthers could only turn this group into a collective weapon for radical change through a revolutionary education and the gun.

While the Panthers clearly expressed the meanings and the implications of the “brothers on the block,” their writings disproportionately addressed the male element of the lumpen. In *Seize the Time*, Seale revealed that he and Newton were aware of the origins of sexism and gender inequality as well as the experiences of black women. Seale argued that sexism within the Party was a product of the capitalist and racist oppression of black people. The class dimension of gender inequality is evident in Seale’s

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47 For more discussion on the gendered implications of the “brothers on the block,” see Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest’s essay in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, “’The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job’: Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982.”

48 Seale, 393.
reference to the historical status of black women as domestic servants as “mothers scrubbing Miss Ann’s kitchen” and he explicitly spoke of the “brothers and sisters on the block who looked like they were on their way to jail.”49 However, there is not any evidence in the writings, speeches, or interviews of Newton, Seale, or Cleaver where they explicitly discussed the role of women in the Party until 1969. In 1969, Seale addressed the role of women in the Party in Seize the Time and Cleaver sent a message of support to Erika Huggins, widow of Los Angeles Panther leader Jon Huggins, who was murdered in New Haven, Connecticut in January 17, 1969. One year later, Newton issued a statement a year later expressing support and solidarity with the Women’s and Gay Liberation Movements.50

Although their pronouncements represented a step forward in gender relations, many of the elements within their statements represent what feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe calls a “patriarchal nationalism.” According to Enloe, nationalist movements consign women to roles that serve the nation. These roles include the “ego-stroking girlfriend, stoic wife, or nurturing mother.” Enloe also asserts that the importance of the nation, or community, becomes so important in nationalist movements that even relations between men and women could be seen as potentially “divisive, even traitorous.”51

49 Ibid., 64-65.

50 Hilliard and Weise, 157.

51 Patriarchal nationalisms, according to Enloe, tend to assume that female oppression is the result of colonization. It could be asserted that Seale’s articulation of the relationship between sexism, classism, and racism is another qualifier of this concept. See Enloe, 62; Seale, 393. Other roles that male nationalists assign women include the “stoic wife” and “nurturing mother.” Enloe, 62.
While a variety of facets compose this type of nationalism, only one is significant for the analysis of Newton’s, Seale’s, and Cleaver’s discussion of black women.

One could assert that all of the Panther women in Seale’s analysis symbolized a collective “ego-stroking girlfriend” as they took Newton’s, Seale’s, and Cleaver’s wishes for black women to pursue and entertain black men who were serious Panthers. Seale endorsed Cleaver’s patriarchal idea of “pussy power” where Cleaver encouraged women to withhold sex from their partners as long as they remained indifferent to the black liberation movement.\(^{52}\) In his discussion of Panther women, Seale described an instance where black women expressed their refusal to date any of the black men who approached them unless they got “hip” to the “real ideology of the Black Panther Party.”\(^{53}\) However, Seale’s views regarding women were not always so clear. Seale told a female Panther that it was okay to pursue sexual relations with a male Panther even if he could not recite all of the ten points by memory. Although Seale assumed that this exchange marked a departure from male chauvinism, it still reflected a manifestation of a patriarchal nationalism because his story depicted a woman who felt that she had to consult a male Panther leader before making a definitive decision about her relations. The sexuality of black female Panthers, at least in this case, literally seemed to be the male leader’s domain since it was expected that Panther women defer to male leadership.\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\) As quoted in Estes, 165.  
\(^{53}\) Seale, 395  
\(^{54}\) According to LeBlanc, sexual harassment and gender inequality continued as women began to ascend the ranks of Panther leadership. Jones, 311.
Even though Cleaver and Newton began to speak out against male chauvinistic practices in the Party, they also gendered their proclamations. Their arguments against chauvinism reinforced the Panthers’ image of women as supporters of Panther men. In his message to an incarcerated Ericka Huggins, Cleaver argued that Huggin’s loss of her husband reflected meaningful female participation within the movement. He wrote, “The incarceration and the suffering of Sister Ericka should be a stinging rebuke to all manifestations of male chauvinism within our ranks.” Cleaver then urged Panther men to recognize black women’s equality and the sacrifices of black women in the Party.

Newton also made a similar argument about the importance of women’s equality within the movement in “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” a year later. Unlike either Seale or Cleaver, Newton raised questions about homophobia within the Party. He admitted his own homophobic views and encouraged Panthers to purge themselves of such linguistic expressions in the Party’s rhetoric. Despite his declarations, however, Newton’s and Cleaver’s disagreement regarding the organization’s tactical and strategic direction in 1970 descended into a personal argument laden with homophobic references and insults.

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56 Hilliard and Weise, 157-159. Specifically, Newton stated that “the terms ‘faggot’ and ‘punk’ should be deleted from our vocabulary, and especially we should not attach names normally designed for homosexuals to men who are enemies of the people…Homosexuals are not the enemies of the people.”

57 Estes, 175.
The Militarized Heterosexuality of Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale

The Panthers also embedded ideas about sexuality in their political discourse and rhetoric, engaging in a rhetorical practice that sociologist Joane Nagel calls militarized heterosexuality. According to Nagel, ideas about sexuality are at the heart of masculinity in militaristic nationalist movements. Thus, Nagel argues, men and military institutions produce and engage in militarized heterosexuality. This discourse includes several facets, but the one most significant for this study of the Panthers’ nationalist language are the ways in which Newton and Cleaver portrayed their male enemies as “incapable of manly virility.” The Panthers (re)imagined the history of American race relations as a masculine struggle between white and black men over sexual access to women and for the self-determination of black communities. Their narrative featured racialized and sexualized stereotypes of not just white men, but also black and white women, as well as black men. According to Newton and Cleaver, the rise of the black man represented a turning point in American race relations because they began to affirm their manhood by defending the black colony and fighting for independence.

Newton and Cleaver considered race relations as a symbolic conflict between two parts of a metaphorical body—the white man who represented the mind and the black man who symbolized the body. The Panthers deployed gendered and sexualized terms to describe black and white men and women when advancing their racial narratives. White men, representing what they called “omnipotent administrators,” controlled the mind and

58 Nagel, 406. The other facets in her formulation include the sexualize nature of warfare and the use of masculine discourse of rape, penetration, and sexual conquest to depict military weaponry and offensives.
the black man, who signified the body. According to Cleaver, white men defined white women as “ultrafeminines” and black women as “amazons.”\(^5\) Black men in America symbolized the “supermasculine menial.” During the era of enslavement and thereafter, the administrators used the menials for labor, or in the words of Newton and Cleaver, as a source of raw material, to further the ends of the mind and build his nation. Newton and Cleaver also conceived of the administrators as effeminate and unmanly. Consequently, the administrators aspired to control the sexuality of the menial and gave themselves exclusive sexual access to black and white women to compensate for their lack of masculinity. Ultimately, the administrator fulfilled the role of creator and defender the American nation-state. These circumstances, according to Cleaver and Newton, resulted in conflicts over masculinity between the administrators and menials.\(^6\)

On the one hand, for Cleaver, this sexualized and racialized clash seemed to be one for sexual access to black and white women. In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver devotes two chapters to the issues of race and sexuality. While one chapter is fictional, “Allegory of Black Eunuchs,” Cleaver’s characterizations of black and white men and women remain consistent in the following, non-fictional, chapter, “The Primeval Mitosis.” In the “Allegory,” Cleaver attributes the concept of freedom to white women and slavery to

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black women. In this context, Cleaver is referring to white men’s historical efforts to exalt white womanhood and control black sexuality whether through their sexual relations with black women or by fiercely restricting black men’s access to white women.\(^{61}\) Then, he declared, albeit via a fictional character, that “Men die for freedom, but black men die for white women who are the symbol of freedom.” Cleaver’s antagonism towards black women also reflected a notion that many male black nationalists shared during the 1960s regarding their belief in black women colluding with white men to emasculate black men. While it seems that Cleaver tried to use these stereotypical depictions of black and white women to explain the myths of the “strong” black woman and the “weak” white female, his descriptions reveal the sort of narrow and patriarchal view of women that many Black Panther men ascribed to until Newton, Cleaver, and Seale began speaking out against the male chauvinism within the Party in 1969.\(^{62}\)

On the other hand, however, Newton characterized the struggle between the dispersed black colony and the white mother country as not one for sexual access, but for black people to fulfill their collective destiny, or in his words, “recapture the mind.” The primary agent of this liberation movement, was not the supermasculine menial but the black urban guerrilla. According to Newton, the guerilla—coded as male—was a unique

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\(^{61}\) Cleaver, 149.

\(^{62}\) Cleaver devotes two chapters to issues of race and sexuality in *Soul on Ice*. While one chapter is fictional, “Allegory of Black Eunuchs,” Cleaver’s characterizations of black and white men and women remain consistent in the following, non-fictional, chapter, “The Primeval Mitosis.” The sacrifices made by various Panther women such as Erica Huggins and the rise of the Gay and Women’s Liberation Movements led to the shift in their thinking on the subject of sexism within the party, and in the liberation movement overall.
figure that was a combination of a warrior, military fighter, commander, and political philosopher. Newton employed phallic imagery to describe the guerrilla. According to Newton, the black urban guerrilla was incomplete without the gun, which he depicted as an “extension of the body.” Essentially, once black men asserted their manhood by liberating their minds and picking up the gun to defend their communities, they shed their identities in America as supermasculine menials. According to Newton, the threat and/or the actual use of violence were inextricably linked to black manhood and liberation. This point reflected Fanon’s ideas emphasizing the inherent link between violence, the creation of manhood, and decolonization.63

Cleaver’s views regarding the role of the black urban guerrilla were consistent with Newton’s ideas during the first five years of the organization’s existence. Considering Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams as the “spiritual fathers of today’s urban guerrillas,” Cleaver urged black men to take up arms against the state if it refused to acknowledge black sovereignty.64 As the Party began to lose members due to police and government repression in the late 1960s, Newton’s and Cleaver’s ideas regarding guerrilla-style revolution diverged. When Newton was released from prison in 1970, his emphasis shifted away from guerilla violence to community organizing while Cleaver remained a staunch proponent of guerilla warfare. Consequently, during a heated telephone discussion between Newton and Cleaver regarding Cleaver’s statements about

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63 In the *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon claims that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” He also argues that decolonization is the “veritable creation of new men.” Fanon, 35 & 36.

64 Cleaver, “The Land Question and Black Liberation,” 70-71.
Party turmoil, Newton expelled him and his east coast faction, from the Party. While Newton and Cleaver’s disagreement over the efficacy of violence was only one factor of their dispute and the eventual schism within the Party, they both recognized during the formative years of the Party that the affirmation of masculinity in the black colony meant resisting the various manifestations of racial oppression. Black men’s use of their minds and weapons represented their rights to self determination and their desires for nations to recognize their sovereignty.

Newton’s discussions of the relationship between race, sexuality, and black liberation also caused a shift in the rhetoric the Panthers used to describe white men. Instead of referring to white men, and the system that they signified and defended, as “The Man,” Newton and the Panthers labeled white men and non-white representatives of the state “pigs.” This term, for Newton, proved to be more dehumanizing than either “the Man” or “dog” because it implied filth and other negative qualities. Newton based this decision on his recognition of black men reclaiming manhood and the acknowledgement of white men and other agents of the state as less than men and as less than human. Newton understood the implications and impact of the rhetoric chosen to depict their enemies. In his book, *Revolutionary Suicide*, he recognized that the Panthers’ abilities to define themselves and their adversaries by appropriating an adversarial anti-colonial language reinforced the idea of the American state and its representatives as the enemies

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66 Foner, 61.
of black urban sovereignty.\(^\text{67}\) However, as Newton and the Panthers discovered, this skill helped organize black people, yet it could not account for their lack of hard power needed to repel government and police repression.\(^\text{68}\)

**Conclusion**

Newton’s, Seale’s, and Cleaver’s creation of the Panther counterpublic from 1966-1969 served to produce and mobilize an urbanized black imagined community. In this counterpublic, they shaped and articulated a concept representing a repository of their revolutionary (inter)nationalism—the projection of sovereignty. Developing this concept, discourse, and rhetoric, the Panther male leadership drew what they believed as the most applicable ideas from past black radicals such as Malcolm X, Harold Cruse, and Stokely Carmichael. Foreign thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and international events also inspired their outlook. They used colonialism as a reference point to depict black American’s circumstances and as a means to forge links with the various nationalist movements abroad. They also built on their understanding of Marxism to develop their own theories and visions of the potential revolutionary role of the lumpen or the “brothers on the block” in the black liberation movement.

\(^{67}\) Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 163-165.

\(^{68}\) The concepts of hard and soft power are used in the realm of international relations to characterize aspects of a country’s foreign policy. “Soft” power refers to a nation’s ability to use diplomacy, or to “attract or persuade.” “Hard” power refers to a nation’s use of military force or coercion. See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), x-xi, 5. According to Nye’s definition of hard power, “Hard power can rest on inducements (‘carrots’) or threats (‘sticks’),” it could be argued that the Panthers use of dehumanizing rhetoric constitutes a form of hard power. Nye, 5.
The Panthers also made ideas about gender and sexuality central in their arguments for national liberation, citizenship, and against their adversaries. Even though Seale, Newton, and Cleaver, sought to curb sexism within the Party, their pronouncements often reflected their patriarchal nationalist tendencies. This observation, however, revealed the contradictory complexities of their thought regarding gender and sexuality as they recognized that they could not separate their understandings of sexism and gender inequality from the broader national culture that still privileged men and marginalized women. This contradiction is evident when one analyzes Newton’s and Cleaver’s thinking about the connections between American race relations and sexuality. Although Cleaver’s writings in *Soul on Ice* often included unflattering depictions of women, he believed he was explaining the vexing circumstances of black men. Significant to the Panthers’ gendered rhetoric and militarized heterosexuality was their willingness to use their weapons as a way of signifying a rhetorical threat and organizing tool, or as a means of defense. This was evident in the Panthers’ patrols and especially during their march on the California capitol building in 1967. One could argue that the Panthers’ militarized heterosexuality and their willingness to violently engage law enforcement were among the causes for their downfall.⁶⁹ However, the Panthers’

disintegration is better understood as a convergence of a variety of factors that included the split between Newton and Cleaver over tactics of community organizing and the use of guerilla warfare, Newton’s acknowledged failure to communicate the Panthers’ ideological growth clearly, their rhetorical and actual use of guns, violent rhetoric, the resurgence of political conservatism preaching “law and order,” and the escalation of police and governmental repression led by individuals such as the Director of the F.B.I, J. Edgar Hoover.

Despite these circumstances, Newton and the Panthers continued to evolve ideologically. Instead of their revolutionary nationalist discourse, Newton theorized and articulated his concept of intercommunalism in 1971. This outlook emphasized Newton’s belief that American empire, or imperialism, rendered the nation-state as an archaic unit of social organization for third world populations. Instead, Newton argued, oppressed peoples should envision themselves as a global network of communities. Newton’s ideological evolution ironically resembled Martin Luther King’s during the last year of his life. While the Panthers and King differed in ideology and rhetorical style, both analyzed society from the standpoint of black men and both decentered the nation and nationality as units of analysis and categories of difference. Eventually both men began to argue for a globalized perspective of oppression and liberation.

Chapter Two:

Building the World House: How Martin Luther King, Jr. Transcended Civic and Racial Nationalism

On March 31, 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. urged the congregation of the National Cathedral Church in Washington D.C. not to fall asleep in the midst of the human rights revolution. This speech did not include a scathing rebuke of the United States like his address at the Riverside Church in April 1967, nor did it carry the dark and prophetic tone of his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech the night before his death. In “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” however, King demonstrated the maturation of his radical democratic socialist political thought and rhetoric. While King was physically closer to where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, he could not have been any farther from the message that galvanized the American people on that August day. The content of King’s message did not reflect the overly optimistic liberal-integrationist, or what historian Gary Gerstle called civic nationalist, ideology that featured his American dream rhetoric that many Americans have grown accustomed to since his death in 1968. Instead, King focused on the themes “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism,” black power discourse, and the need for a “revolution of
values” in his last sermon, and other political arguments such as his Riverside speech and final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*1 Instead of basing his political thought, discourse, and action on the goal of building a “beloved community” (a civic community based upon America’s liberal ideals), King challenged Americans to envision themselves as actors in what he called the “world house.”2

This chapter analyzes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ideological, discursive, and rhetorical transition from 1955 till his death in 1968. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Dr. King engaged and incorporated black power discourse—the rhetoric contained in the black power counterpublic, "racial nationalism”—in his own rhetoric as his thought transitioned from the liberal integrationism of the "beloved community"—the rhetoric developed in the civic nationalist counterpublic—to the democratic socialism of the "world house."3 In *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, Gerstle argues that these conflicting and competing ideals structured American history, public discourse, and policy. Civic nationalism, according to Gerstle, comprises America’s core political, and liberal, ideals—the “fundamental equality for all human beings, [in] every individual’s inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and [in] a democratic

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2 Washington, 268-69; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here*, 167.

3 For the purposes of this thesis, I envision King only as a leading spokesperson for the civic nationalist, or liberal-integrationist counterpublic. It would be possible to include black activist-intellectuals and organizations such as Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and Ella Baker as well as the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as well as the pre-1965 incarnations of the Congress for Racial Equality and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as prominent actors in this black counterpublic.
government based upon the consent of the governed,” and “a kind of democratic universalism that can take root anywhere.” While discussing the modern Civil Rights Movement, Gerstle locates King in the civic nationalist tradition because of King’s early espousal of the aforementioned ideals. In contrast, racial nationalism is an alternative political discourse that “conceives of America in ethnoracial terms, as a people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherited fitness in self-government.” White Americans who advocated this particular nationalist vision saw the United States as a white nation. For Gerstle, black nationalists, such as Malcolm X, also advocated a form of racial nationalism. Gerstle’s categorization of King as a civic nationalist, however, fails to consider how King appropriated elements of a black racial nationalism in his discourse.⁴

In this chapter, I argue that King transcended these two competing ideologies and counterpublics—racial and civic nationalism—at the end of his life as he recognized the limits of both discourses. This examination of King’s ideas, discourse, and rhetoric requires the untangling of the various political concepts reflected in his liberal-integrationist, black power, and radical democratic socialism in order to adequately understand the shifts in his thought and discourse that took place during the last three years of his life. This chapter emphasizes three points about King’s ideas. First, King’s concept of the “beloved community” represented as much a political ideology as a religious philosophy. The concepts associated with King’s beloved community—individual liberty, the American Dream, citizenship, freedom, nonviolence, and

⁴Gerstle, 4-5; King, Where Do We Go From Here, 167.
integration—are consistent with Gerstle’s civic nationalism. King also incorporated
gendered rhetorical components—his gendered critique of segregation and the trope of
the “new Negro”—into his civic nationalist discourse. Second, King incorporated
rhetorical elements of the latest form of black racial nationalism—black power—into his
own political arguments. Understanding how King engaged racial nationalist discourse is
crucial as his debates with black power activists help illuminate his gendered thinking
and reconfigure many of the political concepts found in his thought and discourse.
Finally, King’s concept of the beloved community evolved into his more international
socialist notion of the “world house” by the time of his assassination in 1968. Contrary to
scholars Kenneth L. Smith’s and Ira G. Zepp, Jr.’s argument that the beloved community
was the “capstone” of Dr. King’s thought and the “organizing principle of all of King’s
thought and activity,” I contend that Dr. King’s “world house” and radical democratic
socialism represents the pinnacle of his thought and discourse.

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5 Martin Luther King, Jr. developed the rhetorical theme of the “new Negro” in many of his earlier
speeches and sermons. While black artists such as Alain Locke popularized the idea of the “New Negro”
during the Harlem Renaissance, literary scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that black Americans began
using this term in the late nineteenth century. According to Gates, this term’s meaning changed over time.
Gates contends that Alain Locke depoliticized the term. There is no evidence that suggests that King’s use
of the term is conceptually related to Locke’s conception. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “The Trope of the
New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” Representations, No. 24, Special Issue: America Reconstructed, 1840-1940 (Autumn, 1988); Alain Locke, ed. The New Negro: An Interpretation
(New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925); For an analysis of the relationship between the New Negro and the
political left see Barbara Foley, Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro

6 Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther
King, Jr. (Maryland: University Press of America, 1986), 119.
This chapter situates itself at the cross-section of two trends in civil rights historiography—studies of King and black radicalism scholarship. There has been much written on King and his impact on the modern Black Freedom Movement. Many scholars have adequately covered his religious and philosophical roots as well as the notable aspects of his thought such as nonviolence and integration. However, the scholarship analyzing all of the features of King’s political thinking and discourse has been neglected until recently. This chapter subsequently stakes out a position in historical scholarship by analyzing King’s intellectual contributions to both the movement and American political discourse.

Unfortunately, newer works on black radical thought in the Black Freedom Movement have also placed King’s thought at the margins. This tendency is most likely in response to historian Charles Payne’s criticisms of the “king-centricity” of civil rights

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8 The Black Freedom Movement consists of the two acknowledged strains of the movement—Civil Rights and Black Power.
historiography. Although Payne’s assessment warranted attention at the time, one risks downplaying King’s thought and discourse such as his interpretation and rhetorical appropriation of black power and his radical democratic socialist analysis. Doing so also ignores King’s role as an intellectual who contributed to black radical thought during the Black Power Era. Failing to consider the complexity and totality of his ideology also contributes to the misappropriation of his legacy for the purposes of creating “civic myths.”

This chapter will take both chronological and conceptual approaches. First, by investigating King’s orations between the years of 1955 and 1965, I will illustrate how King’s beloved community assumed the role of a civic community and reflected civic nationalist ideals. King’s experiences in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Birmingham campaign, and the March on Washington and his observations of the student sit-in movement shaped the development of his beloved community. Next, this chapter explores the manner in which King incorporated black power discourse into his rhetoric as he responded to the rise of the Black Power Movement in 1966. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of King’s radical democratic socialism and his conception of

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11 The term “civic myth” is taken from Nikhil Pal Singh’s work Singh, 1; Jacquelyn Hall Dowd also discusses how contemporary conservative politicians have incorporated the Civil Rights Movement’s goals and core ideals into their political discourse in “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91.4 (2005).
the world house precipitated by his campaigns in Chicago and Memphis, his evolving observations on American race relations, and the unfolding war in Vietnam.

**King’s Civic Nationalism: The Beloved Community**

From the first mass meeting during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott to the 1965 Watts Uprising, King based his liberal-integrationist thought and rhetoric on a concept he termed the “beloved community.” This chapter argues that King embedded his construct in Gerstle’s civic nationalist idea that stressed the importance of individual liberty, freedom, citizenship, the American Dream, integration, nonviolence, and the “new Negro.” Other scholars such as James H. Cone, Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp have examined the religious and philosophical foundations of the beloved community. In fact, King’s idea of the beloved community represented a culmination of his studies in philosophy and theology at Morehouse College, Crozer Seminary, and Boston University as well as his experiences as the founding president of the black protest organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Thus, when King spoke of the beloved community, he often referred to the construct as the end result of the implementation of a confluence of religious and political concepts such as love, justice, nonviolence, interracial activism, and democracy. This chapter will focus on King’s

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12 I acknowledge the triumph of justice and love and anti-communism or cold war/civil rights politics, and racial reconciliation as other possible concepts of King’s ideology. For more on the triumph of love and justice see Cone, Martin and Malcolm and America, 61-66. And for more on the politics of cold war/civil rights see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

13 Smith and Zepp, 12.
beloved community as a political construct since many scholars have adequately investigated its philosophical and religious antecedents.

King grounded civic nationalist, or liberal, concepts in his vision of the beloved community. An examination of his speeches and writings between 1955 and 1965, reveals the ideals comprising the beloved community—liberty and freedom, citizenship and democracy, American Dream, integration, nonviolence, and the new Negro. Liberty, as an idea, generally refers to an individual’s freedom from restraint and coercion. In his texts, King envisioned liberty and freedom as concepts bound together in the idea of American citizenship. Liberty and freedom underscored his belief in the equal opportunity for everyone to participate in civic life regardless of race. Participation in America’s civic nation included equal access to social, political, economic, and cultural resources. King developed and expressed these concepts in a milieu where the system of racial exclusion and violence constrained African Americans lives.

King’s political discourse arose from the racial segregation that affected all aspects of Montgomery public life. The enforcement of Jim Crow rather than America’s democratic ideals served as a sufficient cause for black Americans’ political action and specifically the organization of the bus boycott in 1955.\(^{14}\) The Montgomery black activist community organized a one day bus boycott in response to law enforcement arresting Rosa Parks for sitting in the designated white section of a bus on December 1, 1955. As historian Peter Ling observed in his biography of King, black activists in Montgomery

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were searching for a way to confront bus segregation.\textsuperscript{15} Activists such as railroad porter E.D. Nixon singled out Parks’ case because she boasted a respectable reputation and had experience as a civil rights activist.\textsuperscript{16} After forming an organization—the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)—to oversee the protest, the group of activists which included Nixon, president of the black Women’s Political Council, Jo Ann Robinson, and Reverend of the First Baptist Church, Ralph Abernathy, selected King as president. King’s first act as president included addressing the crowd during the first mass meeting, four days after Parks’ arrest, at the Holt Street Church.

The speech that King delivered at the mass meeting is important because he grounded his arguments for protest in American civic nationalist ideals and his beloved community—freedom, liberty, citizenship, and democracy. King, as many civil rights leaders and black Americans, believed that all forms of segregation infringed upon their inalienable rights as American citizens. Thus, as King argued for black Americans’ rights to use the bus system without any restrictions, he tied the citizenship status of the blacks in Montgomery to America’s founding principles:

\begin{quote}
We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullest of its meaning. We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Ling, 34-37.
\textsuperscript{16} Sitkoff, 26-27.
\textsuperscript{17} Carson, 71.
King frequently employed this strategy of linking citizenship and civic nationalism in his speeches. This was even the case in his 1963 book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, when King asked Americans if they thought the creators of the Declaration of Independence “intended that liberty…be divided into installments…” King also suggested that black Americans would win freedom because “the goal of the nation is freedom.” This line of argument was important because he sought to inform his listeners and adversaries that they shared core values, and were thus fit for dignity and respect.

King also couched his arguments for equal opportunity in classed and gendered terms. He spoke from a black middle class perspective rather than from the standpoint of the poor. In an article published in the September 10, 1962 edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, King stressed the importance of open access to the job market for black professionals and college students. In doing so, he demonstrated how racism impacted black Americans who occupied, or either had the potential to partake in, American middle class life. Because he represented the concerns of those from his own social class, King did not explicitly articulate a class-based critique of American society until after the 1965 Watts Uprising and his move to Chicago to organize urban black Americans.

King also advanced a gendered critique of racial segregation. King often questioned how racism particularly affected black men. On December 27, 1962, King

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19 *Washington*, 105 & 111.

defended integration before a church conference in Nashville in an address called “The Ethical Demands of Integration.” King defined liberty and freedom as the “capacity to deliberate or weigh alternatives.” Then, he proceeded to argue that racism, in effect, had emasculated him, and presumably, other black men. King stated he was “robbed of the basic quality of man-ness.” In this way, King operated as a spokesperson for black men when he discussed the emasculating effects of racial segregation. Yet, King rarely mentioned how racial oppression may have affected black women specifically.

For King, electoral participation in the democratic process underscored the core value of liberty; black disfranchisement represented the ultimate expression of emasculation. According to his gendered definition of liberty, one was not a man, let alone an American, without the ballot. While speaking at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, D.C. on May 17, 1959, King claimed, “So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote, I do not possess myself.” Six years later and on the eve of President Johnson’s address on the pending Voting Rights Bill, King wrote in the New York Times that “the denial of the right to vote cuts painfully and deeply into his new sense of personal identity.” Thus, as King remained silent on how disfranchisement dehumanized black women, he connected manhood, liberty, citizenship, and democracy in his texts. America’s civic health depended upon the equal distribution of the franchise to all men.

21 Ibid., 120.
22 Washington, 197.
23 Ibid., 183.
The concept of the American Dream in King’s thought and discourse during 1955-1965 was central and has been well-documented. Although many Americans remember King’s envisioning his dream in his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963, he had begun to integrate this notion into his sermons as early as 1961. Again, King expressed the civic nationalist ideal of equal opportunity when outlining his dream. He also gendered his idea of the equality of men in his visions of the American Dream. In a commencement address at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in June 1961, King defined the American dream as one “where men of all races, of all nationalities and of all creeds can live together as brothers.” His conception of the American nation is consistent with scholar Benedict Anderson’s idea of nationalism as a “deep, horizontal comradeship.” King also pointed out that the phrase “that all men are created equal” meant “all men,” not black men or white men. Thus, King identified men’s individual liberty as central to the dream. In July 1962, King upheld the value of private property as a component of the dream while addressing the National Press Club. However, “privilege and property,” King stated, needed to be “widely distributed,” presumably among men. He also expressed the significant ideas from his “I Have a Dream” speech such as his dream “where men no longer argue that the color of a man’s skin determines


25 Washington, 208.

26 Anderson, 7.

27 Washington, 208.

28 Washington, 105.
According to King, the triumph of the American dream and the establishment of the beloved community depended upon the extension of individual liberty to black Americans, especially men. However, the establishment of King’s civic community depended upon the struggle, achievement, and acceptance of integration and equality in principle and reality.

King often grounded his claims for integration in his perception of human reality in general. He maintained that integration was the way modern society was already organized. In an address to the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change in Montgomery, Alabama in 1956, King contended that all life was interdependent. According to King, the global market economy and science were the forces that strengthened the ties of all groups of people. Consequently, he reasoned that individuals should relate to one another based upon their humanity and this reality. King continued to employ this theme of interdependence as a rationale for integration into his speeches in the early 1960s. In his 1961 speech on the American dream, King declared that “all life was interrelated” and that everyone was “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” He argued that integration is “the recognition of the solidarity of the human family” in his 1962 speech, “The Ethical Demands of Integration.” Essentially, King saw integration as a restoration of a moral order and a reflection of reality. But while King based

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29 Ibid., 103.


integration on his concept of a common humanity, it did not necessarily include the abandonment of racial self-identification.

Many are familiar with King’s integrationist views, especially when compared to the Nation of Islam’s (NOI) and Malcolm X’s early nationalist ideas. However, King rooted his integrationist ideal not on assimilation into “white” American culture, but on the value of citizen participation in the beloved community. While defending his integrationist principles in 1962, King defended integration as the “welcomed participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities.” King only mentioned color-blindness in the context of individual’s opportunity of open access to material necessities. Essentially, integration, for King, was another expression of liberty and freedom. One should be able to frequent public places and participate politically without restraint due to skin color.

But King also maintained that integration did not necessarily mean the celebration of individual social and economic mobility. He argued against a phenomenon he called “token integration.” In 1962 King published an article in the New York Times Magazine titled, “The Case Against Token Integration,” where he argued that state authorities should not create institutional roadblocks that systematically work to limit the number of successful black Americans and stymie integration for the mass of black Americans. If governments were to act, King asserted, they should do so to restore balance, even if it

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32 Washington, 118.

33 Ibid., 183.

34 Ibid., 106-7.
entailed preferential treatment for black Americans.\textsuperscript{35} And if governments failed to act, King maintained, African Americans had the responsibility to take nonviolent action.

King envisioned acts of nonviolent direct action as the means for black Americans to destroy racial segregation and institutionalize the beloved community. He imagined the “new Negro” as the primary actor in the burgeoning nonviolent movement. King gendered the “new Negro,” in his response to white American stereotypes of masculinity that privileged the use of force and black nationalists such as Malcolm X who saw nonviolent resistance as cowardly and unmanly.\textsuperscript{36} Instead, King argued that nonviolence usurped the masculinity of those who sought to impose violent repression. In \textit{Why We Can’t Wait}, King argued:

> When, for decades, you have been able to make a man compromise his manhood by threatening him with a cruel and unjust punishment, and when suddenly he turns upon you and says: ‘Punish me. I do not deserve it. But because I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong,’ you hardly know what to do. You feel defeated and secretly ashamed. You know that this man is as good a man as you are; that from some mysterious source he has found the courage and the conviction to meet physical force with soul force.\textsuperscript{37}

Essentially, King maintained that white Americans who used violence to defend segregation did not hold a monopoly on manhood. In fact, according to King in \textit{Why We Can’t Wait}, there was room in the American polity for men to use moral means to secure moral ends.\textsuperscript{38} Ultimately, black male participants in nonviolent direct action may have

\textsuperscript{35} King, \textit{Why We Can’t Wait}, 134.


\textsuperscript{37} King, \textit{Why We Can’t Wait}, 30.

\textsuperscript{38} King, \textit{Why We Can’t Wait}, 37.
been physically passive, but they cultivated an “active mind and emotions” and were perhaps more disciplined than the white police officer or the black nationalist.\(^{39}\)

King began using the term “new Negro” as early as 1956. In his narratives of the Montgomery struggle, King described the “new Negro” as formerly an acquiescent and passive participant in the segregationist order. However, King often narrated, the new Negro developed a positive sense of self and began to resist racial oppression. In almost every case where he mentioned the metaphor, the new Negro was male. For example, in March 1958, King discussed how the black American “came to feel that the important thing about a man is not the color of his skin or the texture of his hair, but the texture and quality of his soul. With this sense of dignity and self-respect a new Negro emerged.”\(^{40}\)

Later in July 1962, King argued that “the most powerful force that is breaking down the barriers of segregation is the new determination of the Negro himself […] Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation, the Negro has now been driven to reevaluate himself.”\(^{41}\) According to King, this new Negro had emerged and acted in a way that he believed was compatible with particular liberal ideals such as achieving social change through nonviolent protest.

However, King’s point regarding the sudden emergence of the “new Negro” is problematic. Obviously, King’s depiction of the new Negro leads one to wonder whether or not he included black women such as Rosa Parks? Again, King seemed to be silent

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\(^{39}\) Washington, 86-7.

\(^{40}\) Washington, 85.

\(^{41}\) Washington, 101.
regarding black women’s potential experiences in segregated society. King’s concept also
denied black Americans’ agency before Montgomery. It is true that African-Americans
had led a boycott against segregation in New Orleans prior to the one in Montgomery.\footnote{Aldon Morris, \textit{The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change} (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 40.} It
also appears that he only focused on the gestation of mass action rather than individual
resistance. One would be hard pressed to assume that King was unaware of this tradition
of individual resistance to racism as he often conveyed the story of his father, Martin
Luther King, Sr. (or “Daddy” King) chastising a white police officer during a
questionable traffic stop.\footnote{Claybourne Carson, ed., \textit{The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.} (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 8.} Recognizing these discrepancies in King’s thoughts and
discourse leads one to assume that the idea of the “new negro” rising to fight segregation
served to motivate black men to act rather than a method of analysis.

Ultimately, King argued that nonviolent direct action was not an end in itself. For
King, this strategy aimed to coax white Americans and the federal government into
action. Since he viewed black and white Americans as linked by particular civic values,
King understood the importance of employing a strategy that aimed to reconcile the races
rather than create further discord. However, as King and the civil rights movement earned
more victories in the South, northern black Americans intensified their struggle against
institutional racism. Black radical activists such as Stokely Carmichael began to question
the ideals of the civil rights movement.\footnote{Joseph, 129-31. Also see Joseph’s chapter, “‘What We Gonna Start Sayin’ Now is Black Power!,’” for more on Carmichael’s diverging views.} These developments, in conjunction with the
emergence of black power discourse—the rhetoric of black racial nationalism—in 1966, led King to rethink and reconstruct many of his civic nationalist ideals.

“Liberation Must Come Through Integration”: King Redefines Black Power

The twenty months from August 1965 to April 1967 represented a crucial turning point in King’s intellectual and discursive development. King and the civil rights movement scored a legislative victory when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Six days later black Americans in Los Angeles responded to an instance of police brutality by rioting in the streets. These occurrences led King to consider specifically the plight of the black urban poor and rethink the effect of civil rights legislation on ghetto conditions. As a result, King moved SCLC’s full time operations to Chicago in January 1966. Stokely Carmichael’s call for “black power” in June 1966, represented the rise of the newest incarnation of black racial nationalist discourse. Black Americans’ demand for black power and the American mainstream media’s fixation on black power as a violent ideology, prompted King to reinterpret the counterpublic’s values of liberation, power, racial pluralism, and manhood and incorporate them into his radical political discourse. King sought to redefine black power in his efforts to communicate with urban blacks and white Americans. Contrary to literary scholar Houston A. Baker’s contention that King was on the “path of black power,” his engagement with the various concepts of the black power movement pushed
him beyond civic and racial nationalism and towards his use of radical democratic socialist discourse in the remaining years of his life.\textsuperscript{45}

Black Americans created a counterpublic that boasted an assortment of strains of black power during the late 1960s. For the purposes of this study, I maintain that, for the leading spokespeople of black power during 1966-1967, SNCC chairperson, Stokely Carmichael and the founding leadership cadre of the Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP), the concept was a form of what Gerstle calls racial nationalism—nationalism exclusively based upon a group racial identity.\textsuperscript{46} Black Powerites’ values consisted of the primacy of black manhood, the preeminence of African Americans as a group, power, and liberation from the United States. They also identified the goals of the movement as the use of armed self-defense, or even guerrilla warfare in the most extreme cases, the autonomy of an African-based black culture, and the desire for the institutional expression of their ideals. They often grounded their calls for self-determination in the language of internal colonialism.\textsuperscript{47} King incorporated black power activist’s conceptions of power, liberation, and the use of anti-colonial discourse into his political rhetoric between 1966 and 1968.


\textsuperscript{46} Gerstle, 4.

\textsuperscript{47} This chapter does not assume that all proponents of black power shared the same values. In fact, it could be argued that ideological and methodological diversity characterized this movement as there were individuals who took essentially black nationalist, Pan-Africanist, Marxist, socialist, cultural, and capitalist perspectives. See the previous chapter for a discussion of black power advocates’ use of anti-colonial discourse.
Before demonstrating how King integrated black power rhetoric into his own political discourse, I will discuss his reservations about the concept. King disagreed with black power in his writings and speeches for three reasons. First, King thought the slogan misled potential followers and whites. He believed that the term carried separatist and violent connotations. In his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, King discussed how, in a conversation between him, Carmichael, and Congress of Racial Equality’s leader, Floyd McKissick, he sought to convince Carmichael to change the terminology. “Why not use the slogan ‘black consciousness’ or ‘black equality’?” King asked Carmichael. He suggested these slogans in an effort to keep Carmichael’s and SNCC’s politics consistent with his, and the mainstream civil rights counterpublic’s evolving integrationist ideals. For King, black consciousness was consistent with his earlier “new Negro” conceptions where black Americans had finally decided to take pride themselves as a community and resist racial segregation since he argued that blacks were acting upon a newfound awareness of their own abilities to struggle for social change.48

Second, King criticized black power for what he perceived to be its nihilism. He claimed that black power advocates based their analysis on an extreme form of cynicism that presupposed the failure of black Americans to integrate into American society.49 Thus, many black power supporters came to view separation as a possible end. King argued that, despite the negative social and political conditions, black Americans should

48 King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 31.

49 King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 44.
retain a sense of hope and a belief that they could overcome racial oppression in the United States. However, by the time King published his last book, he seemed to wrestle with his own doubts about whether or not white Americans were capable of eradicating racism within their own consciousness and American society. He argued that white Americans had a more superficial understanding of equality that referred to the disassembling of obstructions to progress rather than the combination of both eradicating the vestiges of racism and instituting forms of racial redress. In his discussion preceding the one on black power in Where Do We Go From Here, King stated that white Americans were not “even psychologically organized to close the gap” between themselves and black Americans. However, it appears that King saw himself as a mediator between blacks Americans who leaned toward separatism and white Americans who may have grown disillusioned or even hostile towards the black freedom movement.

In essence, King was wedged between two evolving counterpublics—civic and racial nationalist. King did not abandon the goal of equality or retreat into a form of separatist politics. Instead, he advocated for a form of racial democracy where different groups of people could participate without having to discard their racial or cultural identities.

Third, King saw black power activists’ calls for armed self-defense as potentially destructive. While he acknowledged the role of violence in black power as a matter of interpretation and contestation for whites and blacks, King asserted there was a thin line between self-defense and the call for retaliatory violence. This reflected his injection of

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50 Ibid., 4.

51 Ibid., 8.
pragmatic realism into the argument. When considering the use of violence, according to King, many proponents tended to overlook how black Americans were outnumbered and held little hard power in comparison to the law enforcement and military might of the American state.\(^{52}\) He maintained that the participants in the black freedom struggle should continue to employ nonviolent means in their efforts of achieving equality.

King accepted and incorporated several elements of black power discourse despite being one of movements’ foremost critics. He saw black power as a “psychological call to manhood,” acknowledged the need for racial and cultural pride, and reinterpreted black power’s core ideas of liberation and power to mean the full integration of black Americans.\(^{53}\) It should not come as a surprise that King’s seized on the centrality of manhood to black power due to his gendered idea of the new Negro as masculine. In *Where Do We Go From Here*, King recognized how slavery and racial oppression denied black manhood and restricted the rights of black men to participate in American social, economic, and political culture. Similar to then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s thesis in his 1965 report on the black family, *The Black Family: A Case for National Action*, King also argued that a matriarchal familial culture developed among black Americans during slavery and persisted among the urban black poor since black women could find employment easier than black men. Consequently, King asserted, black women assumed the breadwinner role that white male policymakers such as Moynihan, male civil rights activists such as King, black nationalists such as US

52 King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 56.

53 Jackson, 9; King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 38.
founder Maulana Karenga, and Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver understood as masculine. The culture of matriarchy, according to King, exacerbated black men’s emasculation since they were unable to care for their families. King did not go as far as Moynihan and Cleaver in blaming black women for the problems plaguing the black community. But he did seem to at least tacitly agree with Moynihan’s logic of “presumed male leadership” in American society. As with King’s conception of the new Negro, he neglected black women’s experiences in his analysis of racism and resistance. Although King did mention how African mothers “fought slave traders fiercely to save their children” and “offered their bodies to slavers if they would leave their children behind,” he failed to positively acknowledge black women’s central roles in slave and black communities.

King also connected black power’s core values of power and liberation to his integrationist vision. Seemingly in an effort to address mainstream civil rights leaders and white Americans’ concerns about the slogan’s questionable connotations, King stated that one would be mistaken to equate black power with domination. Black Americans’ will to power, according to King, was a matter of justice and restoration. He insisted that unequal power relations were central to the racist institutional expression of the state.


Consequently, black and white Americans, as well as the Federal government, should work together to restore balance. While the Panthers conceived of liberation for black Americans in terms of group self-determination, King believed there was an inherent connection between liberation and integration, and that integration “is the mutual sharing of power” among races. So, how did King think Americans could institute power sharing? Ironically, King’s thinking about power and politics reveal that his views on the subjects were similar to some black power activists such as Stokely Carmichael.

Although it might be assumed that King and black power activists such as Carmichael were at odds in 1966 and 1967, they shared similar views about black Americans’ need for political power. In his 1964 book, Why We Can’t Wait, King contemplated the efficacy of a black “political bloc” in American politics. In an interview with Rabbi Everett Gendler on March 25, 1968, just ten days before his death, King even went as far as to say that “we must see segregation as a temporary way-station to a truly integrated society.” King figured that ethnic politics could be a useful tactic as long as separation was not the ultimate goal. Similarly, Carmichael advocated for black Americans to “first close ranks” and then engage in ethnic politics as a means to power. Where King and Carmichael differed, however, was in their views on coalition politics.

56 King, Where Do We Go From Here, 37-38.
57 Ibid., 61-2.
58 King, Why We Can’t Wait, 150.
59 Washington, 666.
60 Carmichael and Hamilton, 44; Carmichael, Stokely Speaks, 35.
According to King, black people could organize as a group and still collaborate with whites and other ethnic groups. In fact, King welcomed interracial/ethnic coalitions. Carmichael, on the other hand, claimed that blacks should forego coalitions with whites since they did not share the same political interests. In essence, Carmichael only saw white Americans as competitors while King envisioned liberal white Americans as potential allies depending upon their willingness to challenge themselves in their thinking about race, white privilege, equality, and justice.\(^{61}\)

Other aspects of King’s discussions on black power also moved him closer to transcending the American strains of civic and racial nationalisms. These included the relationships between black power’s idea of power and the concept of community (ghetto) empowerment and the discourse of internal colonialism. According to King, the unequal distribution of power created the various conditions that plagued the urban poor such as inadequate housing, education, and chronic unemployment. Consequently, in his announcement of his plans to organize Chicago in 1966, King declared that inner-city black Americans were victims of “a system of internal colonialism.”\(^{62}\) King’s language regarding internal colonialism was consistent with Carmichael’s and Panthers Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver. All three used this discourse in their analyses of ghetto conditions.\(^{63}\) This line of argument was not new for black organic intellectuals. Former Nation of Islam ( NOI) spokesperson Malcolm X and political

\(^{61}\) King, Where Do We Go From Here, 88-96; Carmichael and Hamilton, 62; Carmichael and Hamilton devoted a chapter to their thoughts on interracial coalitions in Black Power. See “The Myths of Coalition.”

\(^{62}\) Quoted in Jackson, 281.

\(^{63}\) Carmichael and Hamilton, 5; Huey P. Newton, “We are Nationalists and Internationalists,” 94.
activist Harold Cruse had been making this argument since the early 1960s. Despite the rhetorical similarities, King disagreed with Cleaver’s conclusions that black Americans constituted a distinct colonized nation that should embark on a process of violent decolonization as a way to solve the problem of “internal colonization.” While King agreed for the need to organize black Americans living in the ghetto, he began to express publicly the need for the movement to focus on extending human rights and economic justice to all poor people in America and the world.

King’s Radical Democratic Socialist Discourse in the World House

King concluded Where Do We Go From Here by outlining his vision of what he called the “world house.” On the one hand, the world house represented a globalized perspective of King’s beloved community because he based its realization on the abilities of different ethnicities, races, and nationalities to work together. On the other hand, King’s world house was the repository of his democratic socialist principles. King’s radical democratic socialism included the various elements that political theorist Michael Freeden identified as socialist ideals such as the communal group as the center of human organization, the primacy of the welfare of all human beings, and the assertion of human

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64 Steve Clark, ed. Malcolm X Talks to Young People: Speeches in the U.S., Britain, and Africa. (New York: Pathfinder, 1965), 16-17; George Breitman, Malcolm X Speaks, 50, 57, 66-67; Harold Cruse, Rebellion or Revolution? (William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1968), 78. Black American activists also developed this rhetoric in their understandings of African decolonization and their affinities with the work of anti-colonial intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi. Also see Chapter 1 of this thesis for more discussion on black radical’s use of anti-colonial discourse and rhetoric.

65 Washington, 674; Cleaver, Post Prison Writings and Speeches, 67-72.
equality. King also contemplated a tactical shift from nonviolent direct action to nonviolent disruption. This is not to assume that King thoroughly discarded aspects of his civic nationalist discourse. He remained a staunch proponent of civic nationalist notions of democracy and integration as well as interracial political organizing, and state intervention in helping to deliver the movement’s goals. However, King subordinated American ideals of individual liberty beneath his arguments for the primacy and protection of the welfare of all human beings worldwide. Towards the end of his life, King argued that Americans and citizens from other nations must transcend their national identities when addressing global issues such as poverty and militarism.

Many factors precipitated King’s discursive shift in the last year of his life. The 1965 uprising in Watts, SCLC’s 1966 Chicago Campaign, and the rise of black power discourse during the same year helped King theorize ways to uplift the black urban poor. On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, King spoke out in protest against the war in Vietnam. The conflict in Vietnam led King to emphasize the internationalist theme of his radical democratic socialist discourse. King’s efforts to provide assistance to striking black sanitation workers in Memphis and his organizing of the Poor People’s Campaign—a mass demonstration dramatizing the plight of all of America’s poor—in Washington, D.C. facilitated his employment of his radical democratic socialist discourse and his visions of the world house.67

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66 Freeden, 426-27, 430.
67 Washington, 231, 242; Jackson, 326.
King began to emphasize the primacy of the communal group in his writings and speeches in 1967. In *Where Do We Go From Here*, King defined his vision of an imagined community that he called the “world house.” Based on the evidence, King advocated an idea of communal living that accounted for religious, ethnic, racial, and national differences. King also envisioned the community as international in scope. He introduced the world house at the beginning of his chapter on the subject: “We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.” With this concept, King sought to make the point that humanity, and all life, was interrelated.68

King attached the idea of interrelatedness to the aspect of the communal group. King based his shift from the interrelatedness in his integrationist component of his civic nationalist position to this belief in response to what he believed to be the constant threat of warfare and human extinction. In his speeches and sermons since the one he delivered on April 4, 1967, King argued that Americans needed to deemphasize their preoccupation with divisive nationalist—civic and racial—ideals. He stressed that Americans needed to develop “an overriding loyalty to mankind.” King believed that if Americans developed the capacity to think from this standpoint that they could, in effect, usher in the construction of the world house. An person’s allegiances to humanity did not undercut one’s commitments to their particular group either. King claimed that thinking from the

68 King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 167.
perspective of the global community would ensure the sustainment of individual societies. He rooted his argument for “ecumenical” loyalties on his realization that if “men” did not empathize with one another, then they faced mutual assured destruction. In essence, a tragic sense of pragmatism seemed to undergird King’s vision as much as idealism.69

King grounded his case for the interrelatedness of all humans on the socialist belief in equality. Rather than the liberal notion of equal opportunity, King emphasized what he vaguely called the “realization” of equality, or the equality of results. As mentioned earlier, King believed that many white Americans only subscribed to a notion of equality that manifested itself in the removal of barriers rather opening access to all and the redistribution of resources. King contended that it was necessary for the civil rights movement and the federal government to collaborate in fulfilling equality. In his last presidential address to the SCLC, King argued for an economic package that ensured guaranteed employment and/or income in the efforts of abolishing poverty.70 He also asserted in Where Do We Go From Here that all of the world’s wealthy nations should work to redistribute resources to underdeveloped nations without restrictions in order to guard against a development of neo-colonialism. Essentially, King’s suggestions were also a continuation of his arguments for a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged” that he made in Why We Can’t Wait. This “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged” included government action to create social programs and ensure job opportunities for black

69 Washington, 242; King, Where Do We Go From Here, 190.

70 Washington, 247.
Americans.\textsuperscript{71} However, King based his later formulations on slightly different values. He conveyed in his sermons and writings that the goals of the civil rights movement should be equality on a global scale. King also began to express publicly that an individual’s worth could not, and should not, be quantified monetarily.\textsuperscript{72}

King’s arguments during the last year of his life also revealed his focus on the welfare of all Americans specifically and human beings globally. King often reasoned in his texts that Americans needed to undergo a “radical revolution of values” if they hoped to ensure the well-being of all. He contended that the welfare of people should take the precedence over private property rights. According to King, capitalism produced an “I-centered” way of living that encouraged harmful competition. This heightened competition allowed for not just inequality to take hold in the United States, but for globalized exploitation. King did not find communism attractive either. He argued that “Communism reduces men to a cog in the wheel of the state.” He also asserted that communism posed risks to one’s civil liberties. King implored the American people not to choose between capitalism and communism as he recognized truths in both ideologies. Ultimately, King advocated for what he called a “socially conscious democracy” that included the best of individualist and collectivist concepts.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} King, \textit{Why We Can’t Wait}, 138-39.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 248; King, 178.

\textsuperscript{73} King, 186-87.
King proclaimed that Americans needed to shift their focus from a “thing-oriented” to a “person-oriented” society.\(^{74}\) He maintained that “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism” arose when people valued their wealth and privilege over human interests. Thus, Americans needed to develop strategies to distribute resources on the basis of ensuring material and spiritual equality. Again, King grounded his argument on his observations that conflicts arose from his self-described “giant triplets” and the “I-centered” way of human relations. King often uttered that “true compassion is more than flinging coin to a beggar.”\(^{75}\) This shift, according to King, would precipitate a restructuring of American society from the bottom-up, from the streets where the homeless roamed to the halls of the Capitol Building.

Similar to realizing the beloved community, King remained faithful to nonviolent direct action as a means to equality and the establishment of the world house. Yet, he amended his concept of nonviolent direct action. King reasoned that, with the prevalence of inner-city uprisings and white Americans’ hardening their attitudes towards the civil rights movement and race relations in general, the movement had to move towards a strategy of “mass civil disobedience.”\(^{76}\) King envisioned this form of civil disobedience as a far more aggressive and disruptive approach. King stated in *The Trumpet of Conscience*: “Mass civil disobedience as a new stage of struggle can transmute the deep rage of the ghetto into a destructive and creative force. To dislocate the functioning of a

\(^{74}\) Washington, 240; King, 186.

\(^{75}\) Washington, 241.

city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer-
lasting, costly to the larger society, but not wantonly destructive.”77 Subsequently, as
scholars Smith and Zepp asserted in their work on King’s beloved community, King
advocated for a means that transcended the previous methods of protest that King and
civil rights activists employed in the past.78 King correctly deemed marches, boycotts,
demonstrations, and various forms of sit-ins as incompatible with the atmosphere of
metropolitan life. King also felt that appealing to the goodwill of the federal government
was no longer effective. King’s new call for mass civil disobedience as a strategy to
building the world house rested on the tactic of coercion rather than compromise.79 And
as demonstrated, King argued for the more revolutionary goal of the radical restructuring
of American society. King and the SCLC eventually sought to test this form of
nonviolence in Washington D.C. when they mobilized thousands of America’s poor to
erect a large shantytown in the national mall in what King called the Poor People’s
Campaign.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, King did not live long enough to test his ideas. On the evening of
April 4, 1968, King was struck by an assassin’s bullet while providing assistance to black
sanitation workers in their protest against the unsanitary work conditions and their

77 King, The Trumpet of Conscience, 15.
78 Smith and Zepp, 135-37.
79 Ibid., 15.
dehumanizing treatment. Ralph Abernathy and the SCLC eventually made due on King’s promise to organize a poor people’s march on Washington. Their experiment, however, failed when Capitol police destroyed the encampment known as “Resurrection City.”

King’s rationales behind the Poor People’s Campaign, along with King’s engagement with black power have largely gone unnoticed in the study of intellectual struggles during the Black Power Era. Many Americans and scholars remember King as a “dreamer” who advocated nonviolence and implored people not to judge one another by the color of one’s skin but by the content of one’s character.

The purpose of this chapter was not necessarily an attempt to claim that King abandoned America’s highest civic ideals or that he would have openly acknowledged and continued to employ socialist rhetoric for the rest of his life had he lived longer. This study of King’s political expression from 1955-1968 illustrates that he reconfigured the ways in which he thought, argued, and challenged both civic and racial nationalist counterpublics. King’s abilities to draw from particular discourses in order to construct discursive and rhetorical paradigms that appealed to a diverse group of constituents became apparent after consultation of the evidence. King attracted both liberal whites and southern blacks to the struggle for civil rights with his vision of the beloved community. King interacted in and between different counterpublics. He was able to interpret and

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80 Honey, 501.
81 Joseph is the only historian to analyze King in the context of the Black Power Era. Investigations of King’s political thought in this context are missing in Singh’s and Kelley’s works on black radicalism during the Civil Rights and Black Power Eras. See Joseph, 198-99.
82 Washington, 219.
incorporate various aspects of black power discourse into his thinking during the mid-to-late 1960s. In response to a variety of developments and incidents after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, King began to articulate a more radical discourse that transcended civic and racial nationalisms, emphasizing economic justice and the welfare of all human beings internationally.

There were also some problematic aspects of King’s negotiations of civic nationalist and racial nationalist discourses. It is apparent that King saw himself as a representative of middle-class black men when he discussed the emergence of the “new Negro.” However, he was often silent on black women’s role in the civil rights movement. He was just as silent on black women’s issues generally. Like the leaders of the Panther counterpublic, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver, King tacitly bought into male supremacist concepts and rhetoric such as Moynihan black matriarchy thesis. He also failed to interrogate how racial segregation negatively affected black women and how it shaped their experiences of being black and female in the United States.
Chapter Three:


In 1968 and 1969, activist and writer, Toni Cade Bambara, set out to publish a book about black women’s experiences in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Instead of heeding the suggestion of Dan Watts, the editor of the radical publication, The Liberator, to publish a collection of her own speeches, Bambara aspired to produce a collection showcasing the diverse political views of black women in various political organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Black Panther Party (BPP). She was interested in the work of these women because they “were writing position papers and taking the brothers to task for their foolishness…” Those female representatives, however, were not interested in making their pronouncements public.¹

Bambara encountered more problems in her quest as various publishing houses informed her that the “fabulous” manuscripts of black women would “wind up on the sludge pile because there is no market for Black women’s works.” Consequently, instead of waiting for the women in the civil rights and black power organizations to change

their minds, she focused her energies on creating an anthology featuring the work of a vast array of black women including poets Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and activist Grace Lee Boggs. In what became *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Bambara created a publication that not only “kicked the door open” in terms of producing and selling black women’s literature and non-fiction writing to a wider audience, her anthology laid the textual foundation for an emergent black feminist movement that challenged the discourses of the Civil Rights, Black Power, Feminist Movements, and U.S. policymakers during the 1970s.²

Even though many black female activists-intellectuals such as Frances Beal and Toni Cade Bambara, acted in a variety of roles including political organizers and participants in grassroots movements, this chapter will analyze the development of black feminism as an intellectual movement. In doing so, this discussion will focus on black feminism as a project consisting of books, essays, articles, ideas, and arguments, or what Nancy Fraser calls, a “counterpublic.”³ During the period of 1969 through 1981, black feminists founded an array of organizations and produced a number of position papers, manifestos, organizational publications, poetry, fiction, and non-fictional works questioning the prevailing thought regarding the black women’s roles in the black liberation movement and their positions on the various manifestations of the broader women’s liberation movement. In establishing this counterpublic, they invented their own language, modes of societal analysis, and produced alternative visions for social change.

³ Fraser, 67.
This chapter argues that black women created an emancipatory political discourse in the late 1960s and 1970s to confront the dominant political rhetoric of black power, feminism, and liberalism. This concept of an “emancipatory” discourse refers to feminist philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain’s plea for feminists to “move beyond a view of language as simply or inexorably ‘power over,’ discourse as domination, or discourse as unavoidably masked, toward speech as part of an emancipatory effort, a movement toward social clarity and self comprehension.” Elshtain’s ideas help us understand black feminist’s goals for their intellectual and political activity during this period. For the black women considered in this chapter, building “a movement toward social clarity and self comprehension” required struggling against particular discursive myths and tropes that were dominant during this period. This included their interrogation of problematic and harmful stereotypes such as the castrating matriarch, or the black nationalist belief that they somehow, indirectly or directly, collaborated with white men to oppress black men. Black women argued that black men and women did not have to fulfill the stereotypical images of the gun-toting black militant to participate in the struggle. They also argued that these tropes got in the way of affecting social change. As a result, they sought to create alternatives to the images of black femininity and masculinity embedded in the prevailing black power discourses. Ultimately, black women’s belief that they did not have to adhere to the prevailing nationalist or feminist doctrine in order to achieve racial, sexual, or human liberation made their discourse emancipatory.

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4 Elshtain,129.
Black women’s emancipatory discourse also questioned the liberal and radical feminist idea of a universal sisterhood. While many black feminists understood how sexism impacted their experiences, they often responded with suspicion to calls for sisterhood. Black feminists pointed to legacies of racism as the source of their disagreements with white feminists. They contended that they could not achieve human liberation by subordinating their interests to eradicate racism beneath those of addressing sexism. Black feminist activist-intellectuals called for a theoretical approach analyzing multiple forms of oppression that included at least racism, class discrimination, and sexism. Their efforts contributed towards building “a movement toward social clarity and self comprehension” by challenging black and white women to consider various standpoints when analyzing American society.

Most importantly, black women’s construction and use of this emancipatory discourse represented their efforts to fundamentally question society and address concerns that went beyond, but included, their social position as black women. Often

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5 There were several groups of feminists who struggled for women’s liberation during the late 1960s and 1970s. According to scholar Alice Echols, liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan advocated for women’s entrance into the public sphere. They also pursued social and political reform through legislation, court decisions, or other governmental means. They often advocated for women’s liberation using the liberal language of universal individual rights. Radical feminists rejected the liberal goal of integration into the public sphere, and instead, argued that they needed to fundamentally transform gender and sexual relations. Radical feminists such as Robin Morgan also used a universalist language when talking about women’s liberation. For the purposes of this paper, I conceive of liberal and radical feminism as connected by their activists use of a universalist discourse despite their differences. Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3-4; V.P. Franklin, “Hidden in Plain View: African American Women, Radical Feminism, and the Origins of Women’s Studies Programs, 1967-1974,” The Journal of African American History 87, (Autumn 2002), 437.

seeing the goals of black power activists and white feminists as too narrow—focusing only on addressing racial and sexual exploitation—black feminists aimed to employ a vision that could liberate a broader swath of Americans. Black feminists questioned the efficacy of capitalism, liberalism, black nationalism, and feminism. They were as concerned with the state of the individual as they were with the collective. They sought to develop a language that was critical and could serve as a healing agent in the intra-communal rifts between black women and men. Many women considered in this essay also argued their points through the use of a more inclusive language. While many black feminists argued that white feminists needed to consider black women’s position in American society, most of the women considered in this essay concerned themselves with the human rights cause.

Some historians have also argued that scholars should not view black feminism as a reactionary response to the patriarchy present in the Black Power, Nationalist, and Civil Rights movements. For example, historians Paula Giddings and Deborah Gray White situate twentieth century black women’s political action within a broader historical context of activism.7 Throughout American history, Black women struggled against racial and sexual oppression in a variety of contexts. In addition to Giddings’s and White’s long analyses of the experiences of black women, scholars have also begun to focus on complicating black women’s relationships to black power, black nationalist, and feminist politics during the Civil Rights and Black Power Eras. Many of these studies revolve

around particular organizations and familiar figures such as the women in the Black Panther Party. Scholars have also begun to interrogate the gender relations within particular civil rights and black power organizations, the emergence of a “black” variation of feminism, as well as black feminist’s views on various issues that black women organized around including reproductive and welfare rights. However, despite this necessary focus on black women, only a few scholars have focused on black women’s intellectual efforts during the Black Power Era.

Despite this advance in scholarship, no one has analyzed how black women critically engaged black nationalist and feminist discursive strategies as intellectuals. Scholars such as White and V.P Franklin have done the important work of illustrating the conflicts between black women and male black nationalists and white feminists. But how did black feminists intellectually and discursively respond to the disciplinary and homogenizing aspects of black nationalist and feminist rhetoric? What were some black feminists’ ideas of liberation? What made their visions for social change distinct from black nationalists and feminists? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by

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9 See Robin D.G. Kelley’s chapter on black feminism in Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination for the best example of a historical and intellectual analysis of modern black feminists.
focusing on how some black women confronted these two strains and the emancipatory impulse that they embedded in their political discourse.

To prove that black feminist discourse was emancipatory rather than reactionary, this chapter will interrogate various black women’s writings produced between 1969 and 1981. As stated, the work investigates the questions of black women’s liberation as many black women’s organizations rose and fell during this period, as it became easier for black women to publish their work, and as many began to enter the academy. First, this chapter will highlight the efforts of black women to confront the patriarchal discourse and rhetoric embedded in black nationalism and American liberalism during the late 1960s. Many black male nationalists such as Panther leaders, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale, and US founder and leader, Maulana Karenga argued that the role of the black woman in the black liberation struggle needed to complement black men. If black women asserted themselves in their organizations too aggressively, according to male nationalists, they were emasculating or castrating the men, and thus, undermining the movement. These charges served as a form of internal rhetorical discipline, a way to keep black women in line with the masculinist terms of the movement.\textsuperscript{10} Ironically, the trope of castration gained currency and helped reinforced this rhetorical disciplining after the release of Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report on the black family, \textit{The Black Family: A Case for National Action}, in 1965. Many black Americans believed the report blamed the plight of black Americans on the presence of matriarchal

\textsuperscript{10} Estes, 7-8.
family structures in urban black communities.\textsuperscript{11} The willingness of black men to rely on dominant notions of family, masculinity, and femininity not only reflected what scholar E. Frances White refers to as the internal conservatism of the black nationalist counterpublic, but also a patriarchal convergence among black and white American men interested in building and enhancing their nations.\textsuperscript{12}

Next, this chapter will explore how black women’s political discourse addressed the shortcomings of mainstream and radical feminism. Many white female activist-intellectuals such as Betty Friedan and Robin Morgan shaped their feminist ideas around a universalist discourse of “woman” and “sisterhood.”\textsuperscript{13} However, many black women felt this discourse failed to account for black women’s experiences of multiple and simultaneous oppressions. Black feminists such as Frances Beal advocated for an intersectional analysis of oppression. Rather than analyzing society from exclusively the point of gender or sex, many black women simultaneously employed gender and racial lenses (as well as class and sex) to examine their positions in society. This approach did not include a zero-sum proposition as some white radical feminists like Morgan assumed in her introduction to her groundbreaking 1970 anthology, \textit{Sisterhood is Powerful: An


Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement. Black women did not believe that their perspective was a matter of choosing between fighting racism or sexism. Their standpoint reflected their experiences of being black and female in a nation built on the racial and sexual oppression of black women. Black feminist intellectuals such as novelist Toni Morrison and communist Angela Davis also argued that the historical construction of race in the United States created differences in analyses of topics such as family, reproductive rights, and rape.

Finally, I will concentrate on the question of how black women envisioned social change. Black women created broad visions of society that were distinct from black power and feminist counterpublics. Some women offered micro-approaches to liberation while others such as Angela Davis grafted their visions onto already existing left socialist and communist paradigms. Some black feminists only focused on healing and wholeness within the black community while others like Frances Beal envisioned a fight for human rights for women in the underdeveloped, or Third World, nations. Other feminist intellectuals such as bell hooks, aspired to redefine the concept of feminism in a manner that accommodated the diverse perspectives and experiences of a broad swath of women. What made their discourse emancipatory, however, were several of the women’s refutations of prevailing nationalist and feminist discourses and their broad visions of human liberation.
This chapter focuses on a broad cross-section of the first generation of modern black feminist thinkers. These women hail from a variety of backgrounds—graduate students, prominent activists, fiction writers, and politicians. The black women who contributed to Toni Cade Bambara’s 1970 anthology comprise the foundation of the black feminist counterpublic while the works of other black women appear in book form or in other journals and publications. This chapter is not exhaustive in terms of sources, nor does this study presume that black feminists were ideologically homogenous. Not all black female activist-intellectuals were hostile to the ideas of national liberation for black Americans. Many black women such as Bambara, at times, only disagreed with the tactics and the rhetorical and discursive disciplining of black females. Of course not all women were progressive in every area as some were not receptive to lesbianism in their ranks. What draws these women together in this analysis, however, is their participation in the crucial rhetorical and discursive debates with black nationalism, American liberalism, and feminism and their employment of emancipatory discourse as a means to achieving human liberation.

Castrating Matriarchs? Black Women Confront Patriarchy in Black and White

Black nationalists’ and American liberals’ rhetoric of male superiority represented one discursive sphere of intellectual debate for black feminists. Even though black nationalists saw themselves as rebels against a racist white America, both male nationalists such as US founder Maulana Karenga and white American policy makers such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, created and reinforced the rhetorical myth of the black woman as a matriarchal figure in the black community. Many black male nationalists and Moynihan pointed to the perceived matriarchal family structures in the black community as the explanation for black plight in the United States. They believed that male dominance, or patriarchy, was the basis for establishing and maintaining a proper social movement or society. Consequently, both black male nationalists and white American policymakers saw black women as potential threats to their movement and/or national stability.

Black nationalism emerged as the dominant political ideology in the black freedom struggle after Stokely Carmichael’s call for “black power” during the Meredith March Against Fear in June 1966.¹⁵ Black power discourse was a flexible concept that accommodated a variety of political outlooks. Self-described revolutionary nationalist organizations such as the Black Panther Party initially advocated for self-determination for black Americans and international socialism.¹⁶ Organizations such as US, however, endorsed a cultural approach to black liberation. According to Karenga, black Americans

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¹⁵ Joseph, 143.

¹⁶ Jeffries, Huey P. Newton, 69-78.
had to embrace and organize around their “African” heritage. The Nation of Islam (NOI) also remained active during the late 1960s and emphasized economic development among black Americans. Although the black nationalist thought among organizations and individual black Americans was not homogenous, many nationalists advocated conservative and misogynist views regarding gender and sexuality.

Male nationalists such as Karenga endorsed patriarchal gender roles within their organizations and the black community. For example, Karenga endorsed the traditional distinction between the public and private spheres. Black women were to solely focus on the roles of mother and wife. The role of black women, Karenga stated was to “to inspire her man, educate their children, and participate in social development.” According to Karenga, submissiveness lay at the heart of femininity while “tradition, acceptance, and reason” were the justified male supremacy. For him, drawing on dominant patriarchal ideas represented a restoration of black male respect lost during the eras of American history defined by racism. Karenga’s understanding of gender roles also served a practical purpose because he believed that endorsing male-headed households would ensure stability within the black nation.

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18 E. Frances White, 121.

19 Halisi and Mtume, 20.

20 Ibid., 21.
This emphasis on the subservience of black women and their return to the private sphere accentuated black men’s fears of female assertiveness and the belief that matriarchy in the black community explained the oppression of black Americans. The trope of the black matriarchal family gained currency in American political discourse when the Federal Government released Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on the black family. As part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative, Moynihan investigated urban black Americans mired in poverty. Even though Moynihan acknowledged the negative impact of slavery and racism on black Americans, he argued that family breakdown was the fundamental issue plaguing urban African Americans. Thus, for Moynihan, matriarchy became the problem. Black women, Moynihan reported, were more educated and more likely to find employment than their male counterparts. These circumstances, according to Moynihan, demoralized black men who were expected to care for their families. Many black men subsequently ceded familial power to women. Thus, Moynihan concluded, the government needed to assist in uplifting black men and restore patriarchy among urban black Americans. Ultimately black nationalists drew upon Moynihan’s logic of “presumed male leadership” and began to argue for the subservience of black women in the liberation movement.\(^{21}\)

Moynihan’s matriarchy thesis also contributed indirectly to some black men’s belief that assertive black women somehow collaborated with white men to destroy the black community or hinder the black liberation movement. Their understanding of black

oppression engendered the rhetorical trope of the “castrating” black woman or matriarch in black nationalist discourse. Black male nationalists often employed this metaphor or logic to discipline black women who did not fulfill certain “feminine” characteristics such as deference, or put the interests of black male “warriors,” the black nation, or the black liberation movement first. Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver articulated this fear in his fictional chapter on race, gender, and sexuality in America in his book, *Soul on Ice*, “The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs.” In twisted logic, Cleaver argued that black leaders might be able to ensure unity among black Americans if they promised “every black man a white woman and every black woman a white man.” Then he elaborated,

> There is a war going on between the black man and the black woman, which makes her the silent ally, indirectly but effectively, of the white man. The black woman is an unconsenting ally and she may not even realize it—but the white man sure does. That’s why, all through history, he has propped her up economically above you and me, to strengthen her hand against us.

Cleaver’s line of thought in this passage is consistent with Moynihan’s idea that black women’s ability to earn more contributed to the emasculating conditions that black men had to endure. The difference for Cleaver, however, was that white men actively pursued a policy of economically privileges black women over men with the intent of demoralizing black men.

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22 In Chapter 1, I argued that the male Panthers’ emphasis on female subservience and deference in their conceptions of female citizenship reflected what Cynthia Enloe described as “patriarchal nationalism.” Particularly, I contend that many of the Panther women who appear in Panther texts such as Seale’s *Seize the Time* resemble what Enloe termed as the “ego-stroking girlfriend.” See Chapter 1 of this thesis and Enloe, 62.

Angela Davis and female member of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown, encountered this line of thought and rhetoric during some of their encounters with black men. In Brown’s autobiography, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story*, she recounted an interaction where a male member of US accused Brown and one of her friends of “‘unsisterly’” behavior because they challenged a rule outlining the procedure of serving food. Davis wrote that black men in Karenga’s US criticized her for her role in organizing a rally supporting Ed Lynn in San Diego in 1967. Apparently, male members of US accused Davis of “doing ‘a man’s job.’”24 Like many black female organizers, Brown and Davis resisted this “patriarchal nationalism” in action and in print.25

In the 1970s, black female activist-intellectuals focused their efforts on refuting the particularly constrictive rhetorical myth of aggressive black women, or the castrating matriarch. Reflecting these women’s diverse concerns, backgrounds, and viewpoints, many female activist-intellectuals used an array of methods to address different audiences. Some activist-intellectuals like Angela Davis used the Moynihan Report as a point of entry into the debate. In her 1971 article and one of the most thorough analyses of Moynihan’s thesis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” Davis contested Moynihan’s interpretation of the role that American slavery played in the construction of a matriarchal family structure that helped to foster the oppressive conditions in which lower class urban black Americans suffered. She believed that labeling the black family as matriarchal did not account for the imposed instability


25 Enloe, 62.
on the structure. Even though Moynihan acknowledged the destructive nature of enslavement on black families, Davis maintained that Moynihan’s patriarchal point of view hindered him from analyzing the troubles of the black community generally and black women’s circumstances specifically, from the standpoint of female slaves.

Davis disagreed with analyzing the dire circumstances that many urban black Americans found themselves in during the 1960s through a lens that presumed a natural familial, and thus communal and national, order where male breadwinners dominated. Instead of translating racial oppression into a problem emphasizing the absence of patriarchy, Davis contended that one must privilege the black female’s perspective and examine what she called the “historical matrix of her oppression.” This matrix characterized certain realities of enslavement such as the rough division, and thus imposed communal stratification, of labor among slave men and women. Davis argued that the slaveholding class based this matrix on patriarchy. As a result, this system created the various roles that forced female slaves to bear the responsibility of caring for children, perform certain kinds of labor not usually demarcated for women such as field work, and importantly to maintain slave life in the domestic quarter.26

Davis also cited the issue of power, or lack thereof, as the primary reason why it was incorrect for individuals like Moynihan to label slave families, and later black families, as matriarchal or for black male activists to argue that black women had allied themselves with white men. Due to what Davis deemed as the “matrix of her oppression,” black women did not compete for these responsibilities as, Davis wrote, they “naturally’

fell to her.” In essence, female slaves did not have the authority to create a familial structure they could control. Female slaves did not have the ability to impose their will on black men or on American society through their familial roles. Despite these circumstances, however, female slaves were able to muster the means to provide the necessary care for children and men and create and maintain a base of resistance. Thus, Davis contended, female slaves or black women should not be seen as collaborators with white men. Female slaves resisted and acted with the interests of the black community at heart.27

Davis’s investigation of female slaves not only demonstrated the efficacy of analyzing the history of the black community and the development of the United States from the perspectives of both race and gender, but her logic also reflected her concerns regarding the role of black women in the modern black liberation movement. The argument that particular roles “naturally” fell to female slaves is consistent with Davis’ criticisms of black male nationalists’ expectations of black women refraining from political organizing and serving as an “inspiration to her man.” When she described US members accusing her of doing “a man’s job” in her Autobiography, Davis asserted that her responsibilities had also “fallen to her by default.” In fact, she stated, her duties helping to organize a 1967 rally in San Diego was not necessarily a result of racial oppression, but instead a consequence of the questionable work ethic of some male members of the organization that she worked for at the time, the Black Panther Political Party (BPPP). Davis also criticized black male activists for their equation of political

activism and masculinity. This logic, according to Davis, promoted a type of zero-sum thinking about the structure of political organizing among black male activists and motivated the rhetorical disciplining black female activists.28

Lawyer and civil rights activist, Pauli Murray, also penned a scathing rebuke of the male supremacist tendencies of the Black Freedom Movement. In an essay that she published in 1970, “The Liberation of Black Women,” Murray saw her contemporary political struggles for political power as one among men. Murray argued that the political rhetoric in electoral politics revealed black men’s sense of entitlement to holding elected office and power. She pointed to James Farmer’s 1968 campaign against Shirley Chisholm as evidence. According to Murray, Farmer’s campaign emphasized “the need for a ‘strong male image’ and a ‘man’s voice’ in Washington.” She also acknowledged the convergence between black and white men around male supremacist values. Despite their awareness of the connections between racism and sexism, Murray argued that black men’s aspirations for self-determination were really a move to share patriarchal power with white men. According to Murray black male militants tacitly accepted the matriarchy thesis because of their emphasis on their calls for and expressions of masculinity. While Murray voiced her opinion on the pressing issue regarding the roles that black women had to play in black and women’s liberation, she held a more liberal understanding of race than some of the other subjects in this analysis. She spoke in liberal terms of equal opportunity with regard to black women’s aspirations to compete in the American economy. Murray also disagreed with the separatist tendencies prevalent

during the Black Power Era. She contended that it was black women’s responsibility to question black men’s motives for power and to pressure them into adopting a more inclusive vision of liberation.  

Many other black women also used their voices to challenge black male nationalists, and black men in general who used the idea of the castrating matriarch as a way of demarcating gender roles within the movement in the ways in which Davis described. Freelance artist, Fran Sanders argued in an essay published in Bambara’s anthology that black women helped to ensure the survival of the black community. She approved the concept of racial group uplift, but urged activists that, “if we are now all finally finding our voices to assert ourselves as a race, let it not be at her expense.”  

Harlem community worker, Joyce Green, also recognized the disciplining effects of the rhetoric of castration and emasculation on black women’s abilities to voice their concerns within the movement in her essay in The Black Woman. A woman’s capacity to critique a particular organization or movement’s values was important for Green because female activist-intellectuals were able to point out contradictions in values and ask questions of the movement that seemed to fall outside the purview of male black nationalists such as that as men’s fixation on violent political action and the prospects of having to raise

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children by themselves upon a partner’s death. Eliminating black men’s option to employ this particular discourse, according to Green, would allow black women to hold men, especially their companions, accountable for their actions.

Women such as the chairperson of the National Black Student Association, and former chair of SNCC’s Black Women’s Liberation Committee, Gwen Patton, also questioned men’s views on femininity and masculinity in their discussions of the myths of the castrating matriarch. Similar to Davis, black men’s discursive use of this myth was related to their prerogatives as male activists during the Black Power Era. Patton attributed male and female’s beliefs in the rhetoric and discourse of castration and emasculation was a product of what she called the “Victorian Philosophy.” Black men’s adherence to this philosophy represented further evidence the convergence between black male nationalists and white American men as this philosophy privileged the norm of presumed male superiority characterizing mainstream American society.

Patton understood this convergence because she noticed that Moynihan emphasized the negative effects of a “matriarchal” family structure on black men in his report and black men used this argument to marginalize black women in the movement. Therefore, black male activists’ aspirations to rhetorically discipline women and assign “appropriate” gendered roles to women was related to their efforts to enhance their masculinity and advance male leadership within the movement. Patton sarcastically stated, “It is true that Black Power shook many Black men and for the Movement this

32 Ibid., 173.

33 Bambara, 179.
was a necessary and vitalizing force. Black men could respond positively toward Black Power and could assert their leadership, which included a strengthening of their masculinity and, unfortunately, an airing of their egos.” Patton then accused male black power advocates of “keeping their women in line by oppressing them more.” For Patton, the gender roles in the movement reflected black women’s oppression. “Women, Black and white,” Patton declared, “have monopolies on typewriters and children while men have monopolies on revolutionary planning, decision-making, and guns.”\(^{34}\) Patton’s arguments against this myth illustrated the seemingly interrelated nature between the discourse and rhetoric of emasculation and castration, black power political activism, and masculinity and femininity.\(^{35}\) But she also connected her reasoning to a broader analysis of American society.

Activist Mary Ann Weathers also recognized this convergence in her defense of black women’s liberation, “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force.” Published in 1970, Weathers proclaimed that black men were “still parroting the master’s prattle about male superiority.” She also argued that black women were not “matriarchs,” but they had “been forced to live in abandonment and been used and abused.” Although Weathers saw black men’s adherence to male supremacy and the matriarchal myth as obstacles to black women’s liberation, she did not view black men as adversaries. She did, however, imply that various aspects of male supremacy—the stereotypical roles of women as sex objects and domestic workers—was a value that

\(^{34}\) Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 183-84.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 184.
white men instilled in women. Weathers envisioned women’s liberation as a means to form alliances with black men and what she called a “pro-human force for all peoples.”

Black feminist intellectuals such as Frances Beal, Bambara, author Jean Carey Bond, and organizer Patricia Peery also used their critiques of the rhetoric of castration and emasculation to criticize American capitalism, sexism, and racism. Twisting the discourses of castration and emasculation, and consistent with the concept of militarized heterosexuality, Beal and Bambara employed the castration and emasculation metaphors in their depiction of the plight of black men. According to Beal and Bambara, black women were not responsible for emasculating black men; the American systems of capitalism and male supremacy “castrated” black men. Beal, in her influential essay, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” asserted that black women could not have been willing oppressors of black men as capitalism subjugated black men “without consultation or the signing of agreements with black women.” She also considered it “counterrevolutionary” for black men to turn inward and try to usurp a sense of authority and reduce black women to the private sphere. In their piece published in Bambara’s anthology, “Is the Black Male Castrated?” Bond and Peery also make the case that whites such as Moynihan sought to emasculate black men with their use and endorsement of black matriarchy. They also contended that American capitalism “pitted Black man

36 Guy-Sheftall, 158-60.
38 Ibid., 113.
39 Ibid., 145, 147.
against Black woman and vice-versa.” Similar to Davis, Beal, Bond, and Peery agreed that it was disingenuous for anyone to assume that black women collaborated, or aspired to do so, with white America to castrate black men due to their lack of power and to what they perceived to be the multiple oppressions afflicting them.

**Universal Sisterhood? Black Women Forge Their Own Path**

Although black women sought to debunk the myths and critique the relationships between (black) femininity, (black) masculinity, American liberal capitalism, and black nationalism, black feminists also felt the need to respond to the emergent feminist discourse. Prominent white feminists such as Robin Morgan constructed their arguments for women’s liberation around a universalist political discourse and rhetoric that failed to account for the differences—historical, political, and personal—between different groups of women. Like many black nationalists, Morgan also characterized the struggle for women’s liberation in zero-sum terms; black women chose to either fight for black or women’s liberation. Many black female activist-intellectuals such as Linda LaRue, Toni Morrison, and Frances Beal criticized the predominantly white women’s liberation movement due to what they perceived to be a glaring shortcoming in theory. However, not all black feminists were as critical of the idea of an interracial feminism. United States Representative Shirley Chisholm, Pauli Murray, and Mary Ann Weathers acknowledged the potentials of such a movement. Ultimately, most black female activist-intellectuals argued for a more complex analysis, one that emphasized the standpoints of black women. For black women such as Beal, LaRue, and Murray, thinking and acting
from the black female’s point of view entailed analyzing the multiple jeopardies of race, class, gender, and sexuality that affected many black women.

A feminist construction of universal woman and sisterhood first became prominent when Betty Friedan published her landmark 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*. In her book, Friedan, feminist organizer, leading member of President John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women, and founder of the National Women’s Organization (NOW), postulated that women suffered from “the problem that has no name.” According to Friedan, this anonymous problem revolved around the day-to-day lives of suburban housewives, women who usually had to subordinate their own personal ambitions in order to focus on their domestic life. Although Friedan was able to capture the attention and imagination of American women with her piece, “The Problem that Has No Name,” her message seemed to be conflicted. Friedan often spoke in general terms about women that often reduced them into an undifferentiated mass. She asserted that “the problem that has no name was shared by countless in America” and cited individual examples, but there was not any mention of who the dissatisfied women were besides differentials in age and location. Simultaneously, based upon her examples of individual women and her emphasis on housewifery, Friedan’s message seemed to address a particular segment of women—white, middle-class, and suburban. Her formulations set the tone for white feminist discourse and provided a target for black female activist-intellectuals such as Linda LaRue.

40 Collier Thomas & Franklin, 286; Giddings, 299.

Modern radical black and white feminism emerged and evolved out of black and white women’s experiences in the Civil Rights and New Left Movements during the mid-1960s.\(^{42}\) White women were the first to take a feminist stance during this period when white female members of SNCC, Mary King and Casey Hayden, drafted the “Position Paper” and “A Kind of Memo” in 1964 and 1965 in response to SNCC’s shift in perspective. In these essays, King and Hayden criticized SNCC for its endorsement of black nationalism, the unfair relegation of women to clerical positions, and advocated for the return to the group-centered leadership that the organization utilized in its formative years. Black females in SNCC, however, reacted coolly to King and Hayden’s critiques because while many black women may have experienced sexism, they also held prominent positions in the organization. Scholars such Kristin Anderson-Bricker also point to sexual relationships between black men and white women during the 1964 Freedom Summer Project as a source of tension among black and white women.\(^{43}\)

The rhetorical and discursive conceptions and utterances of universal woman and sisterhood gained additional relevance in 1970 with Robin Morgan’s influential anthology, *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology from the Women’s Liberation Movement*.\(^{44}\) In her introduction, Morgan sought to create a group-based identity for


\(^{43}\) Springer, 55-56; Giddings, 302.

\(^{44}\) It should also be noted that feminists were not a monolith as Morgan separated her politics from the more liberal stance of Betty Friedan who advocated for the expansion of female opportunity apart from the private sphere. Morgan, however, liberal and radical feminist discourse both aspired to create a protest
radical feminists. Morgan often contended that personal experiences of sexism were “shared by every woman.”\footnote{Morgan, xvii.} Morgan’s arrangement of writers and essays, however, demonstrated that she was aware of class and racial differences. Her inclusion and organization of black women and lesbian writers into specific categories in her text also illustrated that she acknowledged the significance of these point of view. Yet, despite her recognition, she still approached racial difference more as a problem to be solved and transcended in the name of women’s liberation.\footnote{Ibid., xxv.} Thus, Morgan seemed to advance a sex first and zero-sum proposition for black women’s political options. According to Morgan, sexism was the foundation of oppression and she framed black women’s struggle against racism as a “priority oppression” and a choice, rather than the necessary fight against the intersection and simultaneity of multiple oppressions.\footnote{Ibid., xxvi.}

Many black female activist-intellectuals responded to the burgeoning women’s liberation movement and its push for a universal sisterhood during the 1970s with suspicion. There were a variety of motivations for this response to the idea of universal sisterhood among black feminists. The main impetus of Toni Morrison’s and Frances Beal’s responses reflected their aspirations of creating a black woman’s political discourse that addressed at least racism and sexism. Their replies also revolved around their questions of racial privilege in American society. Morrison answered her own

\footnote{Morgan, xvii.}
\footnote{Ibid., xxv.}
\footnote{Ibid., xxvi.}
question, “What do black women feel about Woman’s Lib?” in her 1971 *New York Times* essay with one word: “Distrust.”\(^{48}\) Then she explained her response as one based upon her understandings of black women’s historical experiences with working with white women for the cause of women’s rights, “…too many movements and organizations have made deliberate overtures to enroll blacks and have ended up by rolling them. They don’t want to be used again to help somebody gain power—a power that is carefully kept out of their hands.”\(^{49}\) Frances Beal also echoed Morrison’s sentiments when interviewed by the *New York Times* a year earlier. Discussing her views of what she perceived as a white-dominated movement, Beal asked, “What makes us think that white women, given the positions of the system, would not turn around and use their white skin for the same white privilege?”\(^{50}\) They recognized that collaborating with white feminists and participating in the women’s liberation movement presented a threat to black female activist-intellectuals. If black women enlisted their support and efforts, according to Beal and Morrison, their cause would suffer at the hands of white women as they risked having their realities of being both “black” and “female” subsumed under the discursive guise of a perceived white-led women’s liberation movement.

Shirley Chisholm, Mary Ann Weathers, and Pauli Murray did not voice any concerns about struggling for women’s liberation with white women or regarding the idea


\(^{49}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{50}\) “Many Blacks in U.S. are Wary of ‘Women’s Liberation’ Drive,” *New York Times* (November 17, 1970), 60.
of sisterhood. In a 1970 article that Chisholm published in *The Black Scholar*, she spoke of, and to, women in general terms. She never qualified women with “black” when discussing the path that women should take towards liberation. In her article, Chisholm encouraged women to become “revolutionaries” and to resist traditional gender roles and stereotypes.\(^5^1\) Mary Ann Weathers also acknowledged that all women shared the indignities of sexism. In “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force,” she argued that “all women suffer oppression, even white women…”\(^5^2\) Weathers suggested that women should seek to dialogue about their experiences with women from diverse backgrounds. Pauli Murray presented a more nuanced analysis of black women’s place in the women’s liberation movement. She argued that racism (“Jim Crow”) and sexism (“Jane Crow”) victimized black women in America. Murray defined Jane Crow as the “entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements that robbed women of a positive self-concept and prevented them from participating fully in society as equals with men.”\(^5^3\) Then she proceeded to use the two concepts to analyze black women’s position in American society. Murray’s conception of “Jane Crow” and her method of analysis in “The Liberation of Black Women” coincided with Beal’s idea of double jeopardy and the analysis of American society from the standpoint of race and sex. What Murray did not share with Beal or Morrison was the feeling of skepticism towards white feminists.

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\(^5^1\) Shirley Chisholm, “Racism and Anti-Feminism,” *Black Scholar* Vol. 1, No. 3-4 (January-February 1970), 42.

\(^5^2\) Ibid., 160.

\(^5^3\) Guy-Sheftall, 186.
Although Murray argued that black women were “key figures at the juncture of the two [black and women’s liberation] movements,” she maintained that the causes and fates of white and black women were inseparable.\(^{54}\)

Essentially, Black women advocated for a perspective that exclusively accounted for black women’s multiple or intersection of oppressions. Instead of using Friedan’s phraseology—“the problem with no name”—to describe the circumstances of black women, Beal coined the phrase “double jeopardy” as a way of analyzing the historical conditions of black women. The racialized capitalist system played a fundamental role in creating harmful norms that economically and sexually oppressed black women.\(^{55}\) Black women were caught in this predicament, as Beal called it, where “She [the black woman] could often find work in the white man’s kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family.”\(^{56}\) Consequently, Beal argued, this arrangement negatively affected black men and women because of the capitalist constructions of masculinity and femininity and gender roles. Black men, and especially male nationalists, believed that realigning the gender order within the black community and movement would result in moving the cause of black liberation forward. Thus, black women often had to be aware of not just sexism, but the many ways in which other groups, discourses, and structures disciplined them. Morrison’s presentation of the black woman’s perspective was not as complex as Beal’s analysis. However, Morrison’s proclamation

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 196.

\(^{55}\) Bambara, \textit{The Black Woman}, 110.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 110.
regarding the role of black women was consistent with the broader purpose that Beal seemed to be reaching for in their analyses, “I view my role of black women is to continue to struggle in concert with black men for the liberation and self-determination of blacks.” This willingness to employ a more complicated outlook of what they conceived of as the black woman’s experience, coupled with the rhetorical embrace of black men and community, ultimately generated more nuanced outlooks on many of the issues that both white and black women cared about and social change generally.

“To Touch and Unify”: Alternative Visions of Liberation

Although black women responded to the prominent rhetorical discourses during the late 1960s and 1970s, they also constructed an emancipatory discourse that freed black men and women from dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity. Black feminists also introduced their own visions of social change. These visions included revolutions in thinking about family life, society, and feminism. Of course, not all black women proposed a single framework for rethinking all of these concepts. But many of the female activist-intellectuals who engaged in questioning the standards of manhood, womanhood, the family and social change did so in a language that was both critical and more inclusive, at least for African Americans and other people of color, than their liberal and radical feminist and black nationalist counterparts.

As could one could gather from the discussion of the matriarchal myth, black women were eager to reconceptualize the meanings of femininity and masculinity for

\[\text{Morrison, 15.}\]
black Americans. They wanted to do so in a way that accounted for the history of the black experience from slavery to the post-segregationist moment. Women such as performer Abbey Lincoln and Fran Sanders also criticized black men for trying to dictate standards of beauty based on what they felt were attractive. In a piece originally published in a 1966 edition of the *Negro Digest* and later reprinted in Bambara’s anthology, “To Whom Will She Cry Rape,” Lincoln questioned black men’s adherence to a standard of beauty based upon whiteness. While Lincoln disapproved of black men’s efforts to hold black women to a standard of beauty based upon a romanticized image of white womanhood, Sanders argued that black women should have the ability to choose and define their own standards of beauty. According to Sanders the “color” of the values did not matter as much as the woman’s right to create and strive for her own image of beauty.  

Black female intellectual-activists were also highly critical of the stereotypical image of the male black militant as a gun-toting, misogynist, fiery rhetorician. In, “On the Issue of Roles,” Bambara declares that, in fact, black men were eager to transcend that image. She stated, “One was the most men are just as eager to get off the how-many-babies-I’ve-laid-this-week treadmill and get down to the business of love…” Joyce Green also echoed these sentiments, “Black men don’t have to be the baddest nigger alive in order to be important. […] Black men must do some soul-searching, must be honest with themselves, must expose their shortcomings even when it hurts; they must internally, first

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define their identities.” Bambara and Green both observed that while black power may have been a “psychological call to manhood,” as Dr. King described it in his 1967 book, *Chaos or Community: Where Do We Go From Here?*, this brand of manhood did not emphasize a wide range of potential models for manhood that could be helpful in addressing the problems regarding the gendered roles of men and women participating in the black liberation movement and the importance of creating healthy personal relationships between black men and women.60

In contrast to some mainstream feminists such as Pat Mainardi who saw family life as a potential impediment to women’s liberation, Bambara, Kay Lindsey, and activist Linda LaRue presented visions of the family based upon a sense of egalitarianism rather than hierarchy. In “On the Issue of Roles,” Bambara envisioned a model of the family that did not fit the private-public dichotomy that separated the affairs of the private (and usually women in the context of American culture) from that of the public (which was based upon “male” prerogatives in the realms of economics and politics).61 The black family, Bambara argued, should resemble an institution that is an extension of a revolutionary fighting unit. Bambara drew upon Fanon’s conception of the Algerian family that was democratic and based upon participating in the struggle for national liberation. In essence, the family was always a series of relationships between mother(s), father(s), daughter(s), and son(s) that were in constant negotiation. In the process of

59 Ibid., 131 & 177.

60 King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, 38.

61 I would also add epistemology, which means the construction of knowledge.
creating family, according to Bambara, it “was no longer a socially ordained nuclear unit to perpetuate the species or legitimize sexuality, but an extended kinship of cellmates and neighbors linked in the business of actualizing a vision of a liberated society.” The egalitarian nature of Bambara’s model was meant to counter an American model of family based on a patriarchal hierarchy that policymakers such as Moynihan were interested in installing in black communities via public policy.⁶²

Linda LaRue introduced the concept of “role integration” as her answer to how African Americans could liberate themselves from the prevailing gender roles and hierarchal constructions of the family. Similar to Bambara, LaRue also saw the established patriarchal model of the family as the fundamental issue important to black women. Instead of using the model of the dominant group, LaRue encouraged black men and women to strive to create their own type of family through role integration. Role integration, as LaRue vaguely defined it, was the notion that “ego attachments to particular activities or traits must be abolished as a method of determining malehood and femalehood.”⁶³ She contended that African Americans should analyze the construction of gender roles in American families and redistribute ego attachments across a broader spectrum of tasks coded as male or female.

Many of the women considered in this essay developed broad theories of liberation that transcended group interest in the American electoral system. Women such as Beal, Bambara, and organizations such as the Third World Women’s Alliance and the


⁶³ LaRue, 40.
Combahee River Collective, based their radical visions on the desire to achieve human rights. In “Double Jeopardy” Beal wrote of wiping out “oppression of any type” in the efforts to create a “New World.” Similar to the desires of many revolutionary nationalist black power groups such as the Panthers, Beal’s vision included rhetorical calls for a “people’s revolution” and liberating colonized people throughout the Third World.\(^{64}\) Beal also saw liberation as a process of self-transformation. She challenged individuals not to wholeheartedly embrace the apocalyptic rhetoric of violent struggle akin to Cleaver’s pronouncements of guerilla warfare. Instead, according to Beal, participants should develop what she deemed a “high political consciousness,” and alter their daily lives since their present conditions restrained both men and women. This meant rethinking gender roles. This argument makes Beal’s idea of liberation emancipatory. Her vision was not one advocating just for the improvement of black women’s lives, but also for black male uplift.\(^{65}\) However, there was a catch. Liberation, could not be achieved if all participants did not acknowledged black women’s complex position in society.

Mary Ann Weathers and Pauli Murray also saw women’s liberation as part of a larger human rights struggle. While, at times, Weathers expressed herself in a more adversarial fashion, she crafted her arguments for women’s liberation on the assumption that social change should occur from the bottom up. Weathers argued the movement should build solidarity with poor women because capitalism was the fundamental problem. While Murray’s arguments for gender equality were more reformist, Weathers

\(^{64}\) Bambara, *The Black Woman*, 121; “Many Blacks in U.S. are Wary,” 60.

claimed that upper-class male capitalists used sexism as a tool of oppression. Consequently, Weathers advocated mass action. She concluded her essay with the following question and statement: “But think for a moment if we all go together and just walk on out. Who would fight his wars, who would run his police state, who would work his factories, who would buy his products? We women must start this thing rolling.” For Weathers, women would lead the way towards human liberation. Pauli Murray’s thinking about human rights coincided with Weathers’ ideas. Murray created her visions, however, in opposition to what she perceived as the separatist tendencies within the Black Power Movement. But Murray constructed her arguments using inclusive language. She declared that “the lesson of history that all human rights are indivisible and that the failure to adhere to this principle jeopardizes the rights of all is particularly applicable here.” Murray concluded her essay with an appeal for racial reconciliation rather than polarization and cooperation among black and white women.

Toni Cade Bambara’s idea of liberation also oscillated between the social and the individual. However, she emphasized the role and the concept of the self as the fundamental revolutionary unit. In both essays included in her anthology, Bambara often proclaimed that the revolution began “with the self, in the self.” Similar to Beal’s insights, Bambara also argued that black Americans must commit to changing themselves first because failing to do so endangers “the couple or pair” and “jeopardize the still

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66 Guy-Sheftall, 161.
67 Ibid., 197.
larger unit—the family or cell, that put the entire movement in peril." Bambara’s theory also shied away from embracing other dominant political discourses and models such as Marxism, black nationalism, and new leftist politics. She declared those models defunct due to what she thought as a lack of flexibility and the realities of sectarianism. Bambara believed that black Americans would have to use their own political imaginations to create far reaching visions of liberation.  

Communist Angela Davis and feminist scholar bell hooks also aspired to construct comprehensive feminist analyses. In 1981, both women published sweeping works documenting histories of black women’s experiences, sexism, racism, and women’s liberation. Employing an integrated analysis of race, gender, and class, Davis’s *Women, Race, and Class* and hooks’s *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* confronted many of the issues that their feminist predecessors addressed in the late 1960s and 1970s. Both women contended that scholars, policy makers, and other male decision makers neglected black women’s lives and experiences in their historical analyses of racism and black Americans. Consequently, this oversight led to assumptions that black women did not actively resist racism and sexism and it allowed for the creation of myths and stereotypes such as the black matriarch and the promiscuous black woman. Davis and hooks maintained that the institutions of enslavement, racial segregation, patriarchy, and

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69 Bambara, 133-34.
capitalism not only created the conditions that led to the degradation of black Americans, but to the “continued devaluation of black womanhood.”

In *Ain’t I a Woman*, hooks revealed the connections between male supremacy and violence in a concept that she called “the imperialism of patriarchy.” This imperialism of patriarchy represented black and white men’s unspoken agreement about their dominance in gender relations. According to hooks, black and white men bonded over sexism. hooks also argued that black and white men “accepted violence as the primary way to assert power.” She then stated that white men responded “to black male violence with the excitement and glee men have traditionally expressed when going to war.” While Pauli Murray saw power as central to men’s adherence to patriarchy, hooks added a decisive element to the equation—the male preoccupation with violence. Despite the fact that hooks fails to offer any concrete examples, black power organizations such as the Black Panther Party made violence, either through threatening rhetoric, visual threats, or the actual use of firearms, central to their arguments for self-determination. In essence, black male nationalists began to communicate in the same violent terms as white men.

While hooks and Davis contributed valuable historical analyses of black women’s experiences, they also critiqued feminism and made suggestions for the future direction of black women’s activism. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis argued for a broad based women’s revolution that would eventually fuse into a movement for socialism. For this to occur, however, the women’s movement would have to adopt more nuanced views of

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70 hooks, 51.
71 hooks, 99.
feminist issues, such as rape and reproductive rights, that were prevalent during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Regarding anti-rape advocacy, Angela Davis argued that white feminists such as Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* and Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* failed to acknowledge the historical circumstances that led to white Americans’ use of the charge of rape as a means of hindering black men’s economic, political, and social success. According to Davis, black women hesitated to join in the feminist chorus deploring rape because of the history of white men using the specter of rape to create damaging racial stereotypes—the black male rapist and the promiscuous black female—and to lynch black men.\(^72\) Instead of conceiving of all men as potential rapists, Davis contended, women should apply an integrated analysis of race, class, and gender in their analyses. She encouraged women to ask how class privilege implied a sense of sexual immunity for wealthy men. She also encouraged white feminists to develop a more inclusive language and analysis to discuss this issue. Their tacit adherence to the myth of the black male rapist alienated black women from their movement.\(^73\)

Davis also argued that the women’s movement also needed to pay attention to the working-class and black women’s views on the subjects of reproduction and housework. While Davis agreed that women’s liberation depended upon women’s access to birth control, she maintained that the women’s movement had failed to properly organize working-class women in their efforts to ensure a woman’s right to reproductive

\(^72\) Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 182.

\(^73\) Ibid., 200-01.
freedom. But she saw the potential for women’s advocacy for birth control as a way to collaborate with women of color. Enlisting the help of black, Puerto Rican, Latina, and Native American women required white activists to confront the history of the forced sterilization of women of color in the United States. Davis also saw the issue of housework as one that crossed the boundaries of race, class, and gender. Davis contrasted what she called “colonial” women’s domestic work from that of the “housewife.” While it may seem that the colonial woman’s domestic labor and the housewife’s tasks may have been similar, Davis contended white male and female capitalists conceived of these images as distinct. According to Davis, the “housewife” reflected a partial reality, for she was really the symbol of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the emerging middle classes.” The domestic women of color, “carried the double burden of wage labor and housework—a double burden which always demands that working women possess the preserving powers of Sisyphus.” Davis also maintained that white feminists needed to address inconsistencies between their declarations of independence from working in the home and their occasional use of poor women of color as a source of labor in their homes. Socializing house work, according to Davis was the only way to resolve this contradiction. The socialization of domestic labor, Davis envisioned, included the creation of institutions that employed individuals to handle one’s household duties. 

74 Davis, Women, Race, and Class, 202-3.


76 Ibid., 231.

77 Davis, Women, Race, and Class, 223.
complete elimination of private housework, Davis contended, could adequately satisfy the question of who would do the work if the feminist liberated herself from the private sphere. A movement to abolish domestic work, Davis hoped, could be a vital catalyst of a socialist movement in America.\footnote{Ibid., 244.}

While Davis pondered a class revolution with working women at its core, hooks aspired to redefine the meanings of feminism and the women’s liberation movement. hooks did not see the concept of feminism as problematic like some of her black predecessors. She argued that as a result of the historical prominence of middle-class white female voices in the women’s liberation movement, “white women liberationists…interpreted feminism in such as way that it was no longer relevant to all women.”\footnote{Hooks, 149.} This circumstance, hooks asserted, led to the development of black feminist groups who “perpetuated the very ‘racism’ they were supposedly attacking.”\footnote{Ibid., 150.} This point and her criticism that these groups did not undertake a thorough enough analysis of the women’s liberation movement seems to be harsh since many black women such as Linda LaRue and Frances Beal included clear assessments of the dominant strands of feminism that were prevalent during the early 1970s. Despite this, hooks advocated for a feminist view that conceives of the movement as a process. hooks wrote:

The process begins with action, with the individual woman’s refusal to accept any set of myths, stereotypes, and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of her human experience; that deny her capacity to experience the Unity of all life; that deny
her capacity to bridge gaps created by racism, sexism, or classism; that deny her ability to change.\textsuperscript{81}

Her ideas echoed Bambara’s emphasis of the female self. To confront the contradictions in race, class, and gender, hooks advocated for a “political solidarity” where women would struggle together and take the initiative to address the divisive effects of particular categories of difference.\textsuperscript{82}

hooks’s feminist vision also included the reinterpretation of the aspirations of women’s liberation. Women would not fight to assume decision making power in order to wield their influence in the same manner as men. In her attempt to redefine feminism, hooks contended that the goal of the feminist movement was emancipatory: “to focus on the fact that to be ‘feminist’ in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression.”\textsuperscript{83} In fact, she criticized feminists for wanting to just assume power. She also argued that the current movement had failed to provide a workable strategy for the fundamental change of American society despite their radical rhetoric. Again, if one considers black feminist’s alternative visions of liberation, hooks’s assessment appears narrow. Frances Beal, Linda LaRue, and Toni Cade Bambara thought and spoke in terms of radically altering society. Despite her pessimism, hooks’s expression of her reinterpretation of

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 157.

\textsuperscript{82} Hooks, 157.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 195.
feminism remained in sync with Elshtain’s notion of an emancipatory discourse as hooks advocates for a view that seeks “social clarity” and “self-comprehension.”

Conclusion

Black women intellectuals were unable to create a mass revolutionary movement rivaling that of Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Women’s Liberation in scope. This could be due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, their discursive efforts to respond to other competing political discourses, rebuild the black community, and the sheer diversity of thought. However, many activist-intellectuals successfully built a counterpublic that survived the neoconservative movement during the 1970s and 80s. Astonishingly, black feminists were able to sustain intellectual momentum into the 1980s. Toni Cade Bambara published her first novel in 1980 about a burned out black female activist called *The Salteaters* in 1980. Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell Scott, and Gloria T. Hull produced the groundbreaking anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave* a year later. Paula Giddings released one of the first comprehensive histories of black women in the United States in 1984, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Sex and Race in America*. Many black feminists also built upon previous theories and coined new terms such as Alice Walker’s “womanist” label to describe black feminists in her 1983 collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. They remained active in the fight against racism, but most importantly, they continued and struggled, in the shadows of the black power and

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84 Elshstain, 129.
women’s liberation movements and in the halls of academia, to fashion alternative visions of liberation via an inclusive and emancipatory discourse, unfortunately to little fanfare outside of their own discursive communities.\footnote{Guy-Sheftall, 18-19.}
Conclusion:

Using the intellectual leadership of the Black Panther Party, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and black feminists such as Toni Cade Bambara and Angela Davis as examples, this thesis has analyzed the role of black radical intellectual-activists in creating counterpublics and using the resources within those publics to develop and articulate the crucial ideas, languages and arguments of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Feminist movements. Participants, journalists, and scholars rightfully emphasize political action—in the form of community organizing, marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and litigation—during the modern black freedom movement. However, I also maintained that scholars should consider civil rights, black power, and black feminist struggles as intellectual movements. Black radical intellectuals such as Panthers Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, King, and Bambara all believed questioning America’s political, cultural, and social values was important in recruiting potential activists and build political organizations, improving black Americans’ circumstances and life chances, and precipitating a fundamental transformation of American society.

To contest American values, the Panthers, King, and black feminists presented what they thought of as alternatives to the prevailing ideas of race, nation, gender, class,
and sexuality held by black Americans in particular and Americans generally. From 1966-1969, the intellectual leadership of the Panthers—Newton, Cleaver, and Bobby Seale—developed their idea of the projection of sovereignty as a way to express their nationalist ideals. Grounding their concept in an anti-colonial discourse, the Panthers imagined the American black community as a colonized national entity. Newton, Cleaver, and Seale also envisioned themselves and the black community as allies of decolonizing third world nations. While it is true that the Panthers often engaged in guerrilla theater, they devised methods, such as their push to throw black American’s citizenship into question by establishing a U.N. plebiscite in the black community, to liberate the dispersed black community from the United States.

Panther nationalism also included mechanisms for determining the boundaries of citizenship and demarcating the enemies of black liberation. Utilizing the insights of various scholars of gender, sexuality, and nationalism such as sociologist Joane Nagel, Cynthia Enloe, and Benedict Anderson, I found that ideas of gender and sexuality were central in the Panthers’ nationalist discourse and rhetoric. Cleaver, Newton, and Seale conceived of citizenship in gendered terms. The Panthers often described the members of the dispersed black colony as “the brothers on the block.” These men were usually the criminal element of the black urban poor, or in marxist terms, the lumpen proletariat. Even though the Panthers placed special emphasis on the black male lumpen, they began to incorporate the black women in their rhetoric as well. Despite Seale’s, Cleaver’s, and Newton’s utterances of inclusion, they retained problematic views of Panther women.

1 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 73; Seale, 30.
Their rhetoric often reflected a patriarchal nationalism where the Panther male leadership set the parameters for relations between Panther men and women and thought of Panther women exclusively as supporters of men rather than participants in their own right.

The Panthers’ projection of sovereignty also relied on a rhetorical practice that Nagel defines as militarized heterosexuality. Their militarized heterosexuality emphasized the sexualized depiction of enemies. Newton and Cleaver conceived of white men as effeminate “omnipotent administrators” who controlled the sexuality and labor of black men (known as “supermasculine menials”), black women (“amazons”), and white women (“ultrafeminines”). The Panthers process of othering their enemies also extended to their depictions of law enforcement as “pigs,” which was a rhetorical device they used to dehumanize police or other agents of the state. The Panthers’ militarized heterosexuality also included sexualized representations of black male participants in the struggle. Newton used phallic imagery to describe the black urban guerrilla. For Newton, the gun was an “extension of the body” of the black urban guerrilla. It seems, for the Panthers, that the use of the gun was essential to Panther manhood and to the fight for black liberation.

For Martin Luther King, Jr., human liberation entailed the transcendence of what historian Gary Gerstle defines as civic and racial nationalism. In Chapter 2, I concluded that by the end of his life, King transitioned from the civic nationalist, or liberal-integrationist, concept of the beloved community to the radical socialist idea of the world

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3 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 163-65; Foner, 60.
house. While doing so, he confronted and incorporated elements of black power discourse—the rhetoric of racial nationalism—into his political thought during 1965-1968. From 1955-1965, King grounded his ideas of the beloved community in civic nationalist ideals of freedom, liberty, democracy, the American Dream. King envisioned nonviolence and integration as the means to establishing the beloved community. Despite his reliance on liberal American principles of liberty and equality regardless of race, King’s ideas were not thoroughly colorblind. King often invoked the image of the “new Negro” when he told the story of how his generation rebelled against southern racial segregation. And when considering King’s concept of the “new Negro” one realizes that his ideas, discourse, and rhetoric were not gender-neutral. King often described the new Negro as male and he discussed how segregation specifically emasculated black men. He envisioned black men’s use of nonviolent resistance as an alternative model of manhood based upon discipline and spirituality. King also recognized the centrality of manhood in Stokely Carmichael’s and other black activist’s call for black power in 1966.\(^4\)

In addition to admitting manhood as a fundamental value of black power, King redefined and appropriated various elements of black power discourse during his transition from civic nationalism to radical democratic socialism. While King acknowledged that black Americans should struggle for power and liberation, he argued that black Americans should understand those two ideas in the context of integration. King saw integration as a form of power sharing among Americans. However, King recognized the possibilities of ethnic politics or establishing a black voting bloc as a

\(^4\) Washington, 85.
means to integrate American society and achieve power. King also accepted the importance of racial and cultural pride and articulated his many of his arguments regarding the urban poor in the discourse of internal colonialism.

During the last year of his life, King advanced political arguments that transcended both American civic nationalism and black racial nationalism. King developed his conception of the “world house” that represented a globalized beloved community grounded in a radical democratic socialism. King called for Americans and citizens other nations, to deemphasize both racial and national difference in favor of a global political consciousness that emphasized interracial and international reconciliation, cooperation, and the welfare of all human beings. King based his world house philosophy on the radical assumption that one should analyze society from the standpoint of the poor, and work to create institutions that ensures political and economic equality for everyone regardless of race, class, and nationality.

Chapter 3 illustrated how black feminists responded to black nationalist, American liberal, and white feminist discourse and rhetoric from 1969-1981. During this period, black feminist created a counterpublic where they developed what feminist philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain called an “emancipatory” discourse. Black feminist emancipatory discourse addressed the disciplining effects of the black nationalists’ and American liberals’ myth of black matriarchy and white feminists’ discursive concept of universal sisterhood. The evidence also suggests that black women did not create black feminist emancipatory discourse in reaction to the prevailing political discourses of the time. Black women such as novelist Toni Cade Bambara, communist Angela Davis,
feminist intellectual bell hooks, political organizer Frances Beal, and others, developed an alternative, yet comprehensive, vision of social change. Black women from a variety of ideological stripes such as Bambara, Beal, civil rights advocate Pauli Murray, and Linda LaRue, questioned the masculinist and sexist assumptions that undergirded American society. They also created and contributed alternative family structures and conceptions of gender relations and roles. Many argued that (black) women’s liberation coincided with human liberation as they contended that by tackling the interlocking oppressions of racism, sexism, and class oppression from their standpoint, they would radically transform society.

Various conceptual, discursive, and rhetorical problems remained in Panthers’ thought. In *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton discussed how he felt the violent rhetoric and imagery often distracted black and white Americans from the Black Panther Party’s more radical social and political goals. Indeed, their militarized heterosexuality encouraged and reinforced an adversarial stance that invited violent conflict. And while the Panthers sought to address uneven gender relations within the Party, they embedded much of their language and solutions in a patriarchal nationalist framework. Other issues such as police repression, internal dissension, ideological disputes with other black power organizations, lingering misogynist and heterosexist practices, and the cult of personality that the Panthers created around Huey Newton, as well as Newton’s own participation in this dynamic, only magnified the Panthers failure to communicate to black Americans and to effectively regroup during the 1970s.

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5 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 150.
The absence of black women’s experiences stands out when reflecting on King’s political thought, discourse, and rhetoric during 1965-1968. As discussed in Chapter 2, King accepted the myth of black matriarchy and the ideal of presumed male leadership in the United States. He often emphasized the effects that racial segregation had on black men. He also remained silent on issues that many black women found important during the 1960s. Black women often criticized King. Political organizer Ella Baker critiqued King for his leadership style and welfare rights activist Johnnie Tillmon criticized him in 1968 for not being informed on welfare issues. It is possible, however, that King might have at least developed a more complex analysis of poverty that accounted for black women’s standpoint if he sought knowledge on the subject. But this likelihood would not be realized due to his assassination later that year.

Many black women intellectuals created complex analyses of American society and a language that challenged facets of the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s from 1969-1981. Black feminist activist-intellectuals successfully infiltrated academia and published numerous works during the 1970s and 1980s. Despite their efforts to create an inclusive, yet critical, language, black feminists seemed unable to create a mass movement based on their ideas. And it seems that they were unable to push their more radical ideas into the political mainstream.

Another underlying argument tied the intellectual activism of the Black Panthers, King, and black feminists together. Using the nationalist and integrationist dichotomy as a lens to analyze black political thought during the modern black freedom movement is

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6 Ransby, 190; Deborah Gray White, 214; Giddings, 312-13.
insufficient. Even if indirectly, I have demonstrated that black male intellectual-activists across ideological boundaries may have had more in common when one accounts for how ideas of gender affected their thinking. King, Cleaver, US founder and leader, Maulana Karenga, for example, all subscribed and/or advocated male supremacist ideas in their writings and speeches. Also some black intellectual-activists such as communist Angela Davis and black feminist intellectual bell hooks actually bypassed this debate between the two categories of political thought. Instead, black women such Davis, hooks, and Mary Ann Weathers were not as concerned with the integrationist-nationalist debate as they confronted sexist assumptions embedded in black and American nationalism and encouraged a human solidarity that accounted for the divergent experiences of all men and women.

Employing the integrationist-nationalist model also obscures how black activist-intellectual’s political thought, discourse, and rhetoric changed over time. Not one black radical activist’s or political organization’s politics considered in this study remained static. The intellectual leadership of the Black Panther Party constantly developed and tested their ideas in the streets and in debate. By July 1971, Huey P. Newton acknowledged that the Panthers had evolved from revolutionary nationalists to revolutionary intercommunalists. In a series of conversations with Yale students and faculty, Newton argued that the Panthers envisioned nations as a network of communities dominated by the United States. Revolutionary intercommunalism, for Newton, was an explicitly anti-imperialistic ideology that advocated a global and human, rather than racial and/or national, solidarity, and the overthrow of a small group of “reactionary
intercommunalists” who “control all other people by using their technology.” Martin Luther King, who is often portrayed as the leading integrationist of his time, appropriated black power discourse into his political rhetoric. King’s public speech also shifted from the liberal-integrationism of the beloved community to the democratic socialism of the world house. Again, considering Newton of the Panthers and King as two primary examples, focusing on the debates between integrationism and nationalism masks the complexities of black intellectuals and continues to limit discussions of these radicals as only interested in narrow political goals.

**Further Directions for the Study of Black Radical Political Thought, Discourse, and Rhetoric**

So, how should scholars approach new studies of black activist-intellectuals and black political thought during the post-war black freedom movement? First, historians can apply analytical frameworks that scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Joane Nagel, and Cynthia Enloe have developed to study the impact of nation, gender, and sexuality on the thought, discourse, and rhetoric of other political organizations, groups, and individuals. How did female Panthers such as Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown respond to the patriarchal nationalism of certain Panther men? How did prominent women in the organization such as Brown participate in the Panthers’ militarized heterosexuality? Scholars could even extend that question to other black feminists such as Beal and Bambara and other political organizations who retained nationalist sympathies.

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7 Erikson and Newton, 30-1.
The black feminist counterpublic—the political organizations, individuals, political writings, speeches, and literature—also deserves more attention. While this study only covered a limited cross-section of black feminists and their ideas, black feminist historiography could benefit from an investigation as to how particular black feminist organizations such as the Boston-based Combahee River Collective or individual black feminist intellectual-activists such as poets Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni contributed to black feminist emancipatory discourse. A study of this sort may also raise questions about how these organizations and individuals addressed a variety of issues such as gender relations among black Americans in particular and Americans in general, racism, and reproductive rights. Black feminist scholarship will also have to continue to chart the trajectory of black feminist thought and discourse. An investigation of novelist Alice Walker’s development and application of the concept of womanism would be a vital contribution to the field. Scholars should also continue to emphasize black women’s efforts to ask large questions of American society rather than just participating in an identity-based political activism. However, historians will also have to wrestle with the question of why black feminist ideas did not infiltrate the political mainstream or why a

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broad based social movement grounded in black feminist ideas, analysis, and discourse did not crystallize. It is important, though, for scholars of black feminism to initiate complicated inquiry as it will be crucial to highlight the intellectual, discursive, and rhetorical differences within the black feminist counterpublic.

Eventually scholarship on the impact of race, nation, class, gender, and sexuality on black political thought will also have to expand beyond the figures and organizations included in this thesis. As scholar Steven Steinberg illustrated in his book, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*, black activist-intellectuals produced numerous works composing what he called a “scholarship of confrontation.”

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League, Whitney Young may yield interesting insights as to how other mainstream civil rights leaders rhetorically responded to or perpetuated prevailing discourses on race, nation, class, and gender during the modern black freedom movement. One could also apply a similar framework used to analyze the Panther leadership in this thesis to the political thought, discourse, and rhetoric of the revolutionary nationalist Revolutionary Action Movement. Despite being one of the more formidable activist-intellectuals of the modern black freedom movement, black radical historiography could use a book-length analysis of Harold Cruse’s intellectual development and influence.\textsuperscript{10} Scholars may also yield interesting insights about the impact of race, gender, and sexuality on black radical thought by analyzing the correspondences between Angela Davis and political prisoner George Jackson as well as the writings of James Baldwin and Bayard Rustin. Studying the relationships between black theology and categories of difference could also add to this growing body of scholarship.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite these potential directions for black radical scholarship, the study of black radical intellectuals may leave scholars struggling with a very important question—what happened to black radical intellectuals and politics during the 1970s and 1980s? Were black radical intellectuals, organizations, and ideas discredited and defeated by law enforcement agencies and burgeoning conservative movement? Did political parties


incorporate any particular ideals, individuals, or strategies developed by black radical activist-intellectuals? Or could one attribute the fate of black radical intellectuals and ideas to a combination of factors? Political scientists such as Michael C. Dawson and Adolph Reed, Jr. have already advanced intricate explanations of the fate of black radical intellectuals during what could be considered the “post-Civil Rights” or “Post-Segregation” Era. Historians such as Matthew J. Countryman and Thomas J. Sugrue also point to black Americans entry into mainstream electoral politics as a possible explanation of the trajectory of black radical politics during the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, studying black activist-intellectual’s roles in the Black Freedom Movement depends upon locating new sources, and most importantly, rethinking the old. Instead of dividing and categorizing black political thinkers, historians should continue asking more nuanced questions regarding the ideas, languages, and rhetoric that black intellectual-activists developed and used to mobilize, discipline, and even demonize particular groups of people. We will have to continue to consider how certain discourses of difference—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, among others—shaped their politics. How did dominant American notions of difference affect the black radical’s thinking and political arguments during this period? It will also be important to ask how these

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discourses alienated individuals within the black freedom movement as well. In fact, honest investigations of black radical politics should yield unlikely connections between adversaries and distinctions among political allies. Ultimately, scholarship on modern black radicalism should not just highlight innovative concepts and intellectual-activists; it should also illustrate the conceptual limitations that are found in all politics.
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