Never Silent: Evolution of Black Women's Anti-Rape Organizing, 1965 - 1985

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NEVER SILENT:
EVOLUTION OF BLACK WOMEN’S ANTI-RAPE ORGANIZING, 1965 - 1985

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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PROGRAM IN WOMEN’S STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES

BY
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I would also like to thank Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré for allowing me to quote and borrow materials from their papers in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. Their permissions allowed this thesis to come to life.
ABSTRACT

Black women experience multiple oppressions due to their gender and their race, and those oppressions are expounded when other social identities, such as class and sexual orientation, are considered. There have been many instances in history of social movements in which black women have fought against the many issues they face. For the purpose of this project, I am looking specifically at 1965 - 1985 to examine the ways in which black women organized against white supremacy and sexual violence. The two forms of oppression would have led black women activists into different organizations for black liberation and women’s liberation—two entities that often never overlapped. Looking at this specific period through the lives of Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré, my research focuses on the ways in which black women reconciled tensions between the anti-rape and black liberation efforts? There are two parts to my inquiry that is focused on both anti-rape organizations and organizations for black liberation: if and how black liberation organizations addressed sexism, misogyny, and gender-based violence; if and how anti-rape organizations made room for addressing the racism and racialized sexism black women face. To that end, in what ways did black women organize each other during times they were told to remain silent?
I. Introduction

This project was inspired by Aishah Simmons’ *No! The Rape Documentary*, a 2006 film that includes interviews with prominent black feminists, womanists, and organizers. *No!* examines black communities’ relationship to sexual violence perpetrated upon black women. In the film, interviewees share their own experiences and analyses, which shape this project’s understanding of sexual violence in black communities. The varied narratives operate under the same idea that black people have difficulty responding to sexual violence as a community.

However, some people, most of whom were women, resisted the idea they should remain silent. The story of one interviewee, who is also the filmmaker’s mother, Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, provided an illuminating narrative that sparked my interest in black women’s organizing during the civil rights era. A member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Simmons was raped by a leader of the organization and was told by her peers she should keep quiet and not involve herself in the slandering of a black man.\(^1\) Simmons continued to organize with SNCC, later becoming one of the two women leaders in Freedom Summer of 1964.\(^2\) One of the largest civil rights projects occurred during that summer.\(^3\) While


\(^2\) See Aisha Shahdidah Simmons (2006) No One is Free While Others are Oppressed: An AfroLezfemcentric Journey, The Black Scholar, 36:1, 54-61, DOI: 10.1080/00064246.2006.11413348

\(^3\) Freedom Summer of 1964 was organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The two organizations trained volunteers, including dozens of white university students, to do a massive voter registration drive in Mississippi.
fighting for institutional equality, Simmons instituted the first anti-harassment and sexual violence policy in the organization.
Simmons’ action appeared to be isolated, but it fits within the legacy of black women’s anti-rape organizing that occurred long before it was considered valid. Hearing her story corrected assumptions I made about black women organizing against sexual violence. For a long time, my limited knowledge led me to believe black feminism was developed in the 1970s and ‘80s. Hearing Simmons’ story inspired many questions: What else happened? Who else spoke up? How did black women navigate spaces in which they were vulnerable to harm? My research taught me that black women made many efforts to address issues of sexism and interpersonal violence within their respective organizations. They wanted to challenge the hierarchy that prioritized men, compromised women’s safety and devalued their labor. This work paved the way for what we now understand as black feminism.

Black women’s history of anti-rape organizing is often minimized or entirely erased from mainstream United States history. This demographic experiences multiple oppressions due to their gender and their race, and those oppressions are compounded when other social identities, such as class and sexual orientation, are considered. Recent books such as Danielle L. McGuire’s *At the Dark End of the Street,* Barbara Ransby’s *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Project,* and Ashley D. Farmer’s *Remaking Black Power* have changed the narrative that black women were docile throughout history. On the contrary, black women organized their people and resisted state-sanctioned violence at every turn.

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This paper focuses on three central issues: concern for black women’s physical safety, addressing race within predominantly white organizations, and addressing gender equality within black liberation organizations. Black women had a vested interest in addressing violence inflicted upon their sisters. This was not limited to rape perpetrated by strangers, such as white men, but domestic violence and rape perpetrated by black men. Black women struggled to work in solidarity with white women. It was not gender equality they took issue with, it was that white womanhood was the focal point. Through this perspective, some black women viewed feminism as oppositional to black liberation. Those who were less conservative understood they were placed below both black men and white women. These issues followed black women for decades: white women were complicit in the slave trade that dehumanized Africans, both men and women, for centuries. Following the end of slavery in the United States, suffragettes’ fight for the right to vote marked the first wave of feminism, the wave that seemed to completely disregard black women. This is the legacy that determined if and how black women found themselves in solidarity with white women during the 1960s and ‘70s.

Considering the aforementioned issues, this paper examines the ways in which black women organized against both white supremacy and sexual violence between 1965 and 1985.

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7 On September 3, 1944, 24-year-old Recy Taylor was kidnapped and gang-raped by white men in Abbeville, Ala. This horrific incident brought together a community of black people including former resident Rosa Parks who covered the case from beginning to end.


This period is situated between the height of black liberation organizing and women’s liberation organizing that included the formation of anti-rape projects, the predecessor of rape crisis centers. The 20-year period was chosen to provide context for black women’s organizing during these two movements. This project centers on two women, Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré, who held leadership roles in a rape crisis center while they organized as black nationalists. The two worked for the D.C. Rape Crisis Center (RCC), the first rape crisis center established in the United States. RCC was influential in the anti-rape movement for its analysis of state violence and its inclusion of black women on staff. Touré worked at RCC from 1974 to 1988 while Ross joined in 1978 and left in 1982. The two colleagues were co-organizers on many issues affecting black women and their communities. As organizers, they addressed gentrification, healthcare, domestic violence, and sexual violence throughout Washington, D.C.

To better understand the work of Ross and Touré, this paper maps other black women’s efforts to address racism and white supremacy alongside misogyny and sexual violence. By doing so, this project uncovers some of the radicalism of the early anti-rape movement in the United States. This radicalism likely came from black women’s analysis of the relationship between interpersonal violence and state-sanctioned violence.11 Black women have always resisted and organized around sexual violence.12 However, as we learn about the women’s

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12 McGuire’s book At the Dark End of the Street introduced the public to anti-rape activism that occurred as early as the 1940s. This is not the only instance, but for the purpose of this project, McGuire’s research is a good example of early instances of black women’s activism.
liberation movement and the anti-rape movement it spawned, black women’s efforts often go unrecognized, despite their association with organizations that held public visibility.

During the 1960s and ‘70s, the Black Liberation movement and women’s liberation movement garnered public attention about injustices both demographics faced in the United States. The two movements are seen as mutually exclusive, leading outsiders to understand black women’s experiences of racism and sexism as also mutually exclusive. The women’s liberation movement is categorized as the impetus of second-wave feminism. In scholarship on the movement, second-wave feminism arguably focused on middle-class, heterosexual white women. This view was largely brought on by the National Organization for Women (NOW), co-founded by *Feminine Mystique* author Betty Friedan. Started in 1966, NOW was the first formal organization conceived during the second wave. Although there were black women like Pauli Murray and Florynce Kennedy involved, NOW was overwhelmingly white and moderate in comparison to leftist organizing that occurred during this time. NOW became the example of feminism that dominated mainstream media. Many of the criticisms of second-wave feminism’s whiteness, which was ascribed to both their ethnic background and the way they simplified issues, came from the limited information people had about smaller organizations that held more radical views. While more radical organizations were not perfect, they were the real force behind

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the women’s liberation movement. Knowing the distinction between radical feminists and moderate feminists is important for recognizing where many black women struggled to fit within the movement.

Other than racial homogeneity, most people probably think of sexual harassment, employment rights, and abortion access when they hear second-wave feminism. Others may think of sexual violence and the rise of rape crisis centers. Rarely do people, especially those outside of academia, consider that second-wave feminism is situated within the socio-political landscape of the United States during that time. The fight against the Vietnam War, police brutality, free speech—feminist organizing was happening, and many were developing an analysis that addressed these issues. Black women were among the many to question women’s place in our society and connect women’s issues to systems of oppression. They developed an analysis of oppression that considered everyone in the United States and beyond, and they used their own experiences as a starting point since black women were known to be at the bottom of the totem pole. They faced what Frances Beale of SNCC and Third World Women’s Alliance labeled as double jeopardy—racism and sexism—and sought to tackle the two, which, in their

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minds, would lead to an end of oppression.\textsuperscript{20} The multiple forms of oppression led black women activists into different organizations for black liberation and women’s liberation—two entities that rarely overlapped.

\textit{Project Design}

This project revolves around the D.C. Rape Crisis Center (RCC), an integral piece in the history of rape crisis centers. It also centers two of its directors, Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré, both of whom are black women. Using oral history interviews with the two, I developed an analysis through feminist theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality and identity politics. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw,\textsuperscript{21} intersectionality is the study of intersections between forms of oppression, domination, or discrimination. Intersectionality marries the experiences of an individual or group with the different contexts in which the experiences occur, the contexts being race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identities that face marginalization. Intersectionality has helped create a framework in which experiences are understood with a specific lens: forms of oppression do not often occur in a vacuum. Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group, coined the term ‘identity politics’ in 1977. Similar to intersectionality, identity politics refers to the ways in which race, gender, class determines social conditions, especially those of marginalized people. Identity politics is a political strategy that considers the various ways people are impacted by systems of oppression and how the oppressions should be

\textsuperscript{20} This can be found in “A Black Feminist Statement” by Combahee River Collective. My reference came from its reprint in \textit{This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color}.

disrupted. Both concepts are useful for examining how black women’s organizing helped with the evolution of both the larger anti-rape movement and movement for black lives.

In 2017 I was given the opportunity to interview Ross and Touré to kick off a feminist oral history project organized by Ross. In Washington, D.C., the pair talked about their 40-year-long friendship, black feminism, black nationalism, and the politics of anti-rape organizing. Topics discussed in the interviews—which will be published in the near future—aided in the crafting the outline of this paper, which uses the women’s experiences at their workplace, the D.C. Rape Crisis Center (RCC), as the main subject. Since the interviews I conducted will not be available by the completion of this paper, Ross and Touré’s previous oral history interviews with Voices of Feminism Oral History Project allow me to still use their own words to contextualize their activism. The Voices of Feminism Oral History Project was sponsored by Smith College, where it is housed in its Sophia Smith Special Collections.

I think it is important to use black women’s words to develop an analysis. While my analysis uses theoretical frameworks, it relies on black women’s personal experiences. Use of firsthand accounts allowed me to make fewer assumptions and instead provide context with relevant scholarship. At the same time, oral histories themselves are not entirely based in fact, as they are focused on a subject’s recollection of events. This does not mean interviewees cannot tell the truth; the use of oral histories are valuable in telling stories of marginalized groups whose narratives otherwise remain untold.22 Decades have passed since my subjects’ tenures at RCC, the subject of growing scholarship about its role in second-wave feminism and the history of rape crisis centers. My subjects’ words from the oral histories and archival materials can be corroborated with recent scholarship as well as both physical and digital archives. Thanks to

recent scholarship, I am able to supplement the oral histories and archival materials with the new knowledge available. For example, historian Anne M. Valk’s *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* is the main text that provided information about the history of the D.C Rape Crisis Center. This paper is able to build upon Valk’s book and provide a wider picture of how Ross and Touré contributed to black feminist organizing that occurred across the country during their time.

Archival materials from Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College help provide context of the work Ross and Touré conducted at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. The oral histories from Smith’s Voices of Feminism Oral History Project are sufficient for serving as the primary subjects due to the breadth of topics discussed. In 2018 I was able to visit the archival materials, much of which remain unpublished or out of print. There exists letters, reports, papers, meeting notes, and much more that provides an opportunity for stories to be told with authenticity—even through a third party. With that said, this paper touches only a small portion of black women’s anti-rape organizing, largely due to the fact that there are still limited texts available about the subject. However, there are archives available for viewing. I found reports and reflections written by Ross and Touré during my trip to Smith College. Their words during their time at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center help fill in the gaps of the stories they recalled throughout their oral history interviews. I was granted permission from Ross and Touré to quote their interviews and archival materials; their words guide the structure of this paper. Along with their interviews, archival materials found at Smith illustrate exactly what black women were organizing for and against.

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This paper helps frame the context in which they organized against sexual violence perpetrated upon them.

In the first section, I provide the socio-political context in which they lived and organized as black women and activists. A brief introduction to black feminist theory—and projects operating within that framework—is crucial to understanding Ross and Touré’s work at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. In the following section, I expound on how their experiences as black nationalists and anti-rape activists mediated their journey into black feminism. Highlights of their work focus on educational programming for black communities, defense campaigns for incarcerated survivors, and a historic conference on violence against women of color. This paper ends with a brief examination of the impact of their work. This project contributes to current conversations with an analysis of narratives from black women organizers on the challenges they faced as they struggled as black people, black women, and survivors of sexual violence between 1965 and 1985.

II. Black Women Within Movements

Black feminism did not appear out of thin air. There were many incidents of discrimination, oppression, and outright disregard for black women’s lives. These incidents happened wherever black women turned: white women’s liberation organizations, black liberation organizations, and at times, their own homes. This project looks to black feminist thought as the main theoretical framework for building a historical analysis. With the help of black feminism, my research builds upon scholarship related to second-wave feminism and black liberation. Those three areas guide this project in building an analysis that considers black women’s status in the United States and the limitations of organizing alongside men and women who do not share their unique experiences. As two black women working within a
predominantly white organization, Nkenge Touré and Loretta Ross of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center (RCC) had their own journeys into feminism. Given that this was a time without social media, they did not know the extent of black feminist organizing.\textsuperscript{24} Similar conversations about the intersections of racism and sexism occurred across the country even where black feminists had no direct relationship with one another.\textsuperscript{25} This section frames the context in which Touré and Ross grew into feminist ideals and the examples they were able to follow.

A former Black Panther, Touré joined RCC in 1975, becoming one of the two black women on staff at the center. The start of Touré’s tenure at RCC consisted of her trying to make sense of feminism. She was not far from calling herself a feminist; however, she had to deal with the confusion that came with being a black woman working with white women. In her interview for Smith College’s Voices of Feminism Oral History Project (2004), she recalled her confusion of navigating the center and feminism: “If you’re black, you can’t be a feminist. If you’re a feminist, you’re not black. If you’re for the women’s struggle, then you can’t be for the people’s struggle. If you’re for the people’s struggle, then how can you isolate out just the women.”\textsuperscript{26} This sentiment was popular among many black people including Brenda Verner, who disrupted a meeting for the Boston chapter of National Black Feminist Organization (NFBO) with anti-feminist remarks.\textsuperscript{27} According to historian Kimberly Springer, “Tactics that undermined

\textsuperscript{24} See Joyce Follett. Interview with Loretta Ross. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 86.


\textsuperscript{26} See Loretta Ross. Interview with Nkenge Touré. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 42.

emerging black feminist consciousness, such as declaring black feminism antithetical to black liberation, dissuaded women who were already ambivalent about black feminist politics.”

Many black women like Touré understood the importance of women’s rights and addressing sexual violence, but there were still feelings they needed to sort through. Black women might not have immediately identified as feminists but they were intrigued enough to figure out where they belonged in the movement. Although Ross did not call herself a feminist, she observed the ways in which black women were mistreated and how their communities responded. As explained later in this paper, Ross and Touré organized themselves and fellow black women to create spaces in which their voices were amplified. Their understanding of black feminism was developed through organizing around social conditions that affected the lives of black women.

Observers often forget what is known as second-wave feminism occurred during and alongside the Black Liberation Movement of the 1970s. Historian Anne M. Valk in Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C. takes a deeper look at feminist organizing that took place in D.C., the city where the subject of my paper is located. In a chapter on the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, Valk wrote:

Through the mid-1970s, many black radicals continued to believe that organizing specifically around women’s issues, including rape and wife battering, counteracted the urgent need to shore up racial solidarity as a defense against other forms of violence and repression. To many in African American communities, feminism represented a form of repression, not liberation, by seeming to promote white women’s demands at the expense of people of color.

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29 Deborah Singletary and Eugenia Wilshire of National Black Feminist Organization are examples of women who hadn’t thought about feminism or the women’s movement in relation to black women. Once space was offered to them, they took it upon themselves to learn about black feminism. See Kimberly Springer. Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980, pp. 52.

Valk is speaking about a belief that affected black women organizers as they made attempts to speak up about experiencing interpersonal violence especially at the hands of their co-strugglers. Gwendolyn Simmons of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Elaine Brown of the Black Panther Party (BPP) provide examples that help contextualize exactly what black women activists faced among their peers. Simmons was raped by a leader of SNCC and upon disclosure was told to remain silent. She stayed in the organization and became one of two women to lead a project. As a leader, she became passionate about making sure no harm occurred. Simmons might not have identified as a feminist at this time, but it is clear she was aware of oppressive behavior that needed to be eradicated. Brown held a leadership position in BPP and experienced physical abuse by men in the party. Brown did not identify as a feminist, despite mistreatment she received. Among the party, feminism was viewed as more of a white woman’s issue. As this paper later explains, her position changed. Experiencing violence at the hands of black men led black women to question exactly how white supremacy could be dismantled when misogyny ran rampant.

*Black Women & the Women’s Liberation Movement*

The women’s liberation movement of the 1970s is often regarded as a white women’s movement while its counterpart, the Black Liberation movement prioritized men. Being both non-white and non-male, black women were often relegated to the margins of these movements, despite taking on labor that sustained both. Black women organized amongst themselves and within movements in which they were told—implicitly and explicitly—would not focus on

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32 Florynce Kennedy’s work in National Organization for Women (NOW) is a great example as she was a mentor to many young white women and taught them how to organize within black liberation.
issues they faced. As anti-rape activism became integral to organizing around women’s liberation, black women became hyper-aware of their position in black liberation organizations. Yet, they were unable to find a home within women’s liberation organizations that did not operate within an anti-racist framework. Black women’s activism was meticulous in the ways that they had to cater to multiple oppressions and hold all into account because it was their life.\footnote{Patricia Hill Collins. \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, Routledge Classics, 2008, pp. 218.}

In the way that their lives were complex, their activism followed. Addressing gender inequality often met having to work alongside white women, with whom black women did not have the best relationship.

In her writing of the 1960s and ‘70s, activist and poet Pat Parker highlighted issues she and other black women faced when trying to organize with white women. In one poem, she describes a scenario in which a black woman and white woman are participating in an organizing space. Parker ends the untitled poem with “SISTER! Your foot’s smaller / but it’s still on my neck.”\footnote{Pat Parker. \textit{The Complete Works of Pat Parker}. A Midsummer Night’s Press, 2016, pp. 55.} Those lines illustrate the tensions between black women and white women; their similarities were not enough to form alliances if black women had to face oppression within so-called progressive spaces. This reality was captured by Audre Lorde in a 1979 letter to Mary Daly\footnote{This letter was sent in response to Mary Daly’s book \textit{Gyn/Ecology}.} in which, she wrote, “The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries.”\footnote{Audre Lorde. (1979). An Open Letter to Mary Daly. In Moraga, C & Anzaldúa, G. \textit{This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color}. 4th Edition. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015, pp. 93.} White women did not seem to understand why black women were not wholly on their side as feminists. In order for black women to trust them, white feminists needed to understand the ways in which their experiences
of gender oppression differed. There was no doubt that women of all ethnic backgrounds experienced gender-based oppression. However, for many, white women fared better than others. Instead of working with white women, many black women started their own organizations that focused specifically on their demographic’s issues.

The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was a space for black women to address both racism and sexism. Its existence was announced at a press conference on August 15, 1973. According to historian Sherie M. Randolph, Margaret Sloan, one of the founding members of NFBO, told reporters that “the new organization would challenge both the “racism killing us from outside the black community” and the sexism that was killing women “from within the community.”

One of its earlier members included Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. In 1974, NBFO hosted its Eastern Regional Conference, where Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, and others were inspired to start a chapter in Boston. The Boston chapter eventually became the Combahee River Collective when the group decided NBFO was more conservative. By 1976, they existed as a separate organization. The members identified as socialists and unlike NBFO, they developed an economic analysis, as evidenced in their collective writing.

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39 The members attended a socialist conference and learned more about the connections of socialism and feminism. This helped them build their economic analysis. In this statement, they wrote, “We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives.” Their statement would later appear in a socialist feminist newspaper. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 43.
Soon after becoming Combahee River Collective, the group published their renowned statement in a socialist newspaper, “A Black Feminist Statement” of 1977 is one of the first black feminist text of its kind. It speaks earnestly about the struggle of organizing black feminists: “The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions.”

Addressing issues most impacting black women was not difficult with the right analysis, but sustained organizing around issues that affected them was proven as such. At this time, the concept of identity politics was developed through the collective. The concept was not new, but this explicit black feminist analysis gave it a new life. Forty years after the statement was published, co-founder Barbara Smith explained its purpose in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*:

What we were saying is that we have a right as people who are not just female, who are not solely Black, who are not just lesbians, who are not just working class, or workers— that we are people who embody all of these identities, and we have a right to build and definite political theory and practice based upon that reality.

In conversation with Kimberly Springer, Smith explained, “It was not a narrow view. But it’s hard to be invisible, and before we began to assert identity politics and the importance of a Black feminist stance we were, by and large, invisible.” The concept of identity politics allowed them to organize themselves in a new way, as they were able to create a language that best described the framework in which they addressed social and political issues affecting their lives.

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experiences deserved to be at the forefront of their political organizing. They needed to organize for the simple fact that they are human—a reminder the rest of the world needed.

Combahee River Collective gave identity politics its name in 1977, but Frances Beale of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNNC) wrote “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” nearly a decade before the collective’s statement. Beale’s essay demonstrated that black women understood the connections between their multiple oppressions:

Black people are engaged in a life-and-death struggle and the main emphasis of Black women must be to combat the capitalist, racist exploitations of Black people. While it is true that male chauvinism has become institutionalized in American society, one must always look for the main enemy—the fundamental cause of the female condition.43

Beale elucidates how many black women were perceived within their community. While some black women accepted the position they had as an effort to support black liberation, many others were aware the treatment they received was antithetical to liberation. For Beale, a black women’s freedom, as further explained by Combahee River Collective, was the road to freedom for all.44

In that same essay, Beale wrote, “Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women's struggle.” The women’s liberation movement focused on the power patriarchy held within the state and how state apparatuses sought to control women’s bodies. With this analysis, many feminists of this time understood the goal of power, control, and domination was extended beyond white women and included any marginalized group such as black people.45 However, many white feminists

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43 The essay was published as a pamphlet. Quotes in this paper are from a reprint of the essay in Toni Cade Bambara. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Washington Square Press, 2005, pp. 120.

44 In the Combahee River Collective Statement, they wrote, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” as seen in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 23.

lacked an anti-racist framework necessary for working alongside black women. As this section later explains, white women had to face the harsh reality of anti-blackness and their complicity. Without that understanding, the women’s liberation movement would find itself replicating the very oppressive forces it claimed to challenge, and that would spill onto the anti-rape movement that would follow.\footnote{This would be clear through the advocacy of rape laws, which many black feminists knew would lead to more incarceration of black men.}

While there were white women involved in the civil rights movement and later the fight for black liberation, there were still tensions between them and black women. White women, primarily those from northern states, were active in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights organizations of the 1960s. According to historian Sara Evans, black women were the first to speak against gender inequality.\footnote{See Sara Evans. \textit{Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left.} 9th edition. Vintage Books, 1980, pp. 82-101.} Black women in SNCC challenged sexism and inspired white women members who soon organized themselves as feminists. As feminism became increasingly popular, there were critiques about white feminists’ involvement in civil right organizations and the analyses they were able to develop. In many civil rights and leftist organizations, women of all racial backgrounds were assigned to administrative work. White women within these organizations started to realize how they could benefit from feminism; they chose to assert themselves in an organization that was meant for black people’s needs, not theirs.\footnote{Paula Giddings. \textit{When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America.} Amistad, 1984, pp. 303.} Although black women could also benefit from feminism and many shared similar complaints, they recognized where white women were wrong. White women’s awakening weakened whatever relationship they had to black women in these organizations.
Anne M. Valk wrote about this issue in *Radical Sisters*: “White feminists’ attempts to speak on behalf of all women, invoking a metaphorical sisterhood of struggle, provoked angry accusations that they exploited the black liberation movement by capitalizing on its ideas and piggybacking on its activities.” The conversations around racism and sexism were not often helmed by black women, despite their ability to articulate the relationship between the two oppressions. Black men and white women took it upon themselves to do the talking. According to historian Paula Giddings, Linda LaRue, a black woman activist, saw white women activists as opportunists: “One can argue that Women’s liberation has not only attached itself to the Black movement but has done so with only marginal concern for Black women and Black liberation and functional concern for the rights of White women.” It was believed that white women took up space while black women were not valued by either the movement or their people. White women were able to speak up and feel entitled to rights not given to black women.

**Issues in the Black Liberation Movement**

According to Anne M. Walk, a 1971 poll claimed “not only did a majority of African American women and men support women’s liberation, but they were more likely to do so than their white counterparts.” This does not seem unlikely as black women were able to assume leadership roles in black liberation organizations in which they belonged. However, not everyone accepted black women in the women’s liberation movement nor did they want them to use the black liberation movement as a platform for gender equality.

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Founding member of National Black Feminist Organization (NFBO) Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* was widely received by black women upon its 1978 release. The book offers criticisms of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s and illuminates black women’s misgivings about the black liberation movement when their full humanity was denied by men of their own communities.\(^{52}\) In *Black Macho*, Wallace wrote:

> With freedom presumably on the horizon, black men needed a movement that made the division of power between men and women clearer, that would settle once and for all the nagging questions black women were beginning to ask: Where do we fit in? What are you going to do about us?\(^{53}\)

As Wallace wrote, black women called on black men to address the sexual oppression they faced. In response, sociologist Robert Staples wrote a damning review of *Black Macho* in the *Black Scholar*, in which he wrote it was untrue black men benefited from the movement more than black women.\(^ {54}\) He highlighted the ways in which black women reached success in employment and higher education at higher rates than black men. The review best illustrates the negative response from black men who disagreed with the content of Wallace’s book. Since black men did not have the same power as white men, many assumed they held no power. Their institutional power might have been nonexistent due to racism. However, they benefited from sexism and exercised their privilege over black women. According to a 1986 *New York Times* article, some men “insisted that the book advocated that black women turn against black men and

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\(^{52}\) Black Power Movement is known as Black Liberation Movement and described as such throughout this paper. It is important to note different organizations categorized themselves as one or the other, sometimes both.


so promoted discord within the black community.”

Instead of turning inward to reflect on their behaviors, some black men chose to deny black women’s lived realities of mistreatment due to their gender.

Wallace’s book reflects on the black power movement as it dwindled towards the end of the 1970s. Conversations about inequality happened during the movement and led to minimal changes. For example, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was vocal about gender equality and encouraged women to take on leadership roles. The national party had guidelines for each chapter to follow, but many members did not comply and continued to harm black women, despite the fact “the Panthers condemned women’s exploitation and tried to implement guidelines to govern men’s treatment of their female counterparts,” according Valk. However, for some men in the BPP, women’s leadership roles enraged them and drove their desire to keep women in their place. Elaine Brown, chairperson of the party from 1974 to 1977, chronicled her tenure and the plight of black women leaders in *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story*:

> A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the “counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.” It was a violation of some Black Power principles that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people.

This view made it difficult for Brown to see herself in any part of the feminist movement. Her stance on feminism changed once she took on a leadership role, though she had previously

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55 Mel Watkin for New York Times wrote “Sexism, Racism, and Black Women Writers” in 1986. The article features texts from black women and details the responses they received from black people, especially black men.


experienced oppression and violence by black men in the party. As she reflected on her transition into feminism, she wrote, “The feminists were right. The value of my life had been obliterated as much as by being female as by being black and poor. Racism and sexism in America were equal partners in my oppression.” Brown represents the many women who did not label themselves as feminists out of refusal to align themselves with white feminists who lacked necessary analysis. At the same time, white feminist organizing sparked conversations many black women didn’t realize were lacking, or that other black women were having outside of their male-dominated space.

An organizer with SNCC and one of the leading black feminists of her time, Beale reminded her community of the history of black women’s plight. In her essay “Double Jeopardy,” Beale demonstrated black women understood their position loud and clear:

Let me state here and now that the Black woman in America can justly be described as a “slave of a slave.” By reducing the Black man in America to such abject oppression, the Black woman had no protector and was used, and is still being used in some cases, as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on Black men.

She argued that a revolution was not possible without respect for black women’s labor and contributions to the cause. This sentiment about respect can be applied to violence black women faced. The words of Beale and Wallace resonated with black women around the country: how did liberation look to the black woman?

In addition to writing about being a black women in white feminist organizing spaces, Pat Parker wrote dozens of poems that encapsulates black women’s mistreatment by black men who prioritized the struggle over the well-being of these women. The untitled poem goes as written:

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Brother
    I don’t want to hear
about
how my real enemy
is the system.
i’m no genius,
but i do know
that system
you hit me with
is called
a fist.

This poem is an example of black women’s responses to experiencing physical and sexual abuse by black male co-strugglers.⁶⁰ Many writers wrote about the violence black women experienced, which was often met with discontent from black men. Parker, Wallace, and Ntozake Shange are some of the many black women who dared to speak out. Shange’s 1975 choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf was embraced by black women for its storytelling of violence and healing. However, black men felt the play depicted them wrongfully. According to the New York Times article previously mentioned, they thought the play “exaggerated and false but that also undermined the black man's struggle for acceptance in mainstream society.”⁶¹ Many men’s criticisms of black women speaking out against sexual violence don’t deny rape is an issue. Instead they seem not to regard rape as an important issue, not if addressing rape occurred at their expense. The expectation that black women would accept violence enraged them but also exposed their vulnerability: if not a black man or white woman, whom can you count on for support?

Black Women & Sexual Violence

In 1966, civil rights activist and jazz singer Abbey Lincoln wrote in *Negro Digest*:

> Who will revere the Black woman? Who will keep our neighborhoods safe for Black innocent womanhood? Black womanhood is outraged and humiliated. Black womanhood cries for dignity and restitution and salvation. Black womanhood wants and needs protection, and keeping, and holding. Who will assuage her indignation? Who will keep her precious and pure? Who will glorify and proclaim her beautiful image? To whom will she cry rape? 

This quote by Lincoln best summarizes how black women observed the protection of white womanhood time and time again, especially with the lynchings of black men accused of raping white women. Despite patriarchal notions of protecting womanhood, it revealed how little a black woman was regarded by the public. Social markers such as race, gender, and class determines which opportunities black women are granted or denied, as well as how they are perceived in the eyes of the law. Victims of sexual violence who were black women were not often given the same treatment as victims who were white, whether it was through the state or their own communities’ responses. On that same note, black women who defended themselves against sexual violence were told they had no selves to defend, that assault in response to sexual violence is not justifiable. Black women knew they couldn’t count on black men when they were raped, especially not when they shared the face of the perpetrators. Instead of providing support, they chose his freedom over her safety. Black women did not want to lock up rapists;

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64 In 1974, Joann Little killed a night guard when he tried to rape her. In 1975, Dessie Woods shot a man with his own gun after he tried to kidnap and rape her and her friend Cheryl Todd. Both them were charged with murder.
they certainly did not want them lynched. If anything, they wanted to be heard and believed as they felt white women were.

The 1970s marked the beginning of what we now call the anti-rape movement. Many women’s liberation organizations started groups that addressed sexual violence through direct service and advocacy. As a result, rape crisis centers started across the country. These anti-rape efforts spawned into a movement of its own that has grown steadily over the last few decades. Early on, black women engaged the anti-rape movement as both organizers and critics. As organizers, they worked alongside their peers and their white counterparts to address sexual violence. As critics, they made the movement aware of the importance of anti-racist politics, specifically as the state intervened with funding resources for rape crisis centers and new laws on sexual assault.\footnote{See Kristin Bumiller. \textit{In An Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence}. Duke University Press, 2008.} Conversations around rape came into the public sphere during the women’s liberation movement and increased in 1975 with the release of Susan Brownmiller’s \textit{Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape}. Brownmiller’s book was not representative of the anti-rape movement, but it was the first of its time to focus entirely on violence against women. The public discourse gave black women an opportunity to speak up like their white counterparts. However, the conversations that took place in their communities often centered around the consequences of speaking up about black men who perpetrated sexual violence.

Michele Wallace is among many who discussed how the fear of lynching overshadowed black women’s vulnerability to sexual violence. Wallace wrote, “To black people, rape means the lynching of a black man. Obsession with the lynching of the black man seems to leave no
room in the black male consciousness for any awareness of the oppression of black women."⁶⁶ Lynchings often occurred in response to allegations of white women’s rapes perpetrated by black men. Never was a black man lynched for the rape of a black woman. The same can be said of white men, which is obvious considering the power they weaponized as a demographic. It was up to white men to determine which rapes were valid and deserved justice. However, their justice was more concerned with asserting white supremacy than protecting white womanhood from black men.

Feminists were concerned with the direction of the anti-rape movement.⁶⁷ The 1970s also saw the formation of the Feminist Alliance Against Rape (FAAR), a group that “concentrated on disseminating feminist theory and information about women’s efforts to eliminate rape to activists working throughout the United States.”⁶⁸ It was in FAAR’s publication Aegis that anti-rape activists were able to parse issues of rape, criminal justice, and various communities in which sexual violence needed to be brought forth. In 1975, civil rights veteran Julian Bond was the subject of a feminist response to his letter about three black men accused of kidnapping and raping a white woman in North Carolina.⁶⁹ The three faced the death penalty, which was quite a punishment for rape—it appeared too similar to lynchings of black men that was more out of anti-blackness than protection. Bond’s concerns were valid, however, they bought into the idea


⁶⁷ Aegis was one feminist publication that provided a platform for radical feminists to discuss how the anti-rape movement was unfolding. See Jane BenDor. “Ending Rape: A Concept Essay on Strategies.” Aegis, 1975. Retrieved from http://www.faar-aegis.org/JanFebMar_75/bendor_janfebmar75.html.


⁶⁹ In 1973, Jesse Lee Walston, Vernon Leroy Brown, and Bobby Hines were convicted of raping a white woman in Tarboro, North Carolina.
that rape does not warrant a response, whether through community or the state. In response, Nancy Baker, then of Rape Prevention Center, wrote for *Aegis*, “Racism and sexism are a product of the same system of thought - one that permits and encourages the oppression of all people who are not white middle class men.”\(^7^0\) Baker understood both how the criminal justice system was weaponized to control and murder black men and how sexual violence is rampant within society. Her response was careful. She was able to elucidate how racism and sexism were interconnected—an analysis crafted by black women who experienced both simultaneously. She, like many other forward-thinking feminists, was concerned state intervention would overshadow the anti-rape movement’s goals.

Angela Davis was one of the most prominent black women activists who criticized the anti-rape movement. Davis in *Women, Race & Class* wrote, “If Black women have been conspicuously absent from the ranks of the contemporary anti-rape movement, it may be due, in part, to that movement’s indifferent posture toward the frame-up rape charge as an incitement to racist aggression.”\(^7^1\) She contends that the racist criminal justice system will never adequately address rape. The anti-rape movement began as a grassroots, community-based effort to confront sexual violence. That began to change when the state was forced to respond by instituting laws to expand protections for rape victims. Unfortunately, this was seen was a strategy to control black men. This belief kept many black women from joining the movement. Many of them could felt they could not demonstrate it was possible to speak up about their experiences without involving the state. Black women activists had to juggle their community’s fear of lynching and their reality of sexual violence. Davis continues this sentiment with the following, “Throughout the


history of this country, Black women have manifested a collective consciousness of their sexual victimization. They have also understood that they could not adequately resist the sexual abuses they suffered without simultaneously attacking the fraudulent rape charge as a pretext for lynching. 72 While not all black women were afraid to speak up, they were a small fraction of a larger community that saw two options: believe a woman and order a man’s death or pretend rape wasn’t an issue. In 2004, Loretta Ross touched on this issue in her interview for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project:

I mean, you’re dealing with the black community that’s trying to live down the myth of the mad black rapist, number one, who is a predator on white women, when in fact most black rapists are predators on their own family, but that’s not — you know, black women are not victims in a white supremacist construct. Only white women are. We’re the Jezebels, so obviously we did something to deserve any sexual abuse that happens to us. 73

Black women did not want to give credit to the myth of the black male rapist. At the same time, they were victims of sexual violence and that needed to be addressed. The next section of this paper takes a look at the ways in which black women reconciled the fears of their community and their own reality as victims.

III. Where Black Feminism & Anti-Rape Activism Met: D.C. Rape Crisis Center

The first rape crisis center in the United States was started in Washington, D.C. The D.C. Rape Crisis (RCC) was born out of community-based interventions in sexual violence. At the time of its formation, anti-rape projects existed throughout the country. The projects were a way for women to support each other after experiencing sexual assault. The previous section examined the ways in black feminism grew out of the women’s liberation and black liberation movements. Anti-rape organizing happened all over the country, and black women were part of

the organizing that spawned the anti-rape movement. This section highlights the work of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center and its role in black feminism during the 1970s and ’80s. Its contributions to black feminism came from Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré, who identified as black nationalists during their time at the center. Their analysis of feminism was developed while they worked at RCC. At the center, they advanced the center’s analysis of violence against women by emphasizing the experiences of black women and other women of color. This paper’s focus on D.C. Rape Crisis Center provides an in-depth look at black women activists who found themselves living in between worlds as they organized alongside white women and black men.

The center, according to former director Loretta Ross, “was a product of its time because it was situated in a context that empowered that kind of discourse, that really lent itself to that, whereas that concatenation of circumstances might not have happened in another city.”

The District of Columbia in particular was an interesting place to organize during this time as many socio-political issues were affecting both women and black people’s lives. The center was active in recruiting black women to its cause, though it was not always an easy task. However, hiring black women showed a commitment to challenging a complex issue that affected all demographics. Black women activists did not need the center for them to have a voice, but its existence equipped them with tools they needed to amplify their own.

The founders of RCC were young white women whose idea came out of a conference hosted by George Washington University Women’s Liberation group. Started in 1972, RCC

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75 As this section later explains, there were many times the center’s board did not agree with the radical ideas of Ross and Touré. As rape crisis centers gained acceptance from the United States government, they became more conservative.

was the first to create an organization to formalize these anti-rape efforts. Without any formal training, their services first started in a person’s apartment on 17th and Q Northwest,\(^\text{77}\) where they started a hotline and guided victims on what to do after an assault. Eventually, they moved into the top floor of a house on 16th and Irvin Street. The early members of RCC helped develop an analysis of rape that was more advanced than the narratives given by many feminist activists and survivors of that time.\(^\text{78}\) They expanded the public’s understanding of sexual violence to include an analysis of misogyny and patriarchy to frame how rape and other forms of sexual violence were developed. This analysis was not a justification of men’s violence towards women, but a strategy for addressing the core of such an issue. Anne M. Valk focuses specifically on RCC as an example of the early radicalism of rape crisis centers: “Beginning by working separately from criminal justice or public health structures, radical feminists created their own institutions, grounded in feminist principles, to confront sexual violence.”\(^\text{79}\) The radicalism of rape crisis centers is what drew many black women in the earlier days.

Michelle Hudson was the center’s community educator coordinator and helped with the recruitment of black women. She was the first black woman on staff and first to assume the role of director. Hudson reached out to Nkenge Touré after listening to her on a local radio show where she spoke against sexual violence. Impressed by the center, Touré joined its staff, primarily working on community education. In 1978, Ross and Touré met in a local community study group started to educate residents on the impact of a potential closure of an affordable

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\(^\text{77}\) These locations are from Touré’s memory as she was responsible for telling the history of the center many times. See Loretta Ross. Interview with Nkenge Touré. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 43.


housing building. The study group introduced participants to Marxist-Leninism and gentrification, then segued into interlocking systems of oppression. Ross and Touré were drawn to the group for both personal—Ross resided in the building that risked closure—and political reasons. Both of them had an extensive history of organizing in their hometowns for unknown and known organizations. Touré was an active member of the Black Panther Party in Baltimore, Maryland while Ross gained an interest in civil rights as a young student in San Antonio, Texas. It was only fitting that the two rabble rousers met in a study group more than a decade into their organizing careers. Ross accepted an invitation by Touré to an event at RCC and soon joined as a volunteer. By 1979, she was the director of the center. The two worked together at RCC for four years, until Ross’s departure in 1982. Among many collaborative projects within and outside of the center, the two women joined the National United Black Front (NUBF) and organized the International Council of African Women (ICAW). This section highlights some of the programs they created for black women during their tenure at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center.

Expanding Sexual Violence Prevention Education

In 1979, Nkenge Touré decided to engage communities by creating a week of educational programming. She called it “Anti-Rape Week.” In her oral history interview, Touré explained that the goal of Anti-Rape Week was to “build education to raise prevention awareness, and to recruit people into an awareness of, and hopefully support for, the Crisis Center and to take a look at and become advocates for the issue of sexual assault.” It was a week of programming that went beyond the center and challenged residents who had not engaged their services to think critically about sexual violence. Two years after its inception, 900 people attended a Take Back

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the Night March in D.C. The crowd went through DuPont Circle, an area where women often dealt with harassment. Touré didn’t think the area should be singled out; instead, she and RCC wanted to address the harassment that occurred throughout the city. DuPont Circle became one of the sites of weekly speak-outs by women who wanted to spread awareness to sexual harassment, pornography, and rape. According to Touré, the speak-outs were part of a concerted effort to “make D.C. a hassle-free zone.” Ultimately, the “hassle-free zone” campaign to eliminate sexual harassment provided much-needed education for people in the city. This type of education is what made Anti-Rape Week successful. The week turned into Rape Awareness Week, which evolved into Rape Awareness Month. Touré was able to meet her goal of encouraging residents to participate in the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. As a result of Anti-Rape Week, more women of color were recruited into the center. RCC’s community education was concentrated in black neighborhoods in D.C. Despite the knowledge being valuable, this strategy might have perpetuated stereotypes about black communities. That is where black women educators arrived: they knew how to speak to the communities, facilitate conversations rather than lessons, and strengthen a community's relationship to rape prevention.

82 In her oral history interview, Touré recalled women responding to harassment at DuPont Circle. She names Linda Leaks, a black woman, as someone who wanted to draw attention to the issue. See Loretta Ross. Interview with Nkenge Touré. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 49.
83 While Touré is not credited as the founder, I see Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) as part of the evolution of Anti-Rape Week. The United States has observed SAAM every April since 2001.
Defense Campaigns for Incarcerated Survivors

Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré organized in support of black women and other women of color who were incarcerated for defending themselves against attackers. Ross in her interview for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project (2004) shared her take on the evolution of anti-rape activists’ analysis of state violence. Crediting black feminism, she stated, “...black feminism has always sought to connect the dots. We are much more able to articulate that with a more coherent analysis now, but the way we had to challenge the rape crisis center to not disconnect apartheid violence from state violence from personal violence.”\(^8^4\) As early anti-rape activists did, black women crafted a narrative around sexual violence that expanded the public’s understanding and connected varying systems of oppression. This included addressing the criminal legal system. Prominent cases such as Joann Little (1974) and Dessie Woods (1975) bought the attention of black communities and white feminists.

Joann Little, was incarcerated at Beaufort County Jail in Washington, North Carolina when a guard tried to rape her. She defended herself against the attacker, whom she killed in the process. Little received an outpouring support from individuals and organizations across the country including the Black Panther Party. Julian Bond of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) wrote in the Black Scholar, “The very right of a woman to defend herself against a sexual attack is at stake.” Bond did not doubt Little was telling the truth and urged people to support her defense campaign, which SPLC supported. After a five-week trial, Little was acquitted of all charges. Dessie Woods shared a similar story of defending herself against a man who attempted to rape her. In Georgia, Woods shot and killed a man who picked up her and her friend Cheryl Todd. The two women were hitchhiking from a prison and needed a ride back to Atlanta. The driver made it clear he wanted to harm the two women. When they tried to escape, he pulled out his gun. A tussle ensued and Woods managed to grab the gun and fired. She was sentenced to 22 years in prison for murder. She served six years of the sentence before she was paroled in 1981. In both cases, the perpetrator was a white man. It seemed black women who survived sexual assaults were able to get support when it was easy to place blame, not so much when the perpetrator was a co-struggler. Nevertheless, these responses to the self-defense cases demonstrated the significance of community mobilization in defense of black woman, a group who often had to assist themselves.


Connecting these cases to the organizing of a conference, the D.C. Rape Crisis Center wrote in a report, “Their imprisonment for defending themselves against sexual assault illustrated the pathos of Third World Women not only as victims of male violence, but as powerless entities under the criminal justice system.”

Touré and Ross were part of groups that worked on the defense campaigns. In the case of Woods, they were part of her support committee. They picked her up from jail in Georgia and brought her home upon her release. They brought RCC into the work, making the center continue its comprehensive organizing around sexual violence. There were concerns from the center’s board but people seemed to understand the importance of paying attention to these cases and the community response. Touré called it a “educational process,” which it was for many: it required building a stronger analysis of sexual violence that considered state violence. It was also an opportunity for people across movements to work in solidarity to free Little and Woods as well as Inez Garcia (1974) and Yvonne Wanrow (1972), two other women of color incarcerated for self-defense during this period. Black women took the lead on organizing around issues that went unacknowledged, especially when it came to connecting personal violence to state-sanctioned violence. Forming defense committees for incarcerated women was one way to practice protecting black women.

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90 See Joyce Follett. Interview with Loretta Ross. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 120. In addition, I found photos of Nkenge Touré with Dessie Woods while she was still incarcerated. I did not get permission to publish the photos, but they are available at Touré’s papers at Sophia Smith Special Collections.

Addressing Violence Against Black Women

Black feminists were concerned about violence against black women even when it appeared that the rest of the world glossed over it. The murders of black women were growing and became a cause for black women to organize around. Boston-based group Combahee River Collective garnered awareness around the murders of 12 black women in a local neighborhood. What was known as the “Roxbury murders” occurred over a five-month period in 1979. In “Why Did They Die? A Document of Black Feminism,” member Barbara Smith wrote, “...all women want violence against women to be ended and in a situation where Black women felt clearly threatened as women, the collective was able to intervene and change the parameters of the dialogue.”

Combahee River Collective attended a rally hosted by a local organization that started in the wake of the murders. While the murders reached many people’s hearts, there was little emphasis on the significance of violence against black women. Most of the rally’s speakers were men who used their speeches to urge women to protect themselves. That ignored the reality of black women’s experiences of victimhood. Black women had to lead not only their community but white feminists in responding to violence and injustices they faced. In 2012, scholar Terrion L. Williamson wrote about this moment for Feminist Wire. According to Williamson, at the rally, Sarah Small, an aunt of one of the victims, Daryal Ann Hargett asked the crowd, “Who is killing us?” Williamson explains the significance of that question:

Although vitally important, this is not simply a matter of figuring out the identities of those individuals who prey on the vulnerable. Rather, the concern over who is killing us

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must be, first and foremost, about dismantling the originary conditions of that vulnerability.94

In response to the rally, the Combahee River Collective created and distributed a pamphlet titled “Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?”95 Their analysis connected the murders to the overall status of black women in the United States. Black women were living under patriarchy in a capitalist society. They experienced so many incidents of oppression from the United States government alone. They were a vulnerable population because their living conditions were created by a government that acted as if black people had little value. Additionally, black feminists of this time were acutely aware of the economic exploitation of black women96 and how it made them susceptible to violence they experienced.

Figure 2. A photo of 22-year-old Yulanda Ward, who volunteered at the D.C Rape Crisis Center until her untimely death in November 1980. Yulanda Ward with typewriter. Loretta J. Ross papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. DOI: smith_ssc_504_b002_f007_006.

94 While Williamson wrote about the rally for Feminist Wire, the quote is from the reprint of the article in Virginia Eubanks, Alethia Jones, & Barbara, Smith. Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2014, pp. 55-70.

95 At the time of the rally, only six women were connected to the string of murders.

Yulanda Ward is another black woman who lost her life at the hands of black men.97 Ward was a powerhouse activist who met Ross and Touré in the D.C. Study Group in 1978. She was also recruited to RCC, where she became the vice president of the board. A student at Howard University, Ward was known for her critical thinking and exemplary dedication to black liberation. She was on break from school to commit to community organizing when she became the victim of a robbery-turned-homicide on November 2, 1980. Her comrades, including Ross and Touré, consider her murder an assassination.98 Black liberation activists across D.C. were spooked by the premature death of their friend. What was also unsettling was the cooperation of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. The D.C. police were quick to find the four assailants and wrote the murder off as a robbery gone wrong, despite the fact that she was isolated from a group of male friends. The offenders did not hit or sexually assault her; they shot her in cold blood. Given the frequency of sexual violence women experienced, it seemed abnormal for the perpetrators to not harm Ward in that manner. They were convicted and sentenced to an undisclosed number of years. The courts did not disclose where they would serve their time. The inconsistent details of the case led Ward’s co-organizers to hire a private investigator to find the truth. While there is still much that remains unknown, Ward’s legacy was honored through a memorial fund and project on feminism.

Touré, Ross, and Ward are examples of black women who joined predominantly white organizations in the interest of supporting their peers and utilizing organizational resources for

97 Yulanda Ward was killed on November 2, 1980 by James Lee Pannell, Mark and Jacob Stoney. A fourth young man was tried as well. See 1981 Washington Post article on the offenders’ plea at https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1981/11/17/3-se-men-plead-guilty-to-murder-of-housing-activist/530f8f37-4bc2-4b9b-98d6-23be95d312be/?utm_term=.bd147b61ede4.

98 Loretta Ross drafted a paper titled “The Assassination of Yulanda Ward: The Connections are Clear” on March 5, 1981. The paper details the speculations Ward’s friends had about her murder.
their communities. At one point, they asked their fellow black women activists to join a panel sponsored by the center. The panel was organized to discuss the status of women in black nationalist organizations. Such an event was considered controversial, even by the center’s own board. Ross recalled, “...the majority white board of directors couldn’t understand, And how does this relate to rape? And then the black nationalist movements, of which we were a part, were like, How’s this going to liberate us? What is this about?” Invited were women from organizations such as the Black Panther Party, the African People’s Socialist Party, and the Nation of Islam. To have women from movements known as patriarchal—in the eyes of the board—did not make sense. The fact that many of those women did not identify themselves as feminists caused additional confusion, despite their ability to speak on experiencing sexism and share their vision for gender equality.

![Figure 3. A copy of a pamphlet on black feminism that distributed by D.C. Rape Crisis Center. Black Women Why Feminism?](image)

Figure 3. A copy of a pamphlet on black feminism that distributed by D.C. Rape Crisis Center. Black Women Why Feminism?.


100 Loretta Ross recalls organizing the panel and the response from the center’s board in her oral history interview. See Joyce Follett. Interview with Loretta Ross. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 101.
Conversations about feminism occurred at a conference hosted by RCC in August 1980. Around this time, a project was developed by Ward and later implemented by the Black Women’s Organizing Collective.\(^{101}\) The project titled “Black Women: Why Feminism?” was funded by the D.C. Community Humanities Council, which allowed for the project to conduct a series of programs on the topic. According to a paper Ross wrote about the project, it existed to “determine whether feminism has or should have any relationship to Black women and the struggle for true social transformation in the condition of Black people in the United States.”\(^{102}\)

At this time, the scholar bell hooks released her first book, \textit{Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism}. The book discussed the failings of the women’s liberation movement, specifically highlighting the ways in which mainstream feminism did not fit black women’s experiences. The book spoke to many black women, including Ross, who said “if ever a book built a movement, \textit{Ain’t I a Woman} did it for us in D.C., at least.”\(^{103}\) Ross introduced the book to Touré and their comrades, all of whom worked to bring hooks to D.C. for a book signing. For Ross, the book allowed them to raise questions about white supremacy and its role in the lived experiences of black women. In a paper on black feminism, Ross wrote, “Our triple burden of oppression forces us to speak for ourselves instead of uncritically accepting the politics of either the Black liberation or feminist movement and Black women are demanding an extension of the

\(^{101}\) The Black Women’s Organizing Collective (BWOC) was a group of nineteen women. From research, it appears Yulanda Ward was a member of the collective, but I did not find further evidence to make that assertion. Either way, she planned to do the black women and feminism project with BWOC.


\(^{103}\) See Joyce Follett. Interview with Loretta Ross. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, 2004-5, pp. 117.
analysis by the Black movement that addresses our particular concerns as Black women.”

This idea reiterated what black feminists across the country spoke. The hesitation to call themselves feminists did not mean black women did not seem themselves in need of such a movement; they needed space to figure out where they belonged and how their stories should be told. Violence and oppression pervaded the lives of black women and it was an issue that needed to be addressed regardless of the platform.

*Third World Women Organizing Against Violence*

Black women knew their struggles differed from other women, especially white women. As the anti-war movement amped up, black liberation organizations denounced imperialism. The women’s liberation movement was sparking conversations within organizations, leading many black women to organize within their respective spaces. In 1968, Frances Beale and a comrade started an ad-hoc group in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to focus on women’s issues in relation to the state. According to historian Ashley D. Farmer, their anti-imperialist stance drew the attention of Latina women. In response, the group identified commonalities between them and other non-white women. In an exercise of solidarity, the Black Women’s Alliance became Third World Women’s Alliance. An advanced version of Beale’s earlier work, triple jeopardy became the understanding of women of color’s struggles. In addition to racism and sexism, imperialism was a driving force in their oppression.

By the late seventies, women of color organized amongst themselves and developed an analysis rooted in addressing imperialism and various forms of violence. Ross and Touré

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supported the work of other women of color trying to address sexual violence, especially through what was now considered a radical lens. Many conversations about their discontent with their all-white rape crisis centers and domestic violence organizations led to RCC hosting a conference specifically for women of color in the field.

The First National Third World Women’s Conference on Violence was organized by the co-conspirators in August 1980 with a committee of anti-rape activists. According to *Off Our Backs*, there were 100 people in attendance.\(^\text{106}\) There were six panels and six workshops that addressed an array of issues from the criminal justice system, working with men, feminism for women of color. This section will examine the three issues highlighted as they were hot button topics for the D.C Rape Crisis Center and contributed to the issues women of color held with the anti-rape field at large. Sponsored by RCC, the conference was an opportunity for women of color to commiserate and develop strategies for addressing their communities’ needs around sexual violence resources and prevention. The changing climate of the anti-violence movement led to many activists to reflect on their work in rape crisis centers with predominantly white staff.

It was not only racism that inspired this conference. The organizing around defense campaigns of women incarcerated for killing abusers created a divide among anti-violence organizations. Women of color working in these organizations were familiar with state violence, and they knew there was a connection between that particular form of violence, sexual violence, and domestic violence. As Emily Thuma points out, there was “collective concern about their

\(^{106}\) Tacie Dejanikus wrote an article on the conference in *Off Our Backs* ’ Vol. 10, No. 11. The issue was published on December 31, 1980.
increasing involvement with the criminal justice state was another closely related impetus.\textsuperscript{107} This was an issue that would never go away as long as their organizations collaborated with the state. This was a concern of feminists as the anti-rape movement unfolded. In \textit{Aegis}, feminists were discussing the implications of legislation, as people were concerned that new laws gave the state more power over women’s bodies.\textsuperscript{108} There were many layers to state control: the incarceration of survivors, the process of reporting rape, and lengthening sentences of men convicted of rape.

Centers working with the state was especially troubling when women of color were trying to disrupt incarceration and work with offenders directly.\textsuperscript{109} Men of color were more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. The prison industrial complex started to expand during the 1970s, which concerned activists, who believed that the potential laws on rape would only amp up the incarceration rates. Most women of color knew that state intervention was not a solution. In 1973, a program called Prisoners Against Rape (later renamed Coordinators’ Collective Against Violence) was established in Lorton Reformatory in Washington, D.C. Serving a sentence for rape and homicide, William Fuller wrote to the center in hopes they would provide education for inmates.\textsuperscript{110} The request stirred up disagreements within the center, but ultimately, they decided to work with the men. In a paper titled “Working with Minority Men Committing Violence Against Women,” Ross wrote “...For most


\textsuperscript{110} The exact year is unknown. It appears William Fuller contacted the center some time between 1977 and 1979.
World Women, working with men has been its basis in confronting the political realities of Third World people.\textsuperscript{111} While working with offenders was not always easy for many, they understood the state itself would not facilitate these programs, not when the state facilitated sexual violence.

A report by Ross, Toure, and Kathy R. Powell of RCC summarized the conference and shared the goal for participants, who “wanted to examine the issue of rape from the perspective of the Third World woman and her political and social realities.”\textsuperscript{112} The conference was significant in that it provided an opportunity for women of color to speak plainly about the injustices and violence they faced. The report further explained why these women came together: “Third World Women are the targets of rape by all men, but particularly men of their own races and others who consider her defenseless prey, with little or no redress through the criminal justice system. They are the least rewarded, yet most victimized sector of all societies.” Black women and non-black women of color made attempts not only to organize themselves but to organize their communities. Their work within rape crisis centers might have gone unrecognized in the larger movement, but they started a task that still remains: center the stories of non-white women, give them resources to organize themselves, redress their grievances. That is a call not only to men who victimize them but their peers who did not see the importance of an anti-racist framework for understanding sexual violence.

\textit{Impact of Institutionalization of Rape Crisis Centers}

As rape crisis centers became institutionalized, the gap between centers and communities in which black women belonged widened. In an essay, Ross wrote, “Violence against women is a social disease that requires a social antidote. Institutionalization tends to enhance this violence


rather than control or arrest it, and as a societal response, have proven to be almost totally inadequate.”^113 The fear of lynching was returned as many centers fought for legislation that, in their minds, protected victims. This legitimized their work to the state. They received government funding and became less anti-establishment. They removed undesirables from their staff for being too lesbian, not middle-class enough, not respectable enough.^114 Black women were starting to once again wonder where they belonged.

Loretta Ross left the D.C. Rape Crisis Center in 1982, two years after the murder of Yulanda Ward. She and her comrades connected Ward’s death to larger systemic issues that the center did not see as part of their analysis.^115 That, along with previous disagreements, led to Ross’ decision to leave RCC. She continued to organize in D.C with her former colleague, Nkenge Touré, who stayed at the center until 1988. The two continued to organize around sexual violence, white supremacy, and other social justice issues such as healthcare and reproductive justice.

By time the two left the center, institutionalization of rape crisis services was in full force across the country. Organizations such as RCC received government funding to keep their doors open.^116 This is also meant they had standards to abide; for many, this meant a change in the organization’s culture. Under the guise of professionalism, marginalized women, including black

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women, women of color, and lesbians, were encouraged to tone down their political affiliations, their social identities included.

In 1975, Deb Friedman of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center wrote in a Feminist Alliance Against Rape newsletter:

Professionals often seem not to feel a need to relate to political activism outside of the institutional structures. The pressure which forced institutions to begin to deal with rape in the first place developed out of the political activities of feminists. There is no reason to believe that further change will come from within those institutions, or from professionals who are accountable only to the institutions.

It was feminists’ analysis that brought rape into the public sphere during the 1960s and ‘70s. However, the professionalism that came from social workers, lawyers, and others who came into the anti-rape movement after its inception challenged the progressive culture feminists had worked to cultivate. The movement was once a place where people like Touré and Ross could enter without initials behind their name. For Friedman, the anti-rape movement did not need professionalism to be validated. If anything, the anti-establishment perspective many centers held allowed them to get to the root of violence against women. Many radical feminists made the connections between the state and the violence bred from its culture of domination and oppression. That is what brought allowed black feminism to find a home within the movement. The institutionalization changed that, presumably for the worse.

IV. Conclusion

This paper focused on Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré to highlight the ways in which they organized black women as feminists. An introduction to black feminism showed how their work fit within the legacy of black women’s organizing. Black feminism gave black women the opportunity to articulate their experiences and organize themselves around issues that affected

117 See Deb Friedman. “Professionalism.” Feminist Alliance Against Rape Newsletter Fall 1975.
them directly. Black feminism was built upon these women’s analyses of their experiences, more specifically how they understood the ways that different oppressions intersected. This theoretical framework allowed me to understand Ross and Touré’s anti-rape organizing within the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. I highlighted influential projects of theirs, specifically projects that mirror many of the issues black women face today. Ross, Touré, and other women of their time imagined a world in which violence was addressed. They brought those ideas forth in their organizing. Unfortunately, this legacy is often not seen as such. As the anti-rape movement evolved, the lesser known these women’s stories became. This project contributes to the work developed around Ross and Touré’s black feminist anti-rape organizing and brings their narrative back to the center.

Significance of Project

The D.C. Rape Crisis Center has been open for over 40 years, making it one of the longest-running centers in the country. This paper only got to tell part of the center’s story, but it is an important one: black women were part of the anti-rape movement. Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré were part of a legacy of black women who persisted. They followed in the footsteps of Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ida B. Wells. They found like-minded people and organized to 1) make sense of the violence black women experienced and 2) make sure it could never happen again. I chose to focus on their story so people can see the evolution of black women’s anti-rape organizing.

Much of the work Ross and Touré and their black liberation comrades started continues today. The Movement for Black Lives amplifies the work of formal and informal community organizations and political organizing groups, some of which started following the murders of Trayvon Martin (2012) and Michael Brown (2014). Dozens of Black Lives Matter and Black
Youth Project 100 chapters were formed, and numerous other organization were formed with the goal of achieving liberation for black people across the United States.118

This current movement for black liberation is different from its predecessors for embracing black feminist theory and using it as a framework for organizing. However, despite their intellectual framework, many actions perpetrated by members have reflected the opposite of what is central to black feminism.

As these groups were created and/or expanded over the years, they gained popularity within mainstream media and social media. It did not take long for internal conflicts to become known to the public. The root of many conflicts is members perpetrating sexual violence upon other members or against people outside of organizations. These incidents of sexual violence happen during the time of their membership or prior to their membership. Many offenders are cis or trans men or trans masculine while many victims are cis or trans women or non-binary individuals assigned female at birth. Gay and bisexual men, cis or trans, are also likely to be victims. All of these aforementioned populations are involved in organizations for black liberation or advocates of issues affecting black Americans. Sexual violence is not only a violation of an individual, it is a violation of organizations’ codes of conduct and philosophies. This project uplifted past organizations that made attempts to address sexual violence, with the understanding it was largely black women who took on that labor.

These disclosures of sexual violence and intimate partner violence are not new to social movements. In fact, they fit well within the historical landscape of social movements, particularly movements for black liberation. This is not to buy into the myth of the black male rapist but to acknowledge the ways in which black girls and women are victimized, primarily at

118 These efforts expanded globally, but my research focuses on the United States.
the hands of black men. The experiences of black girls and women often have gone unaddressed or have been met with lackluster efforts without unanimous support.

Black women have always made space for themselves within the anti-rape movement despite not receiving much attention. The mainstream narrative of sexual violence has shifted to focus on the perfect victim who is often categorized as a white, heterosexual cis woman. This shift has shaped who gets to participate in anti-rape resistance—at least in the mainstream, specifically within anti-rape organizations. The erasure of black women’s involvement within the anti-rape movement creates a false idea that they sided against anti-rape organizing. According to the 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), black women are sexually assaulted and abused at higher rates than many of their non-black counterparts, with the exception of Native American women.119 They, like their white women counterparts, have organized against rape, physical assault, and harassment within their communities.

There is frequent conversation about sexual violence as disclosures dominate the public sphere. The conversation continues to leave out the experiences of black women and how they respond. In black community organizing spaces, there is ongoing discussion of addressing sexual violence without reporting to law enforcement due to police mistreatment of both offenders and victims. For many groups, there is no model for holding perpetrators accountable while simultaneously fighting for black liberation.

Like many of my peers, I was drawn to the Movement for Black Lives in 2014. I was not new to social justice or black liberation, but I did not know how that organizing could exist in the

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present. I was fortunate to find a group of people who wanted to address police brutality inflicted upon young black people in Chicago, Illinois. I went into anti-police violence work intrigued by prison abolition but concerned about what that meant for addressing sexual violence. I was two years into the anti-violence movement as a rape crisis counselor and prevention educator. I was a student activist focused on inadequate resources for survivors of sexual violence on my college campus. I soon discovered I was one of the only black women publicly involved in these organizing efforts. It wasn’t until I found an anti-police violence group that I worked alongside other black people invested in our people’s liberation. However, I quickly recognized gender dynamics and how members were reluctant to speak openly about allegations of sexual assault or physical abuse. Many of these people identified as black feminists, which I did not doubt, but I saw many swallow their feelings about interpersonal violence to focus on the issue at hand: the state kidnapping and killing of black bodies. I turned to the writings of black women activists before me, and I discovered that my comrades’ inability to hold the two forms of violence simultaneously was an issue that had plagued black activist communities for decades. I hope this project provided people a piece of history to make sense of the difficulties of the present. I don’t have all the answers, but I do know one thing: we are repeating a cycle we can end.

*The Legacies of Loretta Ross and Nkenge Touré*

At the First National Third World Women’s Conference on Violence in 1980, Nkenge Touré called for alternatives to calling the police. She was likely not the first to make such a statement, but her words rang true for many women of color activists. As rape crisis centers participated—willingly or not—in mass incarceration, many women of color opted to leave. Their conversations and organizing continued. Trailing behind them were feminists of color who wanted alternatives and worked to create them. These feminists advanced the analysis that
percolated during the 1980 conference. Twenty years later, the first Color of Violence conference was hosted by Incite! Women of Color Against Violence in Santa Cruz, California.

In 1997, former political prisoner Angela Davis co-founded Critical Resistance, a grassroots movement created to challenge, and ultimately, abolish the prison industrial complex. Many of the organizers of Incite! attended Critical Resistance’s 1998 conference, in which over 3,500 people attended.\textsuperscript{120} The conference created an incredible network of activists, artists, academics, and prisoners, many of whom connected with Incite in the work they started to move outside of the rigid anti-violence movement.\textsuperscript{121} In 2001, Incite! and Critical Resistance released a joint statement on the necessity of addressing interpersonal violence through prison abolitionist lens. In the statement, they wrote, “To live violence-free lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression.”\textsuperscript{122} This sentiment echoed what many anti-rape activists, especially black women, said during the height of the anti-rape movement of the 1970s. The work of both Incite! and Critical Resistance has coalesced into a thriving movement that calls for a radical transformation of the United States.

Radical feminists did warn us: the institutionalization of rape crisis centers changed how people were discussing sexual violence. Centers’ services expanded, which was great for clients, but many feminists felt the radicalism was left behind. Since this cultural shift, many organizations have stopped associating their centers with feminism and view their services as

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\textsuperscript{121} The anti-violence movement includes both sexual violence and domestic violence.
\textsuperscript{122} The statement is available on many platforms. This quote came from a reprint of the statement in Natalie. J Sokoloff. \textit{Domestic Violence at the Margins: Readings on Race, Class, Gender, and Culture}. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 102-114.
\end{flushright}
social work. This decision is made despite their organizations’ feminist origins and social work being a field that has feminist ties itself. In 2018, many people associate rape crisis centers with white women with graduate degrees in social work—and few would call them activists—not black women or intersectionality. The misconceptions about rape crisis centers illustrate how important it is that radical history be shared, especially as conversations about sexual violence are occurring more than ever in the wake of the #MeToo movement. This recent movement on sexual violence has captured the public’s attention, however, the overwhelming response once again insinuates that sexual violence must be addressed only when white women are impacted. This is at odds with the reality of the movement’s founder being a black woman, Tarana Burke.\footnote{123 Tarana Burke is a black woman who called her movement Me Too before the Harvey Weinstein allegations that resulted in dozens of disclosures from Hollywood actors. See Sandra E. Garcia. “The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags.” New York Times, 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html}

*Implications for the Field*

Recent conversations with my colleagues and professors have led me to understand there is a larger conversation to be had about second-wave feminism in general. This project is part of expanding our field’s understanding of it. I believe we should interrogate which voices and stories are missing as we uncover the radicalism of second-wave feminism and its relationship to other social movements in the United States. In recent decades, the field of Gender and Women’s Studies has evolved to include more voices of feminists of color. However, this is a history of black feminist organizing that is overlooked or miscategorized as other than feminist. As feminist researchers look back at black women’s organizing, where do we place them? This project is one contribution that guides us in answering that question as well as: in the era of #MeToo, who is listening to black women’s stories of sexual violence? How does the public, or
even the field of Gender and Women’s studies, perceive black women’s strategies to address sexual violence? Unfortunately, this project does not answer all of these questions, but I believe it was a start.
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