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Lisa Gail Collins

**Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms: Parallels
in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the
United States**

What we got to do is to dig into this thing that tugs at our souls—this
blue yearning to make a way of our own. *Black people you are Black art.*
—Larry Neal (1969, 58)

I wanted to wed my skills to my real ideas and to aspire to the making of
art that could clearly reveal my values and point of view as a woman.
—Judy Chicago ([1975] 1993, 138)

Woman power
is
Black power
is
Human power
is
always feeling
my heart beats
as my eyes open
as my hands move
as my mouth speaks

I am
are you

Ready.
—Audre Lorde (1974, 20)

Similar utopian visions linked the black power and women's liberation
movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Passionate
participants in both struggles ardently imagined a world where they

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would thrive, be safe, and feel connected, authentic, and whole. Holding these honest aspirations close, activist-participants worked tirelessly to realize them by transforming the dominant social order. Both black power and women's liberation activists struggled to unite and mobilize the people they saw as their allies and kin in order to dismantle oppressive power relations, redistribute wealth and other resources, gain value and legitimacy, and design a new and just destiny. While black power activists saw their primary goal as defeating white supremacy and feminist activists saw theirs as overthrowing patriarchy, or male supremacy, activists in both struggles shared a common goal for their imagined allies and kin—social and psychological liberation and freedom from oppression.

The black power and women's liberation movements in the United States, as well as their cultural corollaries, the black arts and feminist art movements, closely resembled each other; both movements shared similar traits, tendencies, tactics, and goals. Yet these were largely parallel struggles. Only a vital handful of courageous visionaries such as Frances Beal, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Faith Ringgold, June Jordan, Betye Saar, Angela Davis, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Ntozake Shange claimed, drew from, and shaped both movements. From the late 1960s through the 1970s, the two movements' striking similarities went mainly unseen, unspoken, and almost wholly unutilized because the majority of participants in both struggles drew insight and energy precisely from imagining their collective histories, identities, and struggles as exquisitely unique. Participants in both movements posited separate lineages and trajectories for their struggles and claimed a cultural uniqueness and a distinct consciousness for their constituencies. The two movements' competing controlling imperatives—to overthrow white supremacy for black liberation and to overthrow male supremacy for women's liberation—led activists in each to imagine their essential constituents, often conceived as kin, in opposing ways. Typically, kin were imagined as black men or white women, respectively. Likewise, many of the two struggles' most prominent leaders shared a central contradiction. Though they sought to construct potent collective identities for their imagined kin—who were often intimately addressed as brothers or sisters—they often

A warm thank you to my prized colleagues Lee Bernstein and Judith Weisenfeld, special issue editors Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones, anonymous readers, and *Signs* staff for their wise commentary and heartfelt encouragement. I also offer a tender thanks to my able research assistant, Kate Farquhar, and the inspired students in my seminar "Vision and Critique in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements" at Vassar College for pressing me to think more deeply about connections.

based these familial-inspired constructions on exclusivity. Many pivotal leaders in the largely parallel movements were so deeply desirous of unity based on shared experience that they either hesitated or refused to acknowledge and embrace the complex diversity of their constituents because they perceived the true recognition of diversity as potentially divisive and antithetical to community building.

Activist and writer Lorde intently contemplated and boldly challenged this hesitancy or refusal on the part of U.S.-based social and cultural activists to acknowledge and work from difference. Fully recognizing by the late 1970s that the competing controlling imperatives of the women's liberation and black power movements had worked both to suppress the complex truth of her own life and the lives of others and to marginalize their participation, Lorde eloquently critiqued this shared dynamic and tragic problem. Concerning the struggle for women's liberation from the vantage point of a frustrated activist-participant in 1980, she declared, "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist" ([1980] 1984, 116). And in her landmark speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," delivered the previous year in Manhattan at "*The Second Sex—Thirty Years Later*" conference, Lorde had hinted at the cause of this state of affairs: "As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" ([1979] 1984, 112).

Self-defined as "a Black woman warrior poet" ([1977] 1984, 41–42), Lorde also critiqued the black power struggle for fearfully conceiving of difference as dangerous and suspect. In her 1982 speech "Learning from the 60s," delivered at Harvard's Malcolm X Weekend, Lorde reflected on the tendency among prominent African American organizers of the era to confuse unity with homogeneity: "In the 60s, political correctness became not a guideline for living, but a new set of shackles. A small and vocal part of the Black community lost sight of the fact that unity does not mean unanimity. . . . Unity implies the coming together of elements which are, to begin with, varied and diverse in their particular natures" ([1982] 1984, 136). Through her numerous speeches, essays, and poems beginning in the mid-1970s, Lorde propelled what would become a loud

and persistent chorus of engaged criticism of the women's liberation and black power movements for simultaneously privileging white womanhood and black manhood and downplaying sexism and racism, respectively, and for creating the false and destructive appearance that "all the women are white" and "all the blacks are men."¹

Lorde's activist words point to why only a few activists and artists were able to fully claim, draw from, and shape both the black power and women's liberation movements as well as their cultural corollaries. Scholars of these sociopolitical and cultural movements have perpetuated the era's separatist strains by neglecting to explore these pivotal movements in relation to each other. In this essay, I want to curb this entrenched practice by examining these two largely parallel movements alongside each other. Through this offering of cultural and intellectual history, I hope to expose the links, particularly the ideological links, between these two influential movements and to tap them to help address a critical question that is too often tackled without seeing these movements as central: How did postwar cultural workers deeply immersed in sociopolitical movements in the United States see their role and work?

My approach is a comparative one. I examine the traits, tendencies, tactics, and goals of the black power and the women's liberation movements in relation to each other. This is an odd method in a special issue of *Signs* devoted to revising binary models and going beyond dualisms but perhaps a still necessary one in this first attempt to place these two largely parallel movements in direct conversation. In his essay on comparative history, Peter Kolchin outlines the benefits of comparative approaches: "Comparison of common or similar institutions, processes, and events across space and time holds the prospect of revealing much both about these institutions, processes, and events, and about the environments in which they existed" (1982, 76). Reading the black power movement and the women's liberation movement and their cultural corollaries alongside each other provides an opportunity for an analogous comparison. By comparing the central goals, dominant ideologies, patron saints, tactics, and internal dynamics of these two pivotal movements as well as comparing how the two movements' cultural wings saw the role of the artist, the purpose of art, and the importance of aesthetics and imagery, I hope to enrich our understanding of the charged relationship between art, politics, and society in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s.

¹ Here I am paraphrasing from the classic black feminist collection *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982).

In his essay, Kolchin also acknowledges the “thorny organizational problem of how to present in detail two or more cases at the same time” (77). By structuring this essay through thematic couplings, I certainly have not resolved the problem of how best to present parallel cases, but I hope my pairings prompt reflection, invite discussion, and propel new work that stresses the contrasts and conflicts between the movements, explores how other cultural workers (both within the United States and beyond) envisioned other alternatives, and offers new models of integrated analysis.

Nationalism/feminism

Black power and women’s liberation activists drew explanatory power from two different sources, for underlying the movements were the ideologies of nationalism—specifically, black nationalism—and feminism, respectively. Though often seen as rival forces with opposing worldviews, black nationalists and feminists of the era frequently employed these two ideologies in quite similar ways. Drawing from their respective theoretical reserves, both advocates for black nationalism and advocates for feminism sought to construct a potent collective identity and a strong communal voice for their imagined allies and kin in order to best mobilize them to pursue, gain, and consolidate power and other group resources. Appeals to shared experiences, distinct and distinctive identities, proud (but shrouded) histories, and righteous futures characterized both black nationalist and feminist rallying cries. Larry Neal, the quintessential theorist and advocate for the black arts movement, for example, approached fellow African Americans during this period as latent nationalists and considered the spirited activation of this dormant energy a crucial early goal in the struggle for black power. In this way, Neal, who saw the black arts movement as the cultural wing of the struggle for black nationhood, sought to tap the “group ethos” that, he believed, “tugs at all black people” for the prideful purposes of empowering, uniting, and mobilizing (1970, 15).

Feminist writer Jane O’Reilly, in the preview issue of *Ms.* magazine, a key organ of the women’s liberation movement, demonstrated a similar intimate approach to her imagined allies and kin. By coining the concept “Click!” she revealed a sanguine belief that a latent feminism—one that was just waiting to be actively engaged—resided in women. In her pivotal essay on housewives, O’Reilly supported her activist belief that everyday interactions could unveil the truth of women’s subordination and that, in turn, this “shock of recognition” could serve to complete “the puzzle of reality in women’s minds” and prompt the heady declaration that “the revolution has begun” (1972, 54).

Malcolm X/Simone de Beauvoir

In their attempts to empower, unite, and mobilize their oppressed and suppressed allies and kin, black power and women's liberation activists deployed their respective theoretical reserves in similar ways. Yet in drawing explanatory power from two different ideologies, black nationalist and feminist movement activists claimed different intellectual histories and trajectories as well as different patron saints. The towering, fiery, uncompromising figure of Malcolm X and his militant call for self-definition, self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense for African America served as the principal referent and prime inspiration for the black power movement and its corollary black arts.

Malcolm X's assassination on February 21, 1965, typically marks the official beginning of the black arts movement. Within weeks of Malcolm's murder, writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), in response, dramatically (and traumatically) fled the Village and relocated to Harlem to start the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS), an alternative community center, school, and performance space based on the evolving principles of black power and black consciousness (Baraka 1984, 200–201). Because he established this short-lived (1965–66) but highly influential cultural institution—BARTS spawned somewhere around eight hundred black theaters and cultural centers in the United States—and because he simultaneously coined the bold and evocative term *black arts*, Jones is often credited with founding the black arts movement (Woodard 1999, 66; Salaam 2002, 23).

Yet, while the prominent writer and emerging activist certainly performed the dashing symbolic and concrete acts that launched black arts in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination, it was the living Malcolm X who truly sparked the cultural movement that outlived him. Eight months before his death, Malcolm X had called for a black cultural revolution. On June 28, 1964, at a Harlem rally devoted to announcing the aims and objectives of his Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), the black nationalist leader had stressed the necessity of culture in revolutionary struggles for social and political change. Drawing from the words and deeds of Négritude advocates such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, Malcolm X declared from the stage of the Audubon Ballroom, "Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past" ([1964] 1972, 563).

Sparking and shaping the contours of a black cultural revolution, Malcolm X in his OAAU speech called for the recovery, dissemination, and

embrace of a shared African past as a creative way to psychologically empower black Americans and to knit them more tightly both to African peoples and to their own local black communities. He explained:

We come from Africa, a great continent and a proud and varied people, a land which is the new world and was the cradle of civilization. Our culture and our history are as old as man himself and yet we know almost nothing of it. We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to un-brainwash an entire people. Our cultural revolution must be the means of bringing us closer to our African brothers and sisters. It must begin in the community and be based on community participation. ([1964] 1972, 563)

Black power activists and advocates for black arts overwhelmingly claimed Malcolm X as their patron saint. Yet it was Los Angeles-based scholar and grassroots organizer Maulana Ron Karenga (a chosen Kiswahili-derived name meaning “master teacher” [Maulana] and “keeper of tradition” [Karenga]) who drew most immediately and decisively from Malcolm’s declaration that a black cultural revolution was essential to the revolutionary struggle for black power. Ignited by Malcolm X’s message, incensed by his brutal murder, and informed by his own work as a community leader directly following the August rebellions in Watts, Karenga formed US (meaning “us” as opposed to “them”), a cultural nationalist organization, in Los Angeles in the fall of 1965 (Brown 2003, 38). Profoundly influenced by Malcolm X’s theory that African Americans were both politically and psychologically disempowered, Karenga, a scholar of African politics and languages, devoted his organization to his newly deceased mentor’s assertion that cultural revolution was crucial to black liberation (Brown 2003, 23–24). “You must have a cultural revolution before the violent revolution” (Karenga 1967, 11), the US leader insisted in *The Quotable Karenga*, a distillation of his cultural nationalist views on revolution modeled after the widely read *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, popularly known as the Little Red Book (Mao 1966).²

² In a 1997 interview with historian Scot Brown, James Mtume discussed why he and Clyde Halisi, coeditors of *The Quotable Karenga*, chose the color green for the book’s cover. Mtume explained, “We had seen the Red Book because everybody was running around with Mao, then there was the *Black Book* of Nkrumah, so we said, ‘The green book: Red, Black, and Green’” (quoted in Brown 2003, 67).

By locating, shaping, and sharing alternative histories, values, rituals, and myths, Karenga hoped to heal and transform African America. “The culture provides the bases for revolution and recovery,” he promised (Karenga 1967, 7). The Los Angeles–based leader believed that the development of a strong, healthy, culturally cohesive black nation would provide a firm foundation for revolutionary struggle. “We stress culture because it gives identity, purpose, and direction. It tells you who you are, what you must do, and how you can do it,” Karenga explained (1967, 6).

While black power activists such as Neal, Jones, and Karenga fiercely turned to Malcolm X and his legacy for courage, clarity, and insight, women’s liberation activists avidly turned to Simone de Beauvoir and her enormously influential 1949 book *Le deuxième sexe*—translated into English four years later as *The Second Sex*—for intellectual guidance and political direction. Widely available in the United States in 1953, the French intellectual’s ambitious, learned, and unprecedented study of the construction of womanhood and the oppression and suppression of women served as a clarion call for women’s liberationists in the following decades. A multidisciplinary examination of the stifling subordination of women in relation to biology, psychology, economics, anthropology, folklore, religion, philosophy, literature, and the arts, Beauvoir’s study laid bare the predicaments of women due to the entangled forces of culture and biology. And, though her findings were quite disheartening, she concluded her book with a treatise titled “Toward Liberation.” Here, in the final pages of *The Second Sex*, the existentialist philosopher and not-yet-feminist explained that, up until her book’s publication, women had not been able to excel in the arts and humanities because of the heavy restrictions that engulfed them.³ This tragic loss of creativity and insight, however, was soon to end, for, as Beauvoir presciently proffered, “the free woman is just being born” ([1949] 1953, 715). This emergent woman, she continued, would finally have the freedom to create essential work that would lend meaning to the world. Beauvoir firmly believed that freedom from entrenched restrictions would expand women’s worldview and, in this way, enrich their work. She wrote:

Art, literature, philosophy, are attempts to found the world anew on a human liberty: that of the individual creator; to entertain such a pretension, one must first unequivocally assume the status of a

³ Beauvoir discussed her 1971 entry into the women’s liberation movement in France in an interview published in the first issue of *Ms.* magazine. See Schwartz 1972.

being who has liberty. The restrictions that education and custom impose on woman now limit her grasp on the universe; when the struggle to find one's place in this world is too arduous, there can be no question of getting away from it. Now, one must first emerge from it into a sovereign solitude if one wants to try to regain a grasp upon it: what woman needs first of all is to undertake, in anguish and pride, her apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence: that is, in liberty. ([1949] 1953, 711)

Lamenting the muffling and loss of women's past thoughts and creations—and refraining from theorizing about whether women's future thoughts and creations would be any different from men's—Beauvoir closed her book with a dire assessment of the past coupled with a hopeful assertion for the future: “What is certain is that hitherto woman's possibilities have been suppressed and lost to humanity, and that it is high time she be permitted to take her chances in her own interest and in the interest of all” ([1949] 1953, 715).

The force of Beauvoir's findings, the brilliance of her approach, the elegance of her writing, and the originality of her life all served as critical inspiration for the women's liberation movement. Feminist writers in particular frequently paid tribute to her exemplary work through their dedications, epigraphs, and citations, as well as through the scope, method, direction, and even the existence of their own writings. Yet it was Los Angeles-based artist and emerging activist Judy Chicago who most intently wrestled with the French intellectual's findings on the problems of women creators throughout Western history in relation to the struggles of contemporary women artists. Before wrestling with this history, however, Chicago publicly declared herself “free” and thus—in line with Beauvoir's insights—capable of vital work and worthy of note. In the fall of 1970, Chicago, who had been born Judy Cohen and had become Judy Gerowitz at her first marriage, boldly announced via the entry wall to her solo show at California State College in Fullerton a change in her last name to reflect the city of her birth and to signal her “emerging position as a feminist” (Chicago [1975] 1993, 62–63; Lippard 1976, 217). The artist's name change sign proclaimed “Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name Judy Chicago.”

Along with this assertive act of self-definition and feminist solidarity, which strongly echoes numerous acts of self-naming and bonding within the black power movement, Chicago also launched the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno) in

the fall of 1970. Like Jones's founding of BARTS five years earlier, this first experiment in feminist art education was short-lived but highly influential. Fifteen students joined the Fresno program during the year of its existence under Chicago to devote themselves to its alternative curriculum, which included consciousness-raising sessions, performance workshops, and radical artistic experimentation, as well as extensive research into women's history, literature, and art (Meyer 1996, 239). Directly responding to Beauvoir's claims that women in the past had not been able to excel in the arts and humanities and that their thoughts and creations had been stifled and lost, Chicago made historical research central to the Feminist Art Program's curriculum.⁴ Driven by the desire to personally understand—and perhaps refute—Beauvoir's findings, program participants diligently visited libraries; gathered, studied, and shared the work of their female artistic predecessors; made slides; and built the first archive of women's art on the West Coast (Chicago [1975] 1993, 86).

Yet only a few short years after Chicago and her feminist art students at Fresno State College (1970–71) and, later, at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts; 1971–73) began exploring art created by women, and a full quarter of a century after the publication of *Le deuxième sexe*, Chicago reiterated much of Beauvoir's dismal assessment of women's historical inability to excel in the arts as the result of the stifling restrictions that entrapped them. In a 1974 interview with feminist art critic Lucy Lippard, Chicago explained, "My investigation of women's art has led me to conclude that what has prevented women from being really great artists is the fact that we have been unable so far to transform our circumstances into our subject matter. That is the process of transformation men have been able to make while we have been embedded in our circumstances, unable to step out of them and use them to reveal the whole nature of the human condition" (Lippard 1976, 230). In a striking departure from Beauvoir, however, who sought to solve the "problem" of female greatness by freeing women from gendered restrictions so they could inhabit the highly desirable status of "sovereign solitude" and begin an "apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence" (Beauvoir [1949] 1953, 711), Chicago believed the problem could best be solved if women, freed from restrictions, could draw strength, insight, form, and content precisely from fully grasping their former circumstances.

⁴ Beauvoir's claim that women in the past had not been able to excel in the arts and humanities also energized art historian Linda Nochlin in her discipline-shaking and field-creating essay of 1971, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"

Soul-searching/consciousness-raising

Studying the past, confronting the present, and envisioning a new future were central to the black power and women's liberation movements. Although black power and women's liberation activists drew from different intellectual histories and trajectories, their shared common goals for their imagined allies and kin—social and psychological liberation and freedom from oppression—led both to place a high premium on new ways of seeing, particularly new ways of seeing the self and the collective in relation to society. Activists in both movements believed that increased self-awareness accompanied by ideological awakening would benefit oppressed and suppressed individuals by healing psychic wounds, curbing feelings of alienation and despair, and turning individuals outward so they could more fully unite with their now more visible allies. Underlying their calls for self-examination, reflection, and scrutiny was the belief that increased knowledge of the self and the collective in society, past and present, would lead to a strong communal consciousness that in turn would lead to an empowered and unified activist community ready to transform the dominant social order. Concerning the necessity of this trajectory, Neal professed, “It is impossible for a people to struggle and win without a sense of collective consciousness” (1970, 12). Kathie Sarachild, an early member of New York Radical Women (1967–69), the first New York City–based women's liberation group, revealed a similar trajectory when she explained how her activist group saw its priorities from the vantage point of the period: “The first job now was to raise awareness and understanding, our own and others’—awareness that would prompt people to organize and to act on a mass scale” ([1975] 1978, 145).

Both movements also encouraged explorations of communal identity—of blackness and femaleness, respectively—in connection with their emphasis on individual awareness. Jones voiced the necessity of this form of collective awareness work most succinctly when he declared, “There is no black power without blackness conscious of itself” (1968, 124). Neal, along with Jones, had been central to the workings of BARTS in Harlem in 1965–66 and had coedited *Black Fire*, the essential anthology of the black arts movement, with Jones in 1968. He was one of the first to publicly laud the palpable impact of awareness work—the emerging change in mass consciousness—and to explain its meaning and direction. Within the pages of the August 1969 special issue of *Ebony* magazine devoted to “The Black Revolution,” Neal testified, “We bear witness to a profound change in the way we now see ourselves and the world. And this has been an ongoing change. A steady, certain march toward a col-

lective sense of who we are, and what we must now be about to liberate ourselves. Liberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in more positive terms. For without a change of vision, we are slaves to the oppressor's ideas and values—ideas and values that finally attack the very core of our existence. Therefore, we must see the world in terms of our own realities” (1969, 54).

Women's liberationists also viewed new ways of seeing the self and the collective in relation to society as crucial to the struggle to overthrow male supremacy. Revealing this shared trait, Gloria Steinem, a founding editor of *Ms.* magazine, wrote in 1972, “If it weren't for the Women's Movement, I might still be dissembling away. But the ideas of this great sea-change in women's view of ourselves are contagious and irresistible. They hit women like a revelation, as if we had left a small dark room and walked into the sun” (1972, 48). Central to the women's liberation movement was the practice of consciousness-raising. Sarachild, a prime architect of the practice and its principles, drew from her memories of rap sessions as a civil rights movement organizer in the early 1960s to further develop this powerful agent of personal and social change as a member of both New York Radical Women (1967–69) and Redstockings (1969–70). (See Sarachild [1975] 1978, 145; Echols 1989, 83–90.)⁵ Consciousness-raising (C-R), or informed and attentive life sharing and analysis, quickly became integral to the growing women's movement and lent palpable meaning to its prime rallying cry, “the personal is political.” Concerning the initial purpose of this critical method of self-awareness and social change, Sarachild later explained, “Our idea in the beginning was that consciousness-raising—through both C-R groups and public actions—would waken more and more women to an understanding of what their problems were and that they would begin to take action, both individual and collective” ([1975] 1978, 149). Many early women's liberationists saw both homes and streets as key sites for consciousness-raising. Private analysis and public actions were both viewed as essential to the overthrow of patriarchy. Clarifying this interconnectedness of theory and practice, Sarachild explained, “In consciousness-raising, through shared experience, one learns that uncovering the truth, that naming what's really going on, is necessary but insufficient for making changes. With greater understanding, one discovers new necessity for action—and new possibilities for it. Finding the solution

⁵ In her recent book, Kimberly Springer cites the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's tactics for setting “the cognitive liberation process in motion” as the basis for the practice of consciousness-raising so central to the women's movement. See Springer 2005, 118.

to a problem takes place through theory and action both. Each leads to the other but both are necessary or the problem is never really solved" ([1975] 1978, 148).

Consciousness-raising was integral to the Feminist Art Program's curriculum at Fresno State College in 1970–71. With Chicago's encouragement, the women art students used this essential tool of increased awareness and inspired transformation to heal, to bond, and to create authentic new work. In line with women's liberation movement objectives, program participants studied the past through their historical research on women artists, and, by courageously and attentively sharing their life experiences, they confronted the present and saw the necessity for future action—the necessity to create anew. Faith Wilding, who was one of the first students to enroll in the program and who had been leading a feminist readings course called *The Second Sex* when Chicago was hired, explained how she and her creative peers conducted intensive consciousness-raising sessions:

The procedure was to "go around the room" and hear women speak from her personal experience about a key topic such as work, money, ambition, sexuality, parents, power, clothing, body image, or violence. As each woman spoke it became apparent that what had seemed to be purely "personal" experiences were actually shared by all the other women; we were discovering a common oppression based on our gender, which was defining our roles and identities as women. In subsequent group discussions, we analyzed the social and political mechanisms of this oppression, thus placing our personal histories into a larger cultural perspective. This was a direct application of *the* slogan of 1970s feminism: "The personal is the political." (1994, 32, 35)

Using the insight and courage they gained from these difficult sessions, the fifteen women students of the Feminist Art Program created the first raw, heartfelt, and eloquent work of what would soon be called the feminist art movement.

Black arts movement/feminist art movement

The black arts and feminist art movements were cultural corollaries, or wings, of the larger black power and women's liberation movements. Participants in each of these art movements shared the same utopian visions, drew from the same theoretical reserves, turned to the same patron saints, and placed the same premium on awareness and consciousness as

advocates and adherents of their respective larger sociopolitical movements. Yet members of the black arts and feminist art movements were also artists who firmly believed in the centrality of cultural work in the struggle for social and political change and, because of this, they were more apt to advocate for cultural nationalism and cultural feminism—ideologies that embrace the creative construction of alternative or oppositional cultures of resistance—than their peers who were less committed to the arts.⁶ Jones, for example, embraced Karenga's theoretical principles in 1967 precisely for their explicit focus on culture. Jones later explained, "Because Karenga's whole premise was of cultural revolution, I was pulled closer. Being a cultural worker, an artist, the emphasis on culture played to my own biases. And no doubt in a society where the 'advanced forces' too often put no stress on culture and the arts at all, I thought his philosophy eminently correct" (Baraka 1984, 254).

From 1967 to October 7, 1974 (when he officially rejected nationalism for third world-based Marxism), Jones worked closely with Karenga's cultural nationalist philosophy *Kawaida* (a Kiswahili-derived term translated as "tradition and reason"), which served the writer and activist as a blueprint for the creation of a revolutionary black culture in the United States (Baraka 1984, 253, 312). Along with this embrace of *Kawaida*, Jones also changed his name. In 1967 he was honored with the Arabic name Ameer Barakat ("blessed prince") by Hajj Heesham Jaaber, a Sunni Muslim priest closely affiliated with Malcolm X during his last months. Yet soon after, and with Karenga's counsel and interest in "Bantuizing or Swahilizing" words (Baraka 1984, 267), Jones changed the spelling and pronunciation of his name slightly to Amiri Baraka. Reflecting on the regal replacement of his birth name, Baraka recalled feeling—like Malcolm X (née Malcolm Little) before him—liberated from his "slave name," honored by his mighty new one, and enthused by the embrace of blackness that this name change represented (1984, 266–67).

If Jones/Baraka served as founder of the black arts movement, Neal served as its top theorist and advocate. He penned many of the movement's most engaged and engaging position papers. A poet, dramatist, essayist, and activist, Neal, like his frequent collaborator Jones/Baraka, saw the arts as ripe terrain on which to graft lofty ideals—ideals that would enable black people to envision and propel change. And, like other adherents to black arts, Neal saw cultural work as central to the struggle for

⁶ For a discussion of the competing wings of feminism within the women's liberation movement, see Echols 1989, 3–11. For a discussion of the various forms of black nationalism during the black power movement, see Van Deburg 1992, 129–91.

social and psychological liberation and freedom from oppression. Revealing the inherent intimacy between black power and black arts, he explained:

Now along with the Black Power movement, there has been developing a movement among Black artists. This movement we call the Black Arts. This movement, in many ways, is older than the current Black Power movement. It is primarily concerned with the cultural and spiritual liberation of Black America. It takes upon itself the task of expressing, through various art forms, the Soul of the Black Nation. And like the Black Power Movement, it seeks to define the world of art and culture in its own terms. The Black Arts movement seeks to link, in a highly conscious manner, art and politics in order to assist in the liberation of Black people. (1969, 54)

In a manner similar to how Jones served as founder of the black arts movement, Chicago served as founder of the feminist art movement. Like Jones, Chicago performed dashing symbolic and concrete acts that both directly responded to the tactics and tendencies of the larger liberation struggle and worked to birth and shape its cultural wing. Seven years after Jones established BARTS in an old brownstone at 109 West 130th Street in Harlem and six years after Jones launched Spirit House, a second black arts cultural center and black power political hub on 33 Stirling Street in Newark, New Jersey, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and twenty-one art students transformed a condemned mansion at 533 Mariposa Avenue in Hollywood into the quintessential feminist art project. Participants in the second incarnation of the Feminist Art Program, which was now housed at CalArts and led by both Chicago and Schapiro, these art students employed newly acquired house-renovating skills to create a feminist treatise on homemaking.

Called *Womanhouse*, this collaborative project tackled the subject of the suppression (and depression) of postwar suburban housewives trapped in limited and limiting gender roles. Through room-specific installations and performances, each of the seventeen rooms of the house as well as the five living room-based performances grappled with the restricting gender roles and social expectations that the students had explored as part of their group consciousness-raising sessions. Extensively covered by the press, and experienced firsthand by about ten thousand people during the only month of its existence (January 30–February 28, 1972), this large-scale watershed work powerfully introduced the emerging feminist art movement to the interested public much as BARTS had introduced the black arts movement to attentive America (Raven 1994, 48, 61).

If Judy Chicago served as founder of the feminist art movement, Lucy Lippard served as its principal critic and preeminent advocate. Holding a role similar to Neal's, she penned many of the evolving movement's most engaged and engaging position papers. Lippard, like her activist predecessors and peers, saw art and politics as linked, for, she believed, they both held "the power to envision, move, and change" (1995, 10). Like others committed to the goal of social and psychological liberation and freedom from oppression for their imagined allies and kin, she too placed a high premium on new ways of seeing, particularly on new ways of seeing the self and the collective in relation to society. Lippard saw a developed feminist consciousness as leading to a new kind of art, a new way to experience art, and a new role for it—one with crucial links to feminist activism. She explained, "A developed feminist consciousness brings with it an altered concept of reality and morality that is crucial to the art being made and to the lives lived with that art. We take for granted that making art is not simply "expressing oneself" but is a far broader and more important task—expressing oneself as a member of a larger unity, or community, so that in speaking for oneself one is also speaking for those who cannot speak" (1980, 363). Like Neal, Lippard championed a new art that expressed an alternative and liberatory consciousness and touted its creators for articulating the yearnings of a larger and less heard community.

The role of the artist

Proclaiming pivotal roles for creators and their creations within social and political struggle was crucial to both the black arts and feminist art movements. Both movements avidly touted the ideal of activist artists who could prompt change through their inspired and committed work. "The artist and the political activist are one. They are both shapers of the future reality," pronounced Neal in the closing pages of *Black Fire* (Jones and Neal 1968, 656). Underlying this spirited vision and charge lay a critique of the controlling ideal of the artist in the West—the isolated, typically white male individual whose genius lies far outside the grasp and relevancy of local communities. In direct response to this dominant modernist myth, participants in the black arts and feminist art movements envisioned the perfect artist as one who, immersed in his or her community, created vital work that honored and empowered his or her new and nonelite audience through validation and consciousness-raising. Neal proposed a politically potent and intimate role for creators and their creations within the black arts movement: "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is

the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" ([1968] 1971, 257).

The feminist art movement also sought to overthrow the modernist myth of the combative and elusive artist. Critiquing this dominant standard, Lippard asserted, "The history of the male avant-garde has been one of reverse (or perverse) response to society, with the artist seen as the opposition or as out-of-touch idealist" (1980, 364). Lippard championed an equitable relationship based on honesty and accountability—not aloofness and combativeness—and theorized that a reciprocal stance would enhance the creation and reception of art. "I do not think it is possible to make important or even communicable art without some strong sense of source and self on one hand and some strong sense of audience and communication on the other," she explained (1976, 148).

During the spring of 1974, Lippard was one of seventy-one women to respond to a short letter from the seventeen women art students who were enrolled in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts. Dated March 6, 1974, the art students' letter stated that they, along with their professor Miriam Schapiro, the sole director of the Feminist Art Program at the time, were planning a seven-day Women's Art Festival as a forum in which to share their work and to celebrate the emergence of a "new spirit of visibility and vitality in the arts" (Feminist Art Program 1974, 53). As part of this event, the art students explained, they were soliciting letters they could publish in *Anonymous Was a Woman*, the catalog that would accompany the event. They wrote, "We plan to document this event with the publication of a catalog which will have a section called 'Letter To a Young Woman Artist.' We would be deeply honored to include such a letter from you about your experiences, or advice, or whatever feelings you might wish to express. Your letter would be an invaluable contribution in our efforts to build a strong identity for women" (Feminist Art Program 1974, 53).

Inspired by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's gracious and heartfelt words of advice to an aspiring young writer collected in *Letters to a Young Poet* ([1929] 1984), the students asked their respected elders—women in the arts—for words of wisdom to guide their journey as emerging women artists. Echoing the intimacy and urgency of Rilke's letters to the young poet, Lippard promptly responded to the students of the Feminist Art Program with the following letter:

To a Young Woman Artist,

I'm sorry this has to be so short, because I have a lot I'd like to talk about with you, but try to read between the lines. I hope you're

angry but get it over with fast and *use* it while you've got it. I hope you don't stop being angry now and then until things are better for all women, not just artists; I hope you're working from yourself and know how to fuck the art world pressures when you get out there; and I hope you're working for everybody else too; I hope you'll be the one to figure out a way to keep art from being used the wrong way and for the wrong things in this society; I hope you make your art accessible to more people, to all women and to everybody; I hope you think about that now and aren't waiting till you make it, because that's likely to be too late. I hope you remember that being a feminist carries with it a real responsibility to be a human. I hope and I hope and I hope . . . love, Lucy Lippard (Feminist Art Program 1974, 102–3)⁷

In her frank and intimate response, Lippard voiced what she saw as the role of the artist within the women's liberation movement. After affirming the students' rage at the imposed social order and pressing them to see themselves as participants in a larger struggle, she encouraged them to create honest and heartfelt work and to resist the mainstream art world's pressures to conform. And, finally, the activist critic asked them to make their work "accessible to more people, to all women and to everybody."

For activists who saw cultural work as central to the struggle for liberation, the issue of accessibility was crucial. Karenga, the leader of US, put it most bluntly when he claimed, "There is no art in the world you should have to go to school to appreciate" (1967, 23). Participants in both the black arts and feminist art movements longed for the creation of art that could communicate directly with their imagined allies and kin. Beneath this desire to intimately and authentically communicate with new and nonelite audiences for art was the belief that art, because it dealt in images, was a particularly rich site for the creation of liberatory visions. Articulating the ideal of an art that could target "brothers" and "sisters" for the purposes of validation, consciousness-raising, and the revelation of a "liberated future," Neal pressed artists to create

an art that addresses itself directly to Black people; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that

⁷ For another insight into the dialogue on the role of the artist, see Judy Chicago and Arlene Raven's joint letter to the Feminist Art Program students at CalArts from their vantage point as recent founders of the Los Angeles-based Feminist Studio Workshop in 1973, the first entirely independent alternative structure for women in the arts-related professions (Feminist Art Program 1974, 67–68).

validates the positive aspects of our life style. Dig: An art that opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the Vision of a Liberated Future. So the function of artistic technique and a Black esthetic is to make the goal of communication and liberation more possible. (1969, 56)

Participants in the feminist art movement similarly yearned for artists who could make art that spoke honestly and directly to their imagined allies and kin, and, like their black arts movement peers, they too criticized modernist values for creating the hostile gap between artists and nonelite viewers they avidly sought to close. Chicago understood the problem as twofold—involving both art making and art viewing. Concerning this two-pronged barrier to authentic communication, she explained, “It’s not only the making of art but the perception of art that is too formalized in our tradition, and has to be opened up to a new human dimension” (Lippard 1976, 227). Pledging to serve as a “bridge between artists and community,” Chicago saw her goal as an artist as “introducing art into the life of the community in a way that allows people to see images they can relate to” ([1975] 1993, viii).

A similar desire to dismantle the barriers that isolated art from people and life infused the creation of the New York City-based Heresies Collective and their “idea-oriented” journal, *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Committed to “the broadening of the definition and function of art,” the Heresies Collective included the following mission statement in every issue of the journal beginning with the first in January 1977: “As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts, and our ideas have been suppressed. Once these connections are clarified they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationship between art and politics, work and workers. . . . Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of this dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art” (Heresies Collective 1977, inside cover).

The purpose of art

Activists in both movements were aligned in their desire to expand the purpose and meaning of art. They worked to replace the imposed modernist ideal of art for art’s sake with an activist ideal of art for people’s

sake. In essence, they sought to counter the dominant ideal, which they viewed as decadent and immoral, with a more responsible and life-enhancing one. Karenga put it baldly when he stated, “Black Art must be for the people, by the people, and from the people. That is to say, it must be functional, collective and committing” (1967, 22).⁸ Similarly, Jeff Donaldson, a founder of Chicago’s Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) and a painter on the famed *Wall of Respect*, expressed the critical consciousness-raising role he envisioned for artists and their art in the quest for black power. In his 1969 article “The Role We Want for Black Art,” Donaldson declared, “Black image makers are creating forms that define, glorify, and direct black people—an art for the people’s sake. Those of us who call ourselves artists realize that we can no longer afford the luxury of ‘art for art’s sake’” (1969, 17).

A similar critique of modernist artistic values and embrace of an emerging counterculture was made by feminist activist Robin Morgan, editor of the classic 1970 anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, when she reported on the feminist art movement for *Ms.*: “Beneath the expansion of presses and magazines is an explosion of women’s culture so energetic and widespread that it is not only giving voice to women as a people but shows signs of rescuing art itself from the necrophiliac modernism of the establishment, making poetry and music and drama and visual art and dance once again relevant, passionate, accessible; something to be integrated into all of our daily lives” (1975, 78).

Disgruntled—horrified even—with the role of the artist and the purpose of art as dictated by mainstream modernism, both Neal and Lippard, the principal critics and preeminent advocates of the two largely parallel movements, urged the reclamation of what they saw as the primal purposes of art. Stressing what he envisioned as the ancient link between art, ritual, and religion, and encouraging its renewal, Neal offered the following vision for black art:

The Black Arts movement is rooted in a spiritual ethic. In saying that the function of art is to liberate Man, we propose a function for art which is now dead in the West and which is in keeping with our most ancient traditions and with our needs. Because, at base, art is religious and ritualistic; and ritual moves to liberate Man and to connect him to the Greater Forces. Thus Man becomes stronger psychically, and is thus more able to create a world that is an ex-

⁸ For more on his views, see Karenga (1968) 1972.

tension of his spirituality—his positive humanity. We say that the function of art is to liberate Man. (1969, 56)

Tendering a vision of artists working collectively and responsibly, and of an art deeply embedded in community life, Lippard offered her own vitalizing vision of feminist art:

The feminist (and socialist) value system insists upon cultural workers supporting and responding to their constituencies. The three models of such interaction are: (1) group and/or public ritual; (2) public consciousness-raising and interaction through visual images, environments, and performances; and (3) cooperative/collaborative/collective or anonymous artmaking. . . . All these structures are in the most fundamental sense collective, like feminism itself. And these three models are all characterized by an element of outreach, a need for connections beyond process or product, an element of *inclusiveness* which also takes the form of responsiveness and responsibility for one's own ideas and images—the outward and inward facets of the same impulse. (1980, 364)

Both Neal and Lippard rejected what they saw as the unprincipled dictates of mainstream modernism and championed a world where art was embedded both in the awesome and in the mundane rituals of everyday life and where ethics and aesthetics were one.

Black aesthetic/female imagery

Participants in the black arts and feminist art movements not only critiqued the role of the artist and the purpose of art within mainstream modernism; they also critiqued the dominant art world's exclusion of them, especially when they chose to express openly their distinctive experiences and identities in their art. While some artists actively struggled for inclusion in a transformed art world, others devoted themselves to the creation of alternative structures for the making and experiencing of art. The Chicago-based OBAC made plain its lack of faith in mainstream art institutions and criticism and its full support of new autonomous structures for black artists and their art. This organization's 1967 statement of purposes read: "Because the Black artist and the creative portrayal of the Black Experience have been consciously excluded from the total spectrum of American arts, we want to provide a new context for the Black artist in which he can work out his problems and pursue his aims unhampered and uninhibited by the prejudices and dictates of the mainstream" (quoted in *Ebony* 1967,

49). Seeking independence from the dictates of the dominant art world, OBAC's Visual Art Workshop created the *Wall of Respect*, a mural of "Black Heroes," on the side of a tavern at 43rd Street and Langley Avenue in Chicago's South Side and, through this artful and autonomous act, prompted an outdoor mural movement that spread throughout urban America (Donaldson 1998, 22).⁹

Feminist artists also devoted themselves to a range of struggles, including rallying for inclusion in a transformed mainstream art world, building alternative women-centered sites and structures, and struggling simultaneously on both fronts. Chicago voiced the anger and frustration of many feminist artists who had attended art schools and who had fully envisioned participating in the mainstream art world when she shared her life-shaking realization that her dream for herself was not possible. Around 1969, the fairly prominent young artist realized that her access to formal training and professional development had been dependent on her refraining from exploring either her own personal experiences as a woman or the collective experiences of women generally. Explaining the effect that this form of entrenched misogyny had on her art, Chicago wrote, "I learned that if I wanted my work to be taken seriously, the work should not reveal its having been made by a woman. One of the best compliments a woman artist could receive then was that 'her work looked like it was made by a man'" ([1975] 1993, 36).

Lippard voiced a similar critique when she explained her short-term support for a separate women's art world. In her 1976 introduction to *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, the first volume of feminist art criticism, she asked,

Why are we all still so afraid of being *other* than men? Women are still in hiding. We still find it difficult, even the young ones, to express ourselves freely in large groups of men. Since the art world is still dominated by men, this attitude pervades the art that is being made. In the process, feelings and forms are neutralized. For this reason, I am all in favor of a separatist art world for the time being—separate women's schools, galleries, museums—until we reach the point when women are as at home in the world as men are. (1976, 11)

While Lippard considered inclusion in both a transformed art world and a just "real world" the appropriate long-term goal for feminist artists, she

⁹ For more on this movement, see Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft (1977) 1998. See also Barnett 1984; African American Historical and Cultural Museum 1986; Prigoff and Dunitz 2000.

also believed that, because of the current mainstream art world's exclusion and suppression of women artists and their work, a temporary separatist respite was an important step to the creation and recognition of art that confidently expressed the female gender of its maker (1976, 8).

Infused with cultural feminist and cultural nationalist ideologies—which, by definition, privilege cultural terrain—while championing the unique histories, distinct experiences, and distinctive identities of their imagined allies and kin, artists from both struggles embarked on creative separatist quests. Some feminist art movement participants went searching for a shared imagery, while some black arts movement activists pursued a collective aesthetic. Artists in both movements searched for a set of shared characteristics or principles based in femaleness or blackness that would guide the creation of a generative art—an art that would inspire feelings of connection, authenticity, and wholeness among its community. Initially, seekers in both movements looked to earlier art for the bases of their quests. In a special issue of *Everywoman* devoted to the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College, Wilding explained that, while conducting historical research on women artists in 1970–71, program participants sought to discover a body of work created by women that intimately and courageously reveled in its femaleness:

One of our major tasks then, in this research project, is to find, carefully isolate and then document “female art,” that is, art that deals directly with the experience, sensations, and emotions of women. We are not indiscriminately interested in just any art made by women, for a lot of women have emotionally and psychically internalized the male world, and have learned to produce images which will please men and win their recognition. No, rather, we are interested in very particular images and forms, those which are honest, direct, exposed, tender and emotionally evocative in terms of experience. We have begun to discover that there is a common body of imagery in female art, that there is, in fact, a world of values and experience and sensation that is quite different from that of men. (1971, 18–19)

Drawing on the Feminist Art Program's archival and conceptual research, Chicago and Schapiro lectured widely on the topic of female imagery in 1971–72, while codirecting the program at CalArts (Schapiro and Chicago 1973). After intently studying the works of women artists of the past and visiting the studios and other work spaces of contemporary women artists, the two feminist artists and art educators began to see a

common imagery in some of the art created by women, particularly those who worked somewhat abstractly. Recurrent in the work of these artists, they posited—while showing work by Georgia O’Keeffe, Louise Nevelson, Barbara Hepworth, Lee Bontecou, and themselves—was the use of a “central image.” Frequently echoing a flower or vagina, this “central core imagery,” Chicago and Schapiro theorized, symbolized the female body, and, though often hidden or disguised “behind the facade of formalized art concerns,” this core imagery served as a proud assertion of femaleness (Chicago [1975] 1993, 144). In her autobiography *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, Chicago explained that this hidden sexualized imagery was a path of her female predecessors. Knowing that access to training and professional opportunities were dependent on downplaying overt expressions of their femaleness, some prior women artists, she argued, had created a coded imagery informed by an awareness of, and pride in, their female bodies. Detailing her and her colleague’s discovery of this coded and recurrent female imagery, Chicago wrote,

Mimi and I looked at work together, examining paintings and sculptures of women known and unknown, concentrating on those who had worked abstractly. From our own experiences as artists, we both had an understanding of how to look for the hidden content in women’s work. What we discovered in our studies and later, in our studio visits overwhelmed me; and reinforced my own early perceptions. We found a frequent use of the central image, often a flower, or abstracted flower form, sometimes surrounded by folds or undulations, as in the structure of the vagina. We saw an abundance of sexual forms—breasts, buttocks, female organs. We felt sure that what we were seeing was a reflection of each woman’s need to explore her own identity, to assert her sense of her own sexuality, as we had both done. ([1975] 1993, 143)

Underlying Chicago and Schapiro’s theory of female imagery, which was hotly controversial upon its first articulation in 1971, was the ardent desire for a world where women artists could break free from the misogynist injunction for coded art and fully revel both symbolically and concretely in their distinct and unique identities as women. Women’s different embodied experiences from men had led to the creation of a female consciousness or sensibility, they believed, and they encouraged women artists to draw from this shared resource for the material to make honest new work without apology.

Paralleling the quest for female imagery was the search for a black

aesthetic. Black arts adherents searched for a set of principles that could birth an art that addressed black realities, affirmed black history and culture, spoke to the masses of black people, and aligned itself with liberation struggles throughout the world. No group of people worked more intently on this mighty project than the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AFRI-COBRA), a Chicago-based group that grew out of OBAC's Visual Art Workshop. After the collective creation of the legendary mural *Wall of Respect* during the summer of 1967, the Visual Art Workshop largely disbanded; however, individual members, including Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Wadsworth Jarrell, continued meeting to discuss how to give further visual expression to the goals of black power.¹⁰ Along with other local artists, they pondered a question Donaldson had asked Jarrell at an outdoor art fair in suburban Chicago in 1962, the year before the historic March on Washington. Partially daydreaming, Donaldson had asked his friend and fellow painter, Would it be possible "to start a 'Negro' art movement based on a common aesthetic creed?" (Donaldson 1970, 80). Six years later, in 1968, soon after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the riots and rebellions that followed, five of the Chicago-based artists took the name COBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists) and were poised to answer Donaldson's prescient question affirmatively (Donaldson 1970, 82). The next year, wanting to express their black diasporic consciousness and allegiances spurred by the late Malcolm X's teachings, the now seven artists changed their name to AFRI-COBRA (Douglas 1996, 30). By July 1970, when their traveling exhibition "Ten in Search of a Nation" opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem, they were ten artists committed to a shared black aesthetic. As part of their Studio Museum show, founder Donaldson explained AFRI-COBRA's history and mission to the larger interested public:

We are a family—COBRA, The Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, is now AFRICOBRA—African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. It's NATION TIME and we are searching. Our guidelines are our people—the whole family of African people, the African family tree. And in this spirit of familyhood, we have carefully examined our roots and searched our branches for those visual qualities that are most expressive of our people/art. Our people are our standard for excellence. We strive for images inspired by African people/experience and images which African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience. Art for peo-

¹⁰ Artist and OBAC member Carolyn Lawrence also joined the group later in 1970.

ple and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable. We try to create images that appeal to the senses—not to the intellect. The images you see in an AFRICOBRA exhibition may be placed in three categories:

1. Definition—images that deal with the past.
2. Identification—images that relate to the present.
3. Direction—images that look into the future.

It is our hope that intelligent definition of the past, and perceptive identification in the present, will project nationfull direction in the future—look for us there, because that’s where we’re at. (1970, 82–83)

The artists of AFRI-COBRA sought to create a new art that confidently drew sustenance from the past, engaged the present, and envisioned a new future. To create this new activist art, members collectively defined their political goals, philosophical concepts, and aesthetic principles. Black power was their essential political goal. Similarly, their theoretical goal, one member explained, “was a school of thought that would heighten consciousness and delve into cultural sensibilities in an effort to promote a strong sense of pride in black people” (Jarrell 1985, 17). To further these political and psychological ends, AFRI-COBRA artists searched for a means—a shared black aesthetic. Founding member Jarrell explained that members sought “a collective concept that would say ‘black art’ at a glance” (quoted in Douglas 1996, 26). After studying their own work, as well as the work of other black artists, however, the activist artists decided to construct their own set of aesthetic tenets for the creation of their own black arts art. Drawing from “their inheritable art forms as an African people,” members developed five guiding aesthetic principles, which founding member Jones-Hogu outlined in 1973 (unpaginated):

- A. FREE SYMMETRY, the use of syncopated rhythmic repetition which constantly changes in color, texture, shapes, form, pattern, movement, feature, etc.
- B. MIMESIS AT MID-POINT, design which marks the spot where the real and the unreal, the objective and the non-objective, the plus and the minus meet. A point exactly between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalism.
- C. VISIBILITY, clarity of form and line based on the interesting irregularity one senses in a freely drawn circle or organic object, the feeling for movement, growth, changes and human touch.
- D. LUMINOSITY, “Shine,” literal and figurative, as seen in the dress and personal grooming of shoes, hair (process or Afro), laminated furni-

ture, face, knees or skin.

E. COLOR, Cool-ade color, bright colors with sensibility and harmony.

With their dynamic, hip, high-key, and shimmering offerings of figurative abstraction, the artists of AFRI-COBRA sought to make accessible and affordable art reflective of the realities, experiences, and dreams of African Americans. Drawing from the “roots and branches” of the black diaspora and committed to shared goals, philosophical concepts, and aesthetic principles, the individual members of this “family of imagemakers” creatively labored to give brilliant visual expression to Neal’s declaration “*Black people you are Black art*” (Neal 1969, 58; Donaldson 1970, 86).

for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf

The protracted efforts on the part of black power and women’s liberation activists in the 1960s and 1970s to unite and mobilize the people they saw as their allies and kin in order to dismantle oppressive power relations, redistribute wealth and other resources, gain value and legitimacy, and design a new and just destiny were intensifications of long-standing struggles for social and psychological liberation and freedom from oppression. And, in a dynamic similar to the earlier, analogous struggles for abolition and women’s rights during the nineteenth century, the perceived competition between the two post–World War II movements created a unique predicament for African American women. The black power and women’s liberation movements, as well as their cultural corollaries the black arts and feminist art movements, shared strikingly similar traits, tendencies, and goals. Activists in both struggles sought to create a politically and psychologically viable collective consciousness for their “brothers” and “sisters” in order to overthrow white supremacy and male supremacy, respectively, and to heal from their dire effects. Yet the tone of unity and the tenor of urgency in both movements compromised the ability of women of African descent to articulate their own distinct histories, identities, experiences, and dreams to strong, calm, and attentive ears. Additionally, the easy equation of fulfilled manhood, brotherhood, and liberation in the black power movement, as well as the high premium placed on shared experiences and safe sisterhood in the women’s liberation movement, made it a supreme challenge for African American women to assert the validity of their uniqueness to their fearful and resistant peers.

Despite these difficulties, however, a handful of courageous and visionary women claimed, drew from, and shaped both movements, and perhaps no one was better able to do this than Ntozake Shange (a ritually

given Zulu-derived name meaning “she who brings her own things” [Ntozake] and “one who walks with lions” [Shange]). (See Richards 2001, 652.) Shange, from her bohemian Bay Area vantage point, saw the quest for female imagery and the search for a black aesthetic as linked, like her accepted name, which elegantly meshes the desire for an African homeland so palpable in the black arts movement with the desire for female self-reliance and bodily sovereignty so crucial to women’s liberation. Joining the two previously parallel movements, the artist committed herself both to “creating new rituals and new mythologies for people of color” (Lester 1990, 44) and to learning, preening, and sharing women’s “common symbols” (Shange 1981, ii). In December 1974, the twenty-six-year-old poet, dancer, and teacher performed the first incarnation of her movement-conjoining choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* with four other artists at a women’s bar outside Berkeley, California.¹¹ Infused with the creative spirit of Shange’s daily life in the early 1970s—teaching courses in women’s studies at Sonoma State College, including one called *Woman as Artist*, and then commuting back to San Francisco to study dance of the African diaspora—this raw and eloquent merging of poetry, music, and dance drew insight and energy from both the black arts and feminist art movements as well as from Bay Area-based multilingual and multicultural third world struggle and creativity. It also offered something entirely new: a fierce and delicate expression of black female subjectivity. Sharing how her work, her body, and indeed her being had flourished from her hungry embrace of the rich resources of the period’s (and the region’s) vibrant cultural movements, Shange explained:

Such joy & excitement I knew in Sonoma, then I would commute back the sixty miles to San Francisco to study dance with Raymond Sawyer, Ed Mock, & Halifu. Knowing a woman’s mind & spirit had been allowed me, with dance I discovered my body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet. The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, was poem to me, my body & mind ellipsing, probably for the first time in my life. Just as Women’s Studies had

¹¹ There have been many incarnations of *for colored girls*. From 1974 on, Shange gave the title to many of her poetry readings and improvised performances. For an early version of the poems, with drawings by Wopo Holup, see Shange 1975.

rooted me to an articulated female heritage & imperative, so dance as explicated by Raymond Sawyer & Ed Mock insisted that everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, waz mine. I moved what waz my unconscious knowledge of being in a colored woman's body to my known everydayness. ([1977] 1989, xi)

Drawing sustenance from both the separate lineages unearthed and constructed by black arts and feminist art movement activists and mining this cosmopolitan ancestry, in 1974 Shange created a set of poems centered on the experiences of black women, the very population that had been so difficult to see when blackness and femaleness had been viewed as distinct. Informed by the work of Jones/Baraka, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, Pedro Pietri, Jessica Hagedorn, Susan Griffin, June Jordan, and Ishmael Reed, and modeled on feminist writer and activist Judy Grahn's poetic portraits of seven everyday women in her popular 1969 series of poems *The Common Woman* ([1969] 1978, 60), Shange's set of improvised poems explored the intimate joys and pains of seven iconic black women named for the color of their dresses.

Performed by the "lady in brown," the first poem, "dark phrases," is a solemn plea for the overdue unearthing and creation of a black female subjectivity ([1977] 1989, 4–5):¹²

somebody/anybody
 sing a black girl's song
 bring her out
 to know herself

 sing her song of life
 she's been dead so long
 closed in silence so long
 she doesn't know the sound
 of her own voice

 let her be born
 let her be born
 & handled warmly.

Spoken by the "lady in brown" while her peers stand in silence, this call for a gentle birthing of consciousness rests on the belief closely held

¹² Here I am drawing from the incarnation of *for colored girls* originally published in 1977.

by both black power advocates and women's liberation activists that increased self-awareness accompanied by ideological awakening would benefit oppressed and suppressed individuals by healing psychic wounds, curbing feelings of alienation and despair, and turning healing individuals outward so that they could more fully unite with their allies. This call for careful excavation and conscious awareness of black female subjectivity is then followed by a series of performed poems that expose the experiences of black girls and women coming of age in urban America. Individually, the anonymous women tell stories of youthful passion, delicious sex, and necessary magic, but the stories center on vulnerability and violation, namely, abortion, depression, betrayal, rape, domestic violence, and murder. In the midst of this intimate life sharing, the "lady in yellow" captures the essence of this strenuous soul-searching and consciousness-raising (and the essence of *for colored girls*) when she proclaims: "but bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma / i haven't conquered yet" (Shange [1977] 1989, 45).

After exposing the often cruel experiences of approaching and entering black womanhood largely unprotected by community and society, the penultimate poem "a nite with beau willie brown" performed by the "lady in red" recounts a harrowing tale of "crystal," a young mother, and her partner, "beau willie," who has just returned, traumatized, from Vietnam. The poem exposes the poor couple's descent into a cycle of violence and ends with beau willie dropping his two children out the window of their fifth-floor walk-up in protest of crystal's refusal to marry him. Following this brutal act, the individual black women join together to perform a healing ritual. In "a layin on of hands," the final poem and act, the seven women acknowledge their pain, express their desire for wellness, and perform a communal ritual of self-affirmation and black female solidarity while the "lady in brown" turns to the audience and dedicates the choreopoem to the continuation of healing and growth by chanting "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows" (Shange [1977] 1989, 64).

From its initial poem, "dark phrases," to its closing ritual, "a layin on of hands," Shange's choreopoem draws sustenance from both the black arts and the feminist art movements, particularly in its insistence on self-awareness, self-definition, and solidarity and in its underlying belief in the importance of cultural work in the struggle for psychological, social, and political change.¹³ The "twenty-odd" ([1977] 1989, xiv) performed po-

¹³ For more on Shange's use of both black arts and feminist literacies to create her vision of black women's community, see Clarke 2005.

ems also left their imprint on the future of both movements in their simultaneous articulation of blackness and femaleness and in their innovative construction of a black feminist collective identity.¹⁴ The choreo-poem's trajectory, however, eventually, if temporarily, left the activist settings so typical of the two movement's creations.

About six months after performing the work to acclaim in intimate venues in the Bay Area, Shange and her collaborator, Paula Moss, drove across the country determined to perform it in New York City's downtown alternative spaces. They were successful in her pursuit, and audiences were soon able to experience the poet's still evolving performance piece at small venues such as Studio Rivbea, the Old Reliable, and DeMonte's beginning in July 1975 and starting in March 1976 at the Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre (Shange [1977] 1989, xiii–iv). As a result of the show's continuing popularity, especially among African American and Latino audiences, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* opened at the Public Theater in June 1976 (Shange [1977] 1989, xv). And three months later, in September 1976, it was performed at the Booth Theater on Broadway, where it was continued until July 1978. The Broadway production of *for colored girls* brought national attention to the work and its creator, and it also brought debate. In her review of it for *Ms.* magazine, Toni Cade Bambara called it “blisteringly funny, fragile, droll and funky, lyrical, git down stompish” and said that “the play celebrates survival” (1976, 36). Touting the poet behind it, who also performed as the “lady in orange” at the Broadway opening, Bambara wrote, “She celebrates the capacity to master pain and betrayals with wit, sister-sharing, reckless daring, and flight and forgetfulness if necessary. She celebrates most of all women's loyalties to women” (1976, 38).

Yet within the pages of *Black Scholar: The Journal of Black Studies and Research* the work was viewed more controversially. In a special May–June 1979 issue devoted to “The Black Sexism Debate,” African American artists and activists, including Lorde, Kalamu ya Salaam, Karenga, Jordan, Askia Touré, Sherley Anne Williams, E. Ethelbert Miller, and Barbara Smith all responded to a polemical essay written by sociologist Robert Staples. The essay, “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” was published in the March–April

¹⁴ While her focus is on black feminist organizations, Springer rightly notes that “black feminist movement” encompasses both the political and the cultural realms. Springer credits Shange and others for serving as “pioneers of the contemporary black feminist movement for daring to assert, if not ideologically feminist consciousness, a gender consciousness integral to the struggle for black liberation in the 1970s” (2005, 5).

1979 issue of *Black Scholar*. In it, Staples, a specialist on black sex roles, decried feminists, especially Shange and Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), for marshaling “an all-out attack on black males” (Staples 1979, 24).¹⁵ While watching *for colored girls*, Staples explained, he became disturbed by what he saw as the “vicious assault on black men” in the performance’s emphasis on intraracial violence, particularly in its depiction of “beau willie brown,” and what he experienced as the mixed audience’s “collective appetite for black male blood” (1979, 26). The solicited and unsolicited responses to the sociologist’s brazen essay were so numerous that *Black Scholar* published an extensive reader forum on intraracial sexism—relationships between black men and black women. Few of the respondents directly addressed Shange’s *for colored girls*, yet those who did ranged from labeling it a “dirge of defeat” (Williams 1979, 49) to praising it as an “eye-opening . . . gift for women” (Daniels 1979, 61). Displaying the prescience and fearlessness of her choreopoem in rejecting the privileging of black manhood and white womanhood in the struggles for black and women’s liberation, Shange ingeniously responded to Staples’s essay and the readers of *Black Scholar* by contributing two new poems to the forum. One was “is not so gd to be born a girl (1),” a poem about threats worldwide to girls’ and women’s right “to live freely with passion” (Shange 1979a, 29). The other, “otherwise i would think it odd to have rape prevention month (2),” offered alternatives to women’s virtual imprisonment as a result of rape and threats of rape by men (Shange 1979b, 29). In her reply to the *Black Scholar* debate, Shange held steady to her commitment to address black female vulnerability.

When asked by literary scholar Claudia Tate in the early 1980s about the audience for whom she wrote, Shange replied, “The reason that *For Colored Girls* is entitled *For Colored Girls* is that that’s who it was for” (Tate 1983, 161). More recently, when asked by Homi Bhabha about her thoughts on issues of survival and generation, Shange, an avowed feminist, promptly proclaimed, “I’m a daughter of the black arts movement (even though they didn’t know they were going to have a girl!)” (quoted in Read 1996, 159).¹⁶ Committed to expressing the histories, identities, and struggles of women of African descent, Shange, with *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, joined her predecessors

¹⁵ Alice Walker (1983) also wrote a response that was not published in the special issue devoted to “The Black Sexism Debate.”

¹⁶ I thank Kellie Jones for pointing out this citation.

and peers in the black power, women's liberation, black arts, and feminist art movements in daring to imagine a world where they would thrive, be safe, and feel connected, authentic, and whole—and in devoting themselves to creating that world by all possible means. And, in “striving to create” a “utopian world” where black women were central, the courageous and visionary poet critiqued, linked, and enriched these two previously parallel movements (Shange 1974, 105). Shange's poetic ability to draw meaning (and sustenance) from two distinct movements that posited separate lineages and trajectories also serves as inspiration for further comparative study of how postwar artists immersed in struggle labored to create aesthetics of commitment and arts of transformation.

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