I have walked a narrow path up a steep mountain with white women and their feminism on one side and my people, Black, nationalist, and contradictorily, very American on the other side. Because of tortured racial histories and troublesome gender confusion, it has been difficult for me to organize and advocate for both Black people and women while also addressing the social realities of Blackness and femaleness. Aware of being both Black and female, I have often slipped and slid up and down the sides of that narrow path.

The term “feminism” has never adequately described the thinking of those diverse groupings of women whose only commonality is the socially constructed colorlessness of their skin originally called “white” by marauding European sailors and mad scientists. I have known too many different kinds of white women friends, school chums, and comrades to be deceived by false generalities about their “race” or gender. The concept of “feminism” as some sort of all-inclusive theme of unique sisterhood seems a false stretch for embracing the diversity of white and other women.

In this same way, “Blackness” seems too thin a term for describing people too profound or complex to be limited by the word “race” or the color “Black.” The fervor of our shrill and rhetorical calls for nationalism cannot match our historical location or significance because we, African Americans, are a unique people occupying a powerful and pivotal place in the American nation.

Since the mid 1970s I have, with difficult insistence, dwelt among, and not merely visited, both the Black people and the white-feminist sides. Sometimes I have felt like an envoy and ambassador shuttling between two alien nations. Sometimes as avenging warrior, I have defended each one’s causes to the other. At other times I have sought refuge in one side, after being disgruntled and fed up with the failures and weaknesses of the other. After nearly twenty years, living in two political cultures—one feminist, and the other nationalist—has become fluid and natural to me as speaking two languages. While rustling through old papers, trying to create order out of the last two decades of
notes, diaries, speeches, and other writings, I have discovered my chaotic chronicles of those early tentative steps in these two political cultures. This essay describes my work in “white feminist organizations” and organizing within Black Brooklyn’s myriad of political and social groups from 1976 to 1982.

By the late 1970s white “girls,” who only a few years before were awed by Blackness, usually in the form of Afroed, militant, male gladiators, became fired up with their own words and womanhood. These white women grew closer together, bonding ostensibly around their femaleness, but ultimately also around their whiteness.

During this same time, many Black men and women like me were moving closer toward Africa. When I wrapped my head in African cloth and wore African clothes, I became embraced by and joined similarly clothed others. Their embrace seemed to eradicate all the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the experiences of my racially integrated schooling and hippie lifestyle in the white world and my childhood memories of family and community. Certain that I had discovered my true home in Africa, I repudiated all that was white.

In the seventies, I became an African woman and lived nestled with my children and my husband in a community of other newly discovered Africans. I floated above his male privilege and our mutual poverty, convinced that the specialness of being African would take care of everything. Although he was not involved in my daily activities, my husband was essential and significant in my life.

Each day I was surrounded by Black women who regarded each other as African sisters and who believed being married and mothers were privileges. We also discovered our own special talents and skills in these female relationships. We worked together on food co-ops, craft shows, and catering; we shared information about nutrition and child care. Like most women in the world our women’s consciousness was raised by our common work of child rearing and household chores. The very activities and roles criticized and condemned by feminists empowered us.

We African women recognized and supported our husbands’ attempts to become patriarchs and heads of their families. The sexist aspects of these attempts were peripheral, or at least they were offset by the powerful sisterhood our African-ness unleashed. We women looked to each other for dependable and consistent support.

Even Black feminists have written African-American nationalist women like me out of their feminist discourses because they view us as simplistic and deluded baby makers for even more deluded Black men. The fact is I became a nationalist for the same reasons Black men did—to restore their manhood as well as my womanhood, while reclaiming our self-determination as a people with a history and culture beyond bondage and before America. Even before I got married or became a mother or a nationalist, I was searching for that lost and underdeveloped but essential part of my self. Being African enabled me to live without the shame or regret of being a woman of African descent. My search ended when I became supported, empowered, and loved by other Black women and Black men in an African-based community. My last name, “Omolade,” is a lasting homage to my connections to that “African” home in the United States.

However, I was challenged and stretched to go beyond my African nationalism and family life. First the unique “socialism” of China diverted my attention from exclusively focusing on Africa. After viewing Shirley MacLaine’s film of her multiracial women’s delegation to the People’s Republic, I longed to travel to China. I realized loyalty to Africa need not mean isolation from other people and groups. In fact, the Chinese had supported African countries and groups of visiting African-American nationalists. (I eventually traveled to China in 1978 under the auspices of a national racially mixed organization.)

In 1973, while I was nursing my third child, my nationalism was further transformed by reading Gerda Lerner’s Black Women in White America. Living an “African” lifestyle enabled me to avoid the difficult past history of Africans within the United States. I had spent many years studying precolonial African history and culture and shaping my daily life around African art, cooking, and religion. Although I had studied history and American studies in college, I knew little about the history of African or African-American women or that women like me were historical beings.

After reading Gerda Lerner’s book, I was suddenly burning with questions about how women survived the transition from African woman to slave mother. I yearned to know how my female foremothers lived and survived slavery and segregation. Like many other Black people, I had mentally run away from recognizing our past of colonialism and enslavement and had embraced a more glorious historical
period in the history of Africa. In this sense, my intimate and personal questions about how Black women in the past took care of their children linked the past with my own daily life. I knew this past began in Africa, but living as an idealized African was no longer enough. I embarked upon a historical and scholarly quest to understand what had happened to my people, especially women.

The need to answer these questions led me to pursue a master's degree at Goddard College's off-campus independent study program. In this way, I reasoned, I could remain within my community, take care of my children, but also study about African and slave mothering. Rather than focus on the academy and professoriate, my goal was to become a public historian like John Henrik Clarke and Alex Haley. I didn't need a degree to do this kind of public history, but I hoped the Goddard Program could give me structure and resources.

In 1973, my nationalism was further challenged by my extended family's attempt to move to a more African-like setting in rural Jamaica. Once there, we, or at least I, confronted the limits of Black postcolonial cultural nationalist dreams of a return to a pristine pre-European Eden. The generous but poor people in the hills of Jamaica often drank only sugar water and made stews from roots. They worked sporadically as migrant laborers or hotel staff. They dreamed of coming to America. We, however, believed we could live in Jamaican splendor and comfort without being caught in the obvious contradictions of class. Our African dream depended upon our ability to exploit "the natives" and join the bourgeoisie. But we had neither the color, wealth, nor connections to join the exiled American bourgeoisie. Nor did we want to become part of the Jamaican peasantry and live even more poorly than we had in the United States. After only a few weeks, I returned to the United States grateful to live at the center of the capitalist West where at least I could achieve a decent working- or middle-class life for myself and my children.

Yet another blow to my African dream state came from my father, who had achieved that decent working-class life for his family. Along with other rebels with or without causes in my generation, I had rejected my father's mundane and straitlaced life to pursue the adventurous and elusive dreams of Africa and other idealized places. He saw failure in my marriage and in my dreams. He actually cried when he saw my living arrangements and begged me to let him take care of me and the children. In 1975, with Jamaica and his death still haunting me, I broke away from my marriage and extended family, hoping to provide a decent education and home for my children, then ages 3, 5, and 6, by working at whatever job I could find.

WHITE "SISTERS":
A NATIONALIST WOMAN IN THE HEART OF WHITE FEMINISM

My first post-African commune job was as co-coordinator of a battered women's shelter established in 1976 by the YWCA and National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW). Ironically, I had been one of those Black women who believed that women deserved to be hit by their husbands. Only a few years before, I counseled my sister-in-law to stay with her husband after he hit her, convinced that what I then saw as her verbal aggression must have been the reason for the abuse.

My knowledge of feminism and the women's movement had been gleaned from mainstream media and rabid antiwhite nationalism. But I hid my ignorance, naiveté, and political incorrectness from my new feminist employers. I kept code switching during the hiring process by remembering past friendships with white women. I got the job, grateful for a paycheck even from the "enemy."

My plan was to work for "them" for a while and go back to an African lifestyle by opening a school for Black children or starting a crafts business. I believed my job at the shelter was going to be helping some self-righteous, pampered white women who sniffed every time their man yelled or cursed. So I never thought my new-found employment would clash, conflict, or complicate my nationalist allegiances. I fortunately have a demeanor that exudes confidence and self-assurance, but though my face was calm, inside my eyes were widened, and my jaw dropped, when I saw that the first women in the shelter were Black working-class women with their sons.

The battered women in the shelter were Black like me. They were or had been married to Black men. They worked and had children. During the first weeks I heard their stories of blood, broken bones, police calls, and flight. Most had endured years of physical abuse and had tried to leave many times. Until the battered women's movement and shelters, women like them had no place to escape violence and abuse.
I first learned about feminism and the women’s movement through daily counseling battered women and developing a shelter for them. In fact, my shelter experience introduced me to the violence against women within Black families and communities. There was nothing at all being done within nationalist organizations or cultural nationalist communities to help Black battered women. I also hadn’t found any Black women’s organization or group working on domestic violence. Yet many Black women called the shelter for help.

At home at night I was called by cultural nationalist women who were being beaten by the same brothers who had written poetry about African queens and who were active in Black political work. I never had time to slip into the illusion that spouse abuse was the practice of unpolitical Black men, drug addicts, or just plain mean men. Ironically, my work in the “white” woman’s battered women’s shelter revealed aspects about my own “African” community that had been hidden or that I had idealized.

The monies for the shelter came from a “pork barrel grant” of monies obtained by state legislators Karen Burstine and Carol Bellamy for a sprawling board of thirty women mainly from the YWCA and NCNW. My job was described as co-coordinator of the internal shelter activities. But when I was hired, there was no shelter, so the job really involved working with the other five staff members to create a shelter and its program.

From March to July, we established a pilot project at the Brooklyn YWCA that included a nine-bed shelter, hotline, counseling, and community-education project. From July to August, three staff members including myself moved the program from the Y to its permanent location, a former maternity hospital in Brooklyn. The shelter opened in September 1976, and within three weeks was functioning at capacity with a total of thirty-nine women and children. We were among the first such shelters to include both battered women and their children. We sheltered 145 residents: 52 women and 93 children in 10 months and we served at least 500 women on the hotline. We had established the only battered women’s shelter in Brooklyn and the largest shelter for battered women in the country.

The work was eclectic and daunting. We worked with the police to shore up orders of protection and to bring women to the shelter. We advocated with the welfare department for emergency grants. We estab-

lished a child-care program and worked with contractors to provide washing and kitchen facilities for shelter residents. We recruited and organized volunteers to assist residents and to staff the hotline. We offered room and board to a woman in exchange for evening and weekend coverage. However, as a core staff member, I could be contacted at any time, so the shelter became central to my life.

Our staff was supposed to be a model feminist collectivity for it was assumed that women in the shelter would discover healing, security, and sisterhood from the staff as well as each other. Female volunteers were expected to add to this model of women working together. Shelter planners, however, underestimated the differences and difficulties of a newly constituted staff trying to work when there was no common bond or frame of reference among us except our commitment to creating a battered women’s shelter. The staff included only one paid counselor, but no maintenance, kitchen, or secretarial staff. Although we should have equally shared these tasks, not every staff member wanted to do this daily and unglamorous work.

One staff person worked exclusively with other battered women’s groups in the city rather than mobilize local community support from churches and organizations. Some staff were hired on a part-time basis in order to raise money and to do research. The work of admitting women, meeting and training volunteers, working with contractors to set up the physical arrangements, and creating the shelter’s program increasingly fell to me and two others who were white and lesbian.

Without any clear lines of authority, power, and direction, each staff woman set her own agendas, timetables, and goals. There was both a power vacuum and the absence of a cohesive staff with coordinated roles and responsibilities. In short, the collective model was not working.

In a report to the board, I criticized the peer-counseling model of the shelter. “The model failed in any comprehensive and consistent way to adequately deal with the basic problems, with helping the women cope with economic and ethnic discrimination. Without serious consideration of this discrimination, poor women seeking economic security will fall back into dependent, potentially violent relationships.”

Although I had no more authority than other staff members, I attempted to coordinate the staff’s work. I was increasingly asked by board members to represent the shelter at press conferences and fund-
raising meetings. Six months after I was hired, I had become an articulate, accomplished, and knowledgeable leader in the shelter.

However, board members hovered over me and the staff, sometimes butting in and bullying, and sometimes supporting us. Their lack of experience in creating an ethnically mixed shelter for abused women and their need to micromanage every decision soon clashed with the staff's increasing knowledge about the shelter's needs and operation. Shelter planners optimistically thought women would leave the shelter after six weeks, resettle in apartments, and join supportive women's groups. Since they were not involved in the daily work of the shelter, few board members realized the trauma of dependence and fear suffered by the women. Many were too emotionally paralyzed to quickly move on. Others were beaten down by poverty and discrimination. Black and Latina residents faced housing discrimination and had to spend many more frustrating months in the shelter than white residents. Moreover, language and culture played a key role in keeping Latinas in the same neighborhoods as their batterers. Passivity, poverty, and desire pulled many residents back to their batterers as soon as they were physically and emotionally patched up. There were few miraculous leaps from battered woman to self-sufficient feminist among us.

Furthermore, many board members, volunteers, and staff were unfamiliar and often unwilling to examine the issues and tensions in the shelter that contradicted their feminist visions of sisterhood. Staff who worked closest with women in the shelter had learned to see and hear beneath feminist rhetoric into the real lives of the residents.

Still heady from attempts at creating a "soft revolution" using their white woman's power, board members attempted to rule the shelter more like autocrats and new conquerors than as sisters. Board members envisioned grand publicity campaigns, idealized battered women victims, and minimized references to other "issues" such as poverty and racism. I define that shelter period as a frontier zone—not only was I new to feminism, but feminists were just beginning to translate their consciousness raising into organizations and institutions.

In spite of the desire to establish a feminist institution beneficial to battered women, a rather straightforward power struggle developed between the board (management) and the staff (labor) with racial, class, and homophobic undertones. The board's vision of making everything collective collided with the recognition by myself and the two most active staff members that the board needed to relinquish its authority to an executive director who could manage and supervise the shelter's staff and program.

The shelter board was composed of about thirty professional and politically sophisticated and well-educated white women, while the two or three Black women board representatives were less privileged. There were no women of color on the board who matched the experiences and class of the white board members. When issues of power and policy were involved, the white board members ignored the contribution of the Black women. In one of my recommendations to the board, I demanded it be expanded to include women of color who "have the skills, verbal and organizational, that can deal with the board on an equal level and have equal input and impact on its issues."

Because of these demands and positions, I began to pose an "uppy" challenge to white feminist racial politics and the board's authority. At one meeting I said,

the shelter grew out of the interest of mainly white middle-class professional feminists and is an attempt to establish a feminist shelter for battered women most of whom are not only Black and Hispanic but non-feminists and racially oppressed.

But before I could consolidate my own power base, gather enough resources for the shelter's second year, and systematize the shelter's program, it was all over: the board fired the entire staff.

Fortunately a supportive board member helped me find another job. In January 1977, a month after being fired from the frontier work of the shelter, I found myself at the center of second-wave feminism, working for the Women's Action Alliance, a national women's organization in a mid-Manhattan office building several floors down from Ms. magazine.

The Women's Action Alliance had been formed in 1971 as a clearinghouse on women's issues and program. It housed a library of periodicals about women's issues and organizations, including the Women's Agenda magazine and the National Women's Agenda, an association of national women's organizations. In addition, the alliance established the Non-Sexist Child Development Project (NSCDP), which produced materials, workshops, and presentations for interested educators and parents. I was hired to assist the director of the NSCDP. My work
included travel to conferences and schools to showcase the project’s philosophy and products. But most of all, I enjoyed the chance to learn about the activities and politics of the women’s movement that swirled around the Alliance’s activities.

I soon became involved in Alliance office politics when a Puerto Rican member of the clerical staff was “summarily” dismissed for taking work home during office renovations. Both program and clerical staff protested her firing to the executive director, pointing out the disparity between the clerical and program staff. Not surprisingly, there was also a need for clear and written personnel policies. As a result of the protest, I was appointed to serve on a staff and board Personnel Advisory Committee to develop those policies.

A few months later I was given the enviable assignment to coordinate the Women’s History Project, which included organizing a three-week institute in women’s history at Sarah Lawrence College, and a culminating program at the Smithsonian Institution. Historians Gerda Lerner, the institute’s director, Amy Swerdlov, and Alice Kessler Harris organized the curriculum of the institute. Later institute alumnae pressured politicians to establish March as Women’s History Month.

Although the institute was successful and I was gaining recognition as a leader within the Alliance and among women’s organizations, six months later I resigned from the Alliance, charging the organization and the new executive director with racism. I stated that racism at the Alliance is pervasive, subtle, and devious, permeating policy directions, program implementations, and interpersonal relationships. It makes effective work from Black women a minor miracle. It means every aspect of the work is a battle ground for inclusion. . . . The same old-girl network permeates every program area: white, middle-class women who have limited family or cultural obligations. The hiring practices of the last six months . . . have been the same kind of woman—white. There is little reason to think this will change, especially since I am the only Black woman on staff.

Although I was the only Black woman on the staff when I left the Alliance in 1980, it hadn’t always been so. Before me there had been several other Black women at the Alliance. One of them had also challenged the Alliance’s unfair treatment of women of color. When Black women staff members were together, we laughed at the hypocrisy and cried at the insults of being Black and female in a white feminist organization.

However, it seemed the longer I worked in the white women’s movement, the more I learned about Black women and our own movement.

While at the Alliance I became friends with Susan McHenry, the first Black woman editor at Ms. magazine. In 1978, she edited a major article about Black feminism and about Michele Wallace’s book Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. In her role as journalist, Susan seemed to know about everything and everyone in the women’s movement. Around the time of the Wallace profile, Susan McHenry organized a short-lived women’s group with Michele Wallace and a few other Black women. We studied Michele’s book and classic feminist writings, which introduced me to feminist literature as well as made me see the value of documenting my own experiences and viewpoints.

Working at the Alliance also enabled me to travel to conferences and workshops where I met and learned from other feminists. On one such assignment, in 1979, I attended a Black women’s history conference organized by Darlene Clark Hine at Purdue University. There I met Betty Thomas of the National Council of Negro Women and many other Black women who were feminists scholars studying Black women. I heard Kalamu ya Salaam, a Black male journalist from New Orleans, discuss his workshops and book, Why Black Men Should Stop Raping Black Women.

After that conference I felt more comfortable openly describing myself as a feminist because I knew that “feminism” was not solely a “white woman’s thing.” There were many Black women feminists and Black male supporters of feminism. My connections with other Black feminists and supportive Black men helped me to overcome my doubts about working in the “white women’s movement.” I stopped hesitating and pursued writing and public speaking in feminist circles.

In 1979, the organizers of the Barnard College Scholar and Feminist Conference asked me to fill in for Michele Wallace and lead a workshop on Black women and feminism. My presentation at that workshop was expanded into an essay, “Black Women and Feminism,” which appeared in The Future of Difference, a volume of the conference proceedings. For the next several years I participated in many Barnard Scholar and Feminist Conference planning committees, challenging the limited role of women of color in their work.

In spite of our knowledge and work as feminists, Black women continued to be marginalized within the movement. Susan McHenry, Audre Lorde, and I protested and organized against the exclusion of Black
women from conferences such as the Second Sex Commemorative Conference on Feminist Theory held in 1979 at NYU. I believe Susan made an unannounced presentation during one of the plenary sessions. In the meantime a few of us faced down the angry conference organizer, who tried to limit our participation to the one or two workshops that in her words "were designated for us." The last paragraph of Susan's letter to the conference said it all, "There can be no conference on feminist theory without the inclusion of women of color on every level so in that sense I feel that the Second Sex Conference has already tragically failed."

Black women like Susan and me were integral parts of second-wave feminism but our roles were always being contained, discouraged, and limited by white women who in spite of their so-called "feminist politics" replicated existing power relationships, which minimized and subordinated us because of our race. Nevertheless, by the late 1970s there were enough of "us" to create a "Black sisterhood" unintended by the white women's movement.

We Black women continued to hack away at and expose white female racism at conferences and organizations that purported to be feminist. In many ways, we were still part of an old civil rights model that protested against the exclusion of Black people from anything that was white only. But we were not only protesting, but shaping and creating our own kind of feminist politics.

We were also attracting the attention of many white women seeking a more relevant and connected sisterhood. The fear of Black women's power and abilities and denial about the significance of race caused many white women scholars to place French feminism at the center of their politics and intellectual work. The 1979 Barnard Scholar and Feminist and the Second Sex conferences celebrated and highlighted Simone de Beauvoir and other French feminists, but marginalized Black women's participation. However, many white women participants at the Barnard conference found it difficult to understand the intricacies and relevance of French feminist arguments and cried with delight and connection at Audre Lorde's brief and powerful message about language. In spite of racist opposition by white women, Black women were moving from the margins to the center of second-wave feminism.

By outstripping and challenging the exclusive focus of second-wave feminism on gender and sexism, Black women insisted that an understanding of race and gender exploitation was essential, not subordinate, to feminism. Moreover, since most of the world's women are women of color living in communities and countries devastated by colonialism and underdevelopment, Black feminist views and politics in the United States were more relevant to women's organizing and politics in the rest of the world than the second-wave feminism of white women.

**Black Sisters: Womanism in the Heart of Nationalism**

My family and community experiences were more similar to women's experiences around the world than to those of many of the white and Black feminists I worked with in the women's movement. At that time, I was a Black single mother living in the Black community and raising three school-aged children. My community was beset with problems of poor schools, economic devastation, and police brutality. After my work in the women's movement, I returned to a community and family demanding my attention and support.

I worked and associated with white women during the day, knowing they lived in neighborhoods and apartment buildings that would never rent apartments to women like me. Many of the feminists I met were married or in relationships with financially successful professionals and intellectuals. I met only one or two women who had sole or primary responsibility for rearing children especially within a working-class community. After all the speeches about women's changed roles made by many of my feminist colleagues, most lived lives of class and racial privilege. In contrast, every week I found myself pushing a shopping cart full of groceries and laundry in a poor Black neighborhood.

I faced the contradiction of being applauded by many white women for being outspoken and articulate while my children, especially my daughters, were often punished by white female teachers for expressing themselves. Once my youngest daughter was unfairly punished by a teacher for being too outspoken, yet this same teacher admired a recent speech I had made. She didn't see the irony in applauding me for the very practice for which she punished my daughter. As a Black parent I had to put aside my intellectualism and feminism and defend my children and household against the racism of white teachers, principals, and landlords whether they were male or female. I also knew that taking care of my family included participation in Black community efforts and
nationalist politics. I pushed myself to participate in demonstrations and meetings sponsored by progressive Black organizations.

During the late 1970s the largest Black organization in Central Brooklyn was the Black United Front (BUF), a mass organization that held large protest marches against police brutality and encouraged liberation struggles around the world, especially those fighting apartheid in South Africa. It was organized into international, housing, veterans, culture, education, health, and women's committees, which sponsored many events and weekly community forums.

Work in BUF offered me an opportunity to use the skills, insights, and information I had learned in the Alliance to build our organization and "nation." My feminist experiences, in turn, sensitized me to the value of working with Black women and to exposing the male chauvinism and sexism in BUF. Once I was treated rudely when I criticized the male moderator of a BUF-sponsored Black Women's Forum for misusing the discussion period and not allowing me and others to ask questions. The moderator asked, Who did I think I was to criticize him? In my protest letter to him, I answered, "As a Black woman at a forum on the Black woman, I felt that my question and other questions were more important than your tirade. I am a Black woman with a right to speak in an open forum without being insulted and berated by anyone."

Interestingly, a representative from BUF responded to my letter, I am sure at the urging of Black women in the organization's leadership, by inviting me to write a column for their journal, Black News. For the next several years, from 1977 to 1981, I wrote many articles on subjects such as spouse abuse, women in South Africa, slavery, and ancient Africa. My articles gave me an opportunity to make the political connections between feminism and nationalism. Unknown to Alliance staff, I wrote most of the articles at work.

BUF's positive response to my written protest also encouraged me to join its Women's Committee, which was the largest, most financially solvent, and best organized of all BUF's committees. In April 1979, five months after writing my protest letter, I spoke at one of the BUF weekly forums about relations between Black males and females.

Through my efforts, the Ms. Foundation funded the Women's Committee's participation in a March on Washington to protest the attacks on affirmative action. Our committee chair reported that the Women's Committee showed strong organization, perhaps the best of all participating groups. The chants 'Send Bakke Back!' "The People United Will Never Be Defeated" were most effective; education on the buses was good... there was no criticism to be made of our efforts."

Although I enjoyed cross-fertilizing feminism and nationalism, my family life was suffering as the work in both areas intensified. While working with the BUF Women's Committee, I was also coordinating the Women's History Institute for the Alliance. When the BUF Women's Committee chair asked me to organize an education campaign, I had to decline, saying,

After the meeting I went home at 9:30, my children had not eaten, they were asleap, my son had been crying because he thought something had happened to me. I did not pay attention to the time during the meeting, because I was involved and committed. The next day, he had an asthma attack which meant searching for child care and leaving the girls alone after school. I blamed myself for going through with the meeting knowing I couldn't because of my family responsibilities... I have to continually balance priorities and concerns in the best way I know how. Sometimes I am just too tired to come to meetings, other times I want to spend time with my children and friends. I can't keep up with what you want me to do.

I continued to participate but only in special projects of the Women's Committee and occasionally I spoke at forums or moderated workshops. My work with BUF was especially meaningful because of Safiya Bandele. When I met her at the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, she was one of its most active members, an officer in BUF, and a counselor at Medgar Evers College. Safiya was an example for me of Black female leadership because of her integrity and compassion especially for the "sisters." During the late seventies it seemed that Safiya could become even more powerful, especially because the Women's Committee was so strong.

In 1980, Safiya became an officer in the Black United Front when it expanded into a national organization. However, women's issues and antisexism efforts remained absent from the overall enterprise. At the founding 1980 convention, the Women's Committee became bogged down and divided over the issue of declaring polygamy a form of male chauvinism. I wrote in an unpublished article describing the struggle,
The passing of the motion condemning polygamy, domestic violence and rape as forms of male chauvinism in the Women's Committee and the national assembly degenerated frequently into a "them" and "us" shouting match with the "leftists" on the one side, and "cultural nationalists" on the other. The polygamy issue also tended to obscure the question of participation in the political leadership of the NBUF by women in general and Black "feminist" and/or "leftist" women in particular.

This "polygamy" debate at the national BUF founding convention was actually about the effectiveness of the ideology and practices of cultural nationalism. In spite of the intent to replicate African communities and families, most polygamous marriages formed by cultural nationalists had disintegrated. paradoxically, many of those women most supportive of polygamy at the conference were those who had already experienced and personally rejected it in their personal lives. Hence, the polygamy debate at the conference was a showdown between the Black left and Black cultural nationalist male leadership in which they and their respective women used the issue of polygamy to dominate and overwhelm the agenda of the Women's Committee. The use of women's committees and issues as pawns for male power plays occurred in many Black nationalist organizations throughout the country.

I find in my notes from 1980 the following comments:

What might be missing from these opinions as each group and person tries to come to terms with the issues of male chauvinism and polygamy is that Black women were yelling and screaming around an issue they felt strongly, real strongly about, in spite of their respective male supporters. So no Black men in the context of the convention could have done what they used to do during the seventies—SHUT THE BLACK WOMEN UP. For in spite of the lack of an articulate theory or development of a concrete plan of action by Black women nationally, Black women in bits and pieces have begun to see their issues and themselves as important in critical new ways. Black women were in so many ways taking themselves seriously—reacting for or against polygamy, defending/debating, speaking to the general body. Their feelings had emerged in a volcano of energy about themselves. It is (can be) a continuation of Black women's struggle for self-definition within male-dominated Black organizations and social relationships.

For years Safiya and I attended many meetings of Black women that would begin with expressions of concern about the oppression of Black men and youth. However reluctant they were to make any public statements or stand opposing the "brothers," these women soon shared personal experiences of male chauvinism and sexism in their family and political lives. Safiya and I were not sidetracked by the initial "solidarity talk" because we knew these same sisters would at some point share their rapes, beatings, and difficulties at the hand of many of the same Black men they publicly supported. In spite of the loyalty of Black nationalist women toward their men and organizations, demands for leadership roles and better treatment for women soon spread.

Some organizations attempted to address the issues structurally by assigning male and female leadership to local chapters, promoting individual Black women and supporting women's initiatives and committees. However, these organizations failed seriously to programmatically address the destructive impact of male chauvinism in Black political work and its impact on personal relations. The rage and disaffection of Black women was ignored. Consequently, many Black progressive and nationalist organizations and groups fell apart over the "woman question."

Although I remained optimistic about the power of Black women activists, they did not fight for self-definition in male-dominated organizations. Scarred by sexism and male power, many Black women permanently abandoned Black radical politics. Others became active in electoral, community, and social efforts where they often faced other forms of male chauvinism. Some developed their own businesses, private schools, and community programs. A few became active in the women's movement and worked with white women and other women of color. Finally a few women like Loretta Ross and Nkenge Toure managed to use their nationalist experiences in BUF and other organizations to develop new forms of Black feminist political work such as the Washington, D.C., Rape Crisis Center.

Although I was a member of the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers (the Sisterhood), I only began to see its significance as a Black feminist organization after Safiya and I became more involved with Black women in nationalist political groups. Founded by Daphne Busby in the early 1970s, the Sisterhood was one of the first post-civil rights era organizations in the country exclusively committed to Black women. By
focusing on support for single-mother families, the Sisterhood challenged patriarchal, middle-class, and even cultural nationalist assumptions of women's roles and the family by affirming their completeness and strengths. The Sisterhood sought to debunk the myths and distortions about Black single mothers and their families.

Because it was an autonomous organization run by and for Black women in their communities, the Sisterhood did not have to measure its programs according to abstract ideological principles. The Sisterhood had no need to apologize for anomalies in either nationalist or feminist customs and practices. Under Daphne's leadership, the Sisterhood creatively and powerfully reflected the complicated intertwining of race and gender, family and women's power. Therefore, the Sisterhood's programs were eclectic, expansive, and inclusive in their support for Black single mothers and their families.

A 1977 newsletter describes the breadth of the Sisterhood's work. Rereading it, I find that during a six-month period, Safiya and Daphne represented the organization on radio programs and at the National Association of Black Social Workers, the Urban Corps Conference, the Women for Racial and Economic Equality (WREE) Conference in Chicago, and the National Conference of Panamanians. Safiya spoke to students at a School for Pregnant Students, at Our Lady of Charity Church. Articles about the Sisterhood appeared in magazines. The Sisterhood held meetings and picnics for the membership. Safiya also presented a tribute to her grandfather in the newsletter.

Daphne was as much at ease discussing the Sisterhood in white feminist settings as she was speaking in the Black community. I was surprised when Daphne asked me to accompany her to a session of the International Women's Tribunal: Crimes Against Women held at Columbia University. The session featured a number of feminist issues such as critiques of patriarchal family, support for lesbians, as well as information about violence against women, subjects unmentioned in Black organizations.

With unparalleled boldness, Daphne also fostered work with supportive Black men, many of whom were single fathers. The Sisterhood once held a conference with all male moderators. One of the workshops was moderated by a Black man and a white woman representative from Women Against Pornography, who showed their anti-pornography slide show.

The conference was one of several Sisterhood efforts to create environments that promoted friendship between Black women and men. Unlike many white women's organizations, which attempted to distance themselves from men, and unlike Black nationalist organizations with their contentious male-female struggles, the Sisterhood attempted to strengthen social relationships between Black women and Black men.

Daphne believed that Black single mothers deserved opportunities for social activities with and without their children. Although some feminists and womanists might view these efforts as nothing more than heterosexism, nevertheless, the Sisterhood met the needs and wishes of many of its membership for fun and recreation.

Inspired by the Sisterhood, Daphne Busby, and Safiya Bandele, I embarked on creating opportunities and situations for Black female self-determination independent of either Black male or white female organizations and politics. During 1981, I called together a few Black women to plan an organized response to the large number of murdered and missing Black children in Atlanta. The response became a Mother's Day March for Action: Protect and Defend Our Children, sponsored by our Coalition of Concerned Black Women. The march of mainly women and children was one of the few led and organized solely by Black women.

**Sisterhood and Peoplehood: The Paths Merge**

The march brought me to a juncture where the paths of nationalism and feminism merged. Only a few years before they had seemed inevitably separate, but now, I became aware of their commonalities. The marginal yet supportive place of Black women was integral to the way these groups framed their politics. Black women's secondary status was based upon narrow and rigid constructions of ideological categories where feminism meant white female power and nationalism meant Black male power.

White women's claims of sisterhood were conveniently put aside as they climbed over and through Black and other women for coveted positions, resources, and status. Feminism has been undermined by white women's unexamined and outrageous acts of racism. White women activists frequently bypassed and ignored the experiences, expertise, and institutions of Black people, while attempting to get Black women to
work for them without allowing them any role in defining the policies and directions of the women’s movement. In addition, most white feminists have failed to address the role played by their own privileged nationalism and white power in subverting the stability of Black communities and families. Second-wave feminist claims that sexism was more significant than racism, and feminism more progressive than nationalism were nothing but unabashed claims by white women vying with Black male nationalists and white male leftists for control of Black female loyalty and labor for their cause, as well as for hegemony over the social-protest movement.

Although there were many active Black feminists within nationalist organizations, Black women’s dominant political consciousness and identity has been almost exclusively shaped by Black resistance to racism. However, in the same ways that race undermines white women’s attempts at creating a viable feminist movement, blindness to the significance of gender has blunted the effectiveness of Black politics. By closing off a serious examination of gender, Black nationalists have become unable to explore internal divisions and dilemmas that prevent the internal development of an effective political agenda which could benefit all Black people. I am frankly afraid when I hear some Black nationalist woman’s adamant and unexamined put-down of feminism, because I and others have learned about the closeted, silent space of the personal lives of many Black women who have been victimized and humiliated by the sexism of Black men. The avoidance of a gender analysis has allowed Black women to mask their actual experiences with Black men. And no matter how they try to comfort, understand, rationalize, or explain Black male violence against Black women, it can’t legitimately be viewed as anything but a stumbling block to Black unity. In fact, much of the divisiveness within the Black community and movement can be directly traced to the unbridled and unexamined expression of Black male chauvinism. And what political framework can we use to explain this raw use of male power and brutality, except feminism?

While working in the midst of these white women who were often racist and narrow, I learned to see myself and all women differently. I will never again be so quick to dismiss and to disconnect other women’s joy and pain from my own life and experiences. I no longer view white women as an enemy, nor feminism as a threat to my loyalty and consciousness as an African American.

White feminists effectively prodded women to expose their personal experiences to a political examination and praxis until now, even those who detest feminism have accepted many feminist views on women and work, violence against women, and women’s broader role in society. White feminist campaigns to expose the silenced and ignored issues of rape, incest, and domestic violence benefited all women. Although early Black feminists of this period, such as Angela Davis, Frances Beal, and Toni Cade Bambara, provided analysis and debate, many second-wave feminists created identifiable and concrete projects and programs around women’s experiences with reproduction and sexual violence. The way white feminists framed these issues has benefited all women, exposing us to and teaching us about issues we have either silenced or ignored.

The feminism I identify with was awakened and shaped by my experiences in the white women’s movement, but it did not stop there. In fact, like many Black women, my notions and practice have challenged and outstripped the narrow, but often effective, focus of that movement. Feminism led me to more objectively examine gender within the Black community and its movements. It taught me to connect my personal relationships with Black men to my work in Black political organizations. I learned to view Black men more realistically, with greater sympathy for the personal struggles hidden by their sexism and bravado. My Black nationalist brothers’ powerful analysis of white racism and Black nationalism has taught me how to use their framework to resist and protest against oppression. Their politics showed me how to use feminism as a tool for examining sexism within the Black community.

My experiences have produced a bifurcated angle of vision about feminism and nationalism. Although what I learned and experienced within both feminist and nationalist organizations merged within me, this does not imply that race and gender should be collapsed into each other, for they represent separate social constructs with differing histories. I have simply concluded that there is no effective Black agenda without the inclusion of women’s issues and one of those issues is invariably male chauvinism. There is no effective feminist movement without the inclusion of Black women’s leadership and perspectives and without opposing white racism and elitism.

I didn’t realize it then, but the work of Black women threatened the intentions of both nationalist and feminist organizations. If racial and
gender categories were made porous and flexible enough to include us, then the power structure of those organizations would be challenged. Black women have a strong work ethic of effectively completing agendas and programs with limited resources and usually offer valuable insights about the needs and experiences of working and poor people. Our plain talk about real issues and universal—or category-transcending—concerns about compassion, equality, and justice reinforce our speaking on behalf of the unrepresented and unprivileged groups. I am not suggesting that every Black woman actually performs in these ways, but that we embody and represent these elements to feminist and nationalist power structures.

I have also noticed similarities between Black and white women who counseled other women at the Woman's Survival Space and the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers. Though both groups can be considered as pioneering "feminist" models, much of their work was, in fact, a continuation of women's traditional efforts to offer support to other women. In an ahistorical perspective typical of that time, the women who developed the shelter and the Sisterhood believed themselves to be unique. They failed to connect with Black and white female social workers and nurses who have also worked with populations of needy women. In the absence of these connections, many wheels of building successful ways to care for women were reinvented, and many opportunities to radicalize and expand the work of professional women caretakers were left unexamined.

Both the Sisterhood and the shelter used resources from the state, foundations, and churches to empower and heal women. But much of the time of women workers in these groups was spent competing for grants, writing reports for funders, and meeting state and other regulations. Caught between meeting the demands of their funding sources and the needs of their constituency, these groups found it difficult to consistently and actively connect the personal problems facing Black and poor women with structural solutions such as adequate housing, decent jobs, and better medical care. Instead, the work of both the Sisterhood and the shelter rested upon the notion that personal experiences of sisterhood could heal troubled women. Often these women were emotionally patched up just enough to enable them to function, but not enough to challenge the fundamental forms of political and economic inequality that oppressed them.

Yet organizations such as the Alliance and BUF that purported to address racial and gender inequality more structurally had failed to do so. In spite of the rhetoric of inclusion and challenge implied in the multiple issues of the Alliance's work as a national information clearinghouse for women's issues, and in spite of BUF's attempts to develop a national mass-based political organization, both were more interested in enabling a small group of white women and Black men to attain organizational power over information, decision-making, and resources. The Alliance, using the methods of corporate lobbyists, and BUF, using the protest tradition of labor union and political parties, demanded resources from the state in the name of women and Black people. However, their methods were derived from the same white men whom they viewed and spoke of as privileged adversaries. In fact, the grassroots, community-based elements of nationalist and feminist organizing were downplayed in favor of enabling the leaders of these groups to become recognized "players" in the national political arena.

Many of us who worked with prominent and promising feminist and nationalist organizations during the 1970s and 1980s believed we were creating changes in the relationships of women and Black people to state power. We assumed ourselves the advanced guard of the next wave of the civil rights, Black power, and women's movements, but we were, in many ways, the last of the 1960s-style radicals.

Nationalist and feminist politics and their representative groups and organizations no longer dominate or even participate in the public discourse. However, identity politics remains an important means for racial, ethnic, and gender groups to define their own particular strengths and issues. But this form of political organizing has limited value because few groups are able to remove their ideological blinders long enough to define an effective agenda based on concrete rather than rhetorical and opportunistically constructed group needs. The failed legacy of feminist and nationalist identity politics goes beyond their exclusion of Black women, but rests in their inability to realize that women, racial, and ethnic groups all live under a common political and economic system that ultimately controls the organization of race and gender.

Greater participation by Black women might have helped these groups understand that feminism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive and contentious categories, but malleable frames of reference for political organizing among working- and middle-class people. However, both nationalist and feminist organizations framed their issues and causes in ways more germane to the urban privileged intellectuals that
they were than to the people whom they claimed to represent. Identity politics often disregards the fact that most people—including Black people and women—live and frame their lives around family, work, and religion, more than abstract ideologies.

Yet the organizations I worked with gave only minimal attention to these issues. Only the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers and the shelter focused primarily on women’s experiences within the family, while BUF and the Alliance downplayed that side of daily life. In many groups, I often felt I had to silence and suspend the importance of my family obligations and experiences. While the Alliance focused more on women’s work than the other groups, none made any attempts to connect with labor unions or workplace issues. In fact, paid employment was treated as an afterthought of political organizing, something one did in between meetings and conferences. As for religion, one of the organizations was even housed in a church, but no group seriously addressed the question of religion, faith, or a relationship with God, which was so central to people’s daily lives as well as to past and contemporary social movements.

Feminist and nationalist politics have been eclipsed by conservative social movements that have rendered our protest mode obsolete, ended our financial support, and wearied our best efforts to make the national and personal efforts of organizing meaningful. From the vantage point of the merged politics that I experienced and from my own personal journey, I can see how necessary the combined strengths of the shelter, the Sisterhood, the Alliance, and BUF were for mounting viable campaigns that could effectively address issues of morality and ethics as well as justice and equality. However, a much needed critique of past work is necessary for feminists and nationalists to more effectively address the changed social context. Feminism still offers a challenge to the blinders that distort and obfuscate the truth about gender, sexism, and women’s lives, while the protests of African Americans demonstrate to all how to expose and fight against racism.

I am convinced that both nationalists and feminists have used too much precious time and effort bashing conservatism as if all its elements and positions are to be condemned. At first I joined in the almost knee-jerk antagonism toward everything conservative, but more recently, I have found myself agreeing with their privileging of family and moral values. I, however, continue to believe that struggles against racism and sexism are dimensions of a larger effort toward improving family and that nationalist and feminist voices remain vital for examining the differences and inequalities among us while we create a common democratic community.

For although we remain walled in by the social constructions and constrictions of race and gender as well as by our class positions and the cultural and ethnic heritage of our families and communities, those walls are more porous than we usually recognize. In contemporary society, the ideas and actions of one political culture must necessarily have an impact upon those in other political cultures. Not only can we study and view the “other” across these porous boundaries, but in many situations, such as my own, we can walk through and embrace the other’s culture as our own.