U.S. Women in Struggle
A Feminist Studies Anthology
EDITED BY Claire Goldberg Moses and Heidi Hartmann
In most societies, it is from women that you get the most consistent concept of nationhood of any people. Women usually are very nationalist in the way we determine what we are supposed to be doing with our lives. With Black people in the United States, we understand that one of our responsibilities is to live and struggle so that there will be another generation of people. This makes us, Black women, as a group within the Black community, nationalist. We have to take on the task of understanding what or who Black people are as a people and how we, Black women, must move so that there will be our people today and tomorrow. Historically, we have confronted with our very being the premise that Black people were not brought here to be here always. If we look at early years of Black existence in this society, we find that in the brutality of the slave system, we died in greater numbers than we were born. The problem of our people then was to turn around this dying recipe of slavery so that there would be a Black people. To take on that job is to be a nationalist, to be about the formation and continuance and survival of a nation. Black women as mothers have been the heart of that battle.

We are, at the base of our identities, nationalists. We are people builders, carriers of cultural traditions, key to the formation and continuance of culture. We are the ones who touch the children first and most consistently. Social researchers tell us that by the time we are two or three years old, much of our cultural identity has been set. The experiences and data that go into making up that identity come to the child carried by the personnel charged with the maintenance of the environment in which life begins and grows. In the Black community, this environment has historically been our responsibility. Whether it is
from the mother or the grandmother or the aunt or the babysitter or the nursery, the first words that the child begins to speak, the first smells, the songs, the body stances, the tastes, come from the women part of the society. Black women are nationalists in our efforts to form a nation that will survive in this society, and we are also the major cultural carriers and passers-on of the traditions of our people.

The roles that Black women have played in making a Black space in the United States of America in which Black life can grow have been nationalistic, cultural, and also revolutionary. Revolution, as I understand it, is the stopping of something, the turning around of something, the radical change of direction. It involves a lot of violence, and it has to be a cleansing process. I go back to my earlier statement that we were brought here to do certain kinds of work, to carry out a certain kind of function. That function and responsibility did not have with it a concern with our continuance or existence as a people through time. Sometimes I think by the time they made the cotton-picking machines, we were just not supposed to be here anymore. The continuing process of stopping that, the act of turning that around, this kind of nationalism is revolutionary; and Black women have played a major role in that particular struggle.

For the development of my thinking in this area, I owe much to Dr. Vincent Harding. Vincent talks about Black American existence in this country as the longest revolutionary struggle we know to date. As a people, we began to fight when they took us from Africa and we have not yet stopped. When you look at Black American history, you see skirmishes and battles in the war. In between, are mending periods, even some slipping-back periods. We call it backsliding. However, it is good to keep in mind that natural flow of things. Waves go out. When they come in there is always a rock-back. It is not the same wave in the same place and the sands have shifted to never again be the same.

I am in fact doing the same thing that my mother did and that my sisters did. The sands have shifted, but the motion I carry is from them. If we understand that we are talking about a struggle that is hundreds of years old, then we must acknowledge a continuance: that to be Black women is to move forward the struggle for the kind of space in this society that will make sense for our people. It is different today. Things have changed. The search for high levels of humanity and space to be who we know we are is the same. And if we can make sense of our people in this society, we will go a long way in making sense for the rest of the peoples who also live and suffer here. From that perspective, nationalism goes outside of what I call cocoon nationalism or isolationist nationalism. It has to have in its view the knowledge that what we do
affects a larger scene. We cannot wrap ourselves in a wall and survive. In some ways, a wall threatens survival, making a clearer target. Being a nationalist may mean a centering in purpose inside oneself and then being sure of being everywhere so that as my nation goes, so will you, my enemy.

*My mother.*

My mother was born in Worth County
Her mother was a seamstress
Words from my mother about her mother were like
“I never knew when she went to bed”
She was a farmer
When she got home from working the farm
my grandmother would do her work as a seamstress
To my mother she was always a seamstress
Even while she picked cotton or pulled corn or cooked peas and rice
My mother’s mother’s mother was very heavy
When my mother talks about her,
(who she did not know) she says
“They said that because of her—”
(Her husband was a scholar—he read books—and he would sit down
 and talk to you about books)
“Because of her—”
My mother’s mother’s mother took on the practical existence of her family
“So did they own a plantation”
When she died the plantation fell apart
To talk about this lady’s strength and talent is to talk of tenaciousness
I don’t say nothing negative about Jordan Hill (her husband)
because if you do—
you have to fight everybody in the family.
“Because of her—”
Because of Hannah Hill
all of the children went to school
At least up until she died
We’re talking about the 1890s, 1900, Worth County, Georgia
There were no Black schools in Worth County, Georgia
She had to earn money to send them off to school

My grandmother
who is my mother’s mother
had her clothes packed to go off to school when Hannah Hill died.
Hannah Hill died in August
Grandmother was to leave for school in September
But when Hannah Hill died
Grandmother never caught the ride
so she didn’t go off to school.
She sewed and sharecropped her way through.
Now what Hannah Hill did is what I saw my mother do
And what she saw her mama do

If you live as a Black person in this country
you see these people
who show you how to be
Men are supposed to be like *this*
and women are supposed to be like *this*
The powers that be
told Black men they could not be men unless—
Unless they had a job
Unless they supported their family
Unless they protected their women
Then the powers that be
froze the jobs
starved the babies
raped us
And then said
See you are not a man
’cause you are not responsible
’cause you don’t have a job
’cause you don’t support your family
’cause you don’t protect your women
*And do you know that*
*there are some of us—*
*buy that.*

Women
Black women
looking at white women
Never had illusions about being that
There was never any possibility
It was just not in the offering
Too far away from keeping Black folks alive
So when you look at what Black women do
You are looking at people who have to fashion a something else
A way out of no way
When we look across time at Black women
We're looking at women who come to this country in bondage, with a
tradition
And we had to do whatever we could to continue that tradition.

We have to do whatever we have to do in order for there to be a new
day. That means dealing with practical reality in a way that keeps you
very close to the ground, always knowing what you have to deal with in
the everyday sense. I think there must be dreams someplace in this
picture. The reality, the practical reality, hits you so hard that—
Maybe you propel your dreams two or three generations down the line.
Lay it on your daughters or your sons or their children. You under-
stand that what you have to do is make up the difference, whatever that
is

My father would work from sunup to sundown
and would come home exhausted
eat, and go to bed
My mother would work from sunup to sundown
would come home
and work from sundown to sunup
to work from sunup to sundown again
The bottom line
Nobody else to turn to
If my father came home from work
and dinner was not done
hell broke loose
because he had worked from sunup to sundown
The only person who did that dinner
until we could do it
was mama
My father had a turning place
mama
We had a turning place
mama
white folks had a turning place
all of us
There was nobody for mama to turn to
She was it
When a dress had to be made for a play
if my father did not have the money to buy the material that was
it
For mama that was just the beginning
She then had to figure out a way to get the cloth for the dress and stay up all night making it for this child to be in this play.

It's called making a way out of no way I'm not talking about magicians. I'm talking about people who have to handle the things that they find in the society. I'm talking about people who have to scrub walls and do whatever they have to do—so that they can deliver the goods when there is no way laid out to deliver the goods.

_I had a teacher named Mamie Daniel_
I thought Mamie Daniel was old. I thought she must have been teaching for hundreds of years. Not hundreds but at least she was 50 when I went to school and I started school when I was three because Mamie Daniel told everybody to send their three year olds to school so by the time they were six they would be ready for the first grade. I went to school when I was three and I thought I was supposed to learn to read so I did and I passed into the second grade. When I was four, Mamie Daniel would let you do that By the time I was in fourth grade I was teaching at least I thought I was teaching I think I was teaching first grade—reading and math. Mamie Daniel would let you do that. Well, she couldn't really do anything more because she had seven grades in one room in a little red schoolhouse. I thought Mamie Daniel was really old I went back to talk to her as part of this research project and it turns out that at Blue Springs School, she had her first teaching job. In fact, she was very young How did she go to college? Mamie Daniel got married.
Her husband went into the service and sent back $50.00 a month. On $50.00 a month she put herself through school and the first job she had was at Blue Springs which was this little school I went to at three years old.

Mamie Daniel was an extraordinary teacher but I'm talking about her as a prototype of extraordinary teachers. I don't want to give you the impression that she was rare. She is rare today. If you tried to find her today you'd be up the creek. But she was not a rarity in 1940 Black teachers understood that if they managed to get a degree that degree put them in another class. The only thing that did was make them more responsible for handling more material things to complete the delivery of goods to their community.

Mamie Daniel had a vision of how to open up our world and point us outward. My father was a carpenter. He built a stage in our one-room schoolhouse so that we didn't have programs that were on the floor.

We had a real stage. That meant that Mamie Daniel could put the first grade on the stage and turn them so that they could get their lessons out when I was helping them.

And the third grade would be turned another way, looking out that window. She could make space where there was none. And she could organize the space she had

My mama
My grandmama
My great grandmama
Mrs. Daniel... dreamers who believed in being materialists—revolutionaries who were also nationalists who were also cultural carriers.

My children games I learned from Mamie Daniel. Sometimes she'd yell that we were not clapping right. Every day at lunch time you would finish your lunch and go outside
and Mamie Daniel would lead all of the games, to make sure you got
them right.
It did not matter that you were three and the seventh graders were—
they looked to be six feet tall.
When I would see one coming
I would run because they were so big.
Today in school you don't go up against those kinds of giants
They're way down the hall someplace and you're in your little room if
you're in kindergarten
But if you were a third grader at Blue Springs
and you had to go to the outdoor toilet and you were coming back
through the garden
that Mamie Daniel made your PTA plant
so that you would cook greens so you'd learn to cook
and then here come R. C. Norman
you would just run.
You would also cry, because he was just so huge
But at recess all of you would be in this game
and you would be shaking it to the east
and shaking it to the west with R. C. Norman
And Mrs. Daniel would be running it all.
Then R. C. Norman would look very good because in a group you
could fantasize about him being your boyfriend.

My mama
My grandma
My great grandma
Mrs. Daniel
were dreamers who believed in being materialists—
revolutionaries
who were also nationalists
who were also cultural carriers.
Mamie Daniel found out we had never been on a train trip.
She took us on a trip from Albany to Americus, Georgia.
She found out we were not drinking milk and made the milkman
who stopped at a store a few miles away
swing by our school
so that we could have milk.
She found out we weren't brushing our teeth
and taught us to make toothbrushes out of pine needles.
If somebody came in and hadn't brushed
they had to go make a brush and brush their teeth
She made the PTA build a playhouse
I know you've seen playhouses made out of cardboard
That is not what I'm talking about
I'm talking about a playhouse one-fourth the size of our one-room schoolhouse
a playhouse that my father and other fathers designed and put together
and built including all of the things in it
a playhouse that we could walk into and sit down in
Nobody at our house could buy a playhouse
Nobody could get one
But we had a playhouse you could walk in
and if you did everything right, you got to clean it up
While you cleaned it up
you could sing your little songs and do all the things you saw your mama doing

*There was a Miss Nana in every church*
My father pastored a church every Sunday
Miss Nana was in two or three of his churches
Miss Nana was like thunder
I called her Miss Nana
My mama called her Nana
and Nana was a great singer
She couldn't sing all kind of songs
but certain songs she could really get a grip on
This was the way my mama would talk about it
"Nana could get a grip on a song and rock a church with it"
She used to sing—
"*Time, oh, time, time is a-winding up*"
and if you don't hear Nana singing it, you don't know the song.
I mean you could hear me singing,
"*Time, oh, time, time is a-winding up*
that would be sort of a weak reference point for what
Miss Nana did when she sang
"*Time, oh, time, time is a-winding up*"

Everybody in church talked about
Miss Nana's relationship with God
People thought she had a sort of audacity
Everybody else would say
"Now, Lord, here comes me your meek and undone servant and you
know me and you know my condition"
This was a way of saying
“Now, Lord, I don’t even need to go over my situation
Let us start now with where I am and what I need today”
Black people have a familiarity with God
But Miss Nana would take it to an extreme
She would get a hold of God in a special way especially during a revival
meeting.
Miss Nana was big
I don’t know now how old she was
She just looked real old to me
I was a teenager at the time
My Daddy would open the doors of the church and somebody would
come to join
and everybody would have to watch Miss Nana
Miss Nana would either grab the child who had just come in
or she would grab my father
The ushers would race to get Miss Nana so she wouldn’t get ahold of the
little converts
Miss Nana would be making a streak for a convert—
or the preacher
and all the while she would be talking in a very everyday, familiar way
with God
She would be saying things like—
“All right, thank you, Jesus.
Thank you Lord—
Thank you
I really appreciate that, Jesus
And tomorrow night you can just send us some more now
You just send us some more.”
Miss Nana was grateful for what she got but she didn’t let up on God for
what she wanted
God had already given her a soul, right?
But then she’d say,
“That ain’t all I need, Lord.
You are not off the hook.
I expect you to be here on time tomorrow night.”
People thought Miss Nana was amazing
and didn’t know what to do with her
You just sort of protected yourself from her so
she didn’t get too close.
It was like when you put an extension cord into a socket and the
power ain’t right
You could blow the socket
or the extension cord.
Miss Nana could blow a lot of sockets in our church.

_Trois J. Latimer was my history teacher at Albany State College._
I don't remember a lot of history she taught me.
I know I learned about World War II and I remember Hitler.
I made A's out of both classes.
I did not become a historian until later.
She did not give me my love for history.
But Trois J. Latimer was an educated—degreed Miss Nana.
Church people talked about Miss Nana the same way we students talked about Miss Latimer.
We called her Ma Lat.
The thing I remember about Miss Latimer was that the first day we organized a Movement demonstration,
Ma Lat said,
as we went by trying to get people out of their classes,
"Get out. Go do something for your freedom. You ain't doing nothing here."
She ran the class out of the room into our demonstration line.
That was Trois J. Latimer.

_Miss Rogers taught me history in high school_
and I remember two things
One, she thought I could go to Talladega College which from Albany,
    Georgia, was a really fancy-select school that was very difficult to get into
    She thought I should go to Talladega.
The other thing was
I was reading my history book and it said
"Black people were better off in slavery than they were in Africa because in Africa they ate themselves."
Miss Rogers popped her girdle and said
"Well, I don't know about that."
And that's what I know about Miss Rogers.

_Miss Patricia Webb taught me sociology_
and she was the person who when we were talking in class would say
"Integration is coming and you all had better be ready," She said this to us consistently in preparation for this day when we'd be sitting next to white people
Then we were talking one day—
somebody started talking about the bomb. Patricia Webb said she
didn't think the bombs were supposed to be dropped
This was in the 1950s in Albany, Georgia, and she thought it was a
bad idea to drop those bombs on Japan.
That was very different from anything anybody else had ever told me
about the bomb
And Patricia Webb told me that

_Autherine Lucy was my first Black woman fantasy partner_
Me and Autherine Lucy went to the University of Alabama
We went there together
I was with her there every day
I would dream about her
She said something wrong one day
I know it was because they were pushing her up against the wall
And they suspended her
So I just went home and helped her get together
because the NAACP was going to get her back in
which they did
And she went back
me and Autherine Lucy—
I'm in junior high school—
went back to the University of Alabama
Then she got suspended again
which was no problem
since she had gotten suspended one time before
I'd just go home and eat me some more grits
Me and Autherine Lucy were going back as soon as the NAACP forced
the University of Alabama to let us back in
But she didn't go back
She got married to this preacher who took her to Texas
I still have not forgiven him
because I never got to go back to the University of Alabama with
_Autherine Lucy_
She was my fantasy partner.
One day I know I'll meet her and I'll be able to tell her that.

The Civil Rights Movement was simply a continuance
_or more complexly a continuance_
The list reads the same way
I'm talking about Black people in different times
on different levels
but the list reads the same way
The mother of my church
I heard her pray every Sunday
But I didn't really hear the prayer
until she was in a Civil Rights
Movement mass meeting
She said, "Lord, here come me your meek and undone servant knee
bent and body bowed to the mother dust of the earth asking you to
have mercy and come by here
You know me
You know my condition”

And a new
feeling came over me.
It was the first time I had really heard it
I don't mean that the mother of the church had not prayed that prayer
before
But it took a march
a Civil Rights Movement march
for me to hear it
to understand what this woman had been saying all of her life
I knew for the first time what it took for me to be able to hear those prayers
In order to stand in the shoes of this old woman
who I had never seen march before or do sit-ins
or any of the fantastic things
we were doing for the first time
in our lives
that Black people hadn't done before us
so we thought
In order to even be able to understand what she had been telling me in
her prayers for the 17 years I had lived till then,
It took my being in the struggle
marching
fighting in the
Civil Rights Movement
to be able to finally hear
and feel the meaning of her words.
Till my marching and going to jail
my ears had not lived enough to hear her prayers.

What Black women did in the Civil Rights Movement was to continue
looking at what else we had to do in order for there to be another
day for our people.
The Civil Rights Movement, in that respect, is not necessarily this gigantic, unbelievable leap.
It is, in this light, a continuance.

We used to look at Fannie Lou Hamer
who weighed cotton for 17 years on a plantation
as if one day she suddenly went down to register and vote.
It was not one day suddenly going to register and vote.
It was changing jobs to go on carrying out her real work.
If you exist to—
If it is your job to—
If your role is to somehow manipulate this society so you can deliver the goods for the survival of your people,
If somebody says there are more Black people in this country than white people—and if you all will register to vote, you may be able to deliver more goods
then you don’t go on weighing cotton on somebody else’s plantation
If you could believe that
then you could go down and try to register to vote.
What is revolutionary about registering to vote in Mississippi in the sixties is you know you’re going to get killed
When you decide in Mississippi you’re going to register to vote you have already passed the point that revolutionaries pass when they know that what they have to give is their life.

Black women are a part of a Black nation, trained, defined, shaped in a way that says
“We must give our lives”
We settle our peace with that very early
Very early we know that one of the things we have to do in order to deliver the goods is give our lives
So it is not surprising that the Civil Rights Movement had more women than men
A majority of the people who were in jail were women
We were the majority of the people who were in the marches
We were the majority of people who were in the mass meetings
When you look at an intensive campaign that lasts without let-up for a year
When you look and see who comes to the mass meetings
It is Black women who are there every night
Somehow understanding that in this movement we might be able to
increase the space that we had to work in
in order to deliver the goods
so that there will be another day for our folks.

When we look at people like Fannie Lou Hamer
and Victoria Gray
When we look at that woman out of Little Rock
When we look at Dorothy Cotton
When we look at Septima Clark
When we look at Ella Baker
Betty Mae Fikes
Cleo Kennedy
We are looking at my sisters
regardless of age or generation
Black women who jumped at the opportunity to enlarge the space we
had to work in in order to do what we have to do.

Today I perceive Black women as being given another opportunity
to enlarge the working and living space
That space is us
we—ourselves
We must apply energy to the development of our potential
as parents
as creative producers
as the new way-makers.

There must not be a woman's place for us
We must be everywhere our people are
or might be—
in order to continue to do
what my mother did
and her grandmother did
and what my sisters of the Civil Rights Movement did
Fighting each generation
Each decade
to seize and hold more space
to continue to deliver the goods of survival
in a society that does not know how big we are
and how much room we need
to stand to our full height.