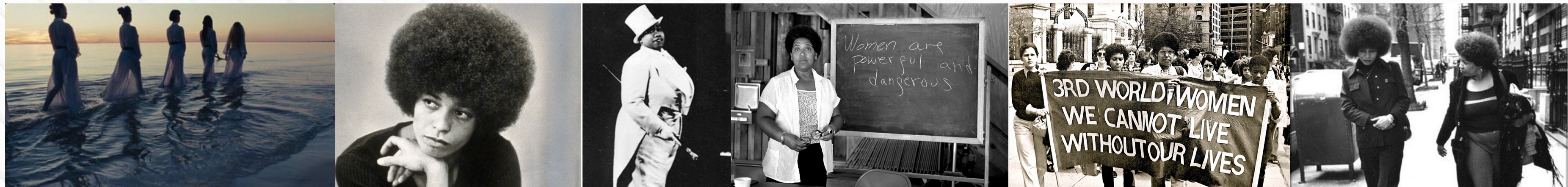




Black Feminism: Theory, Method, Practice

Summer 1 - OLLI 2021

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Agenda **week 3**

1 ***Women, Race & Class* (1981)**

Chapters 9, 10, 12

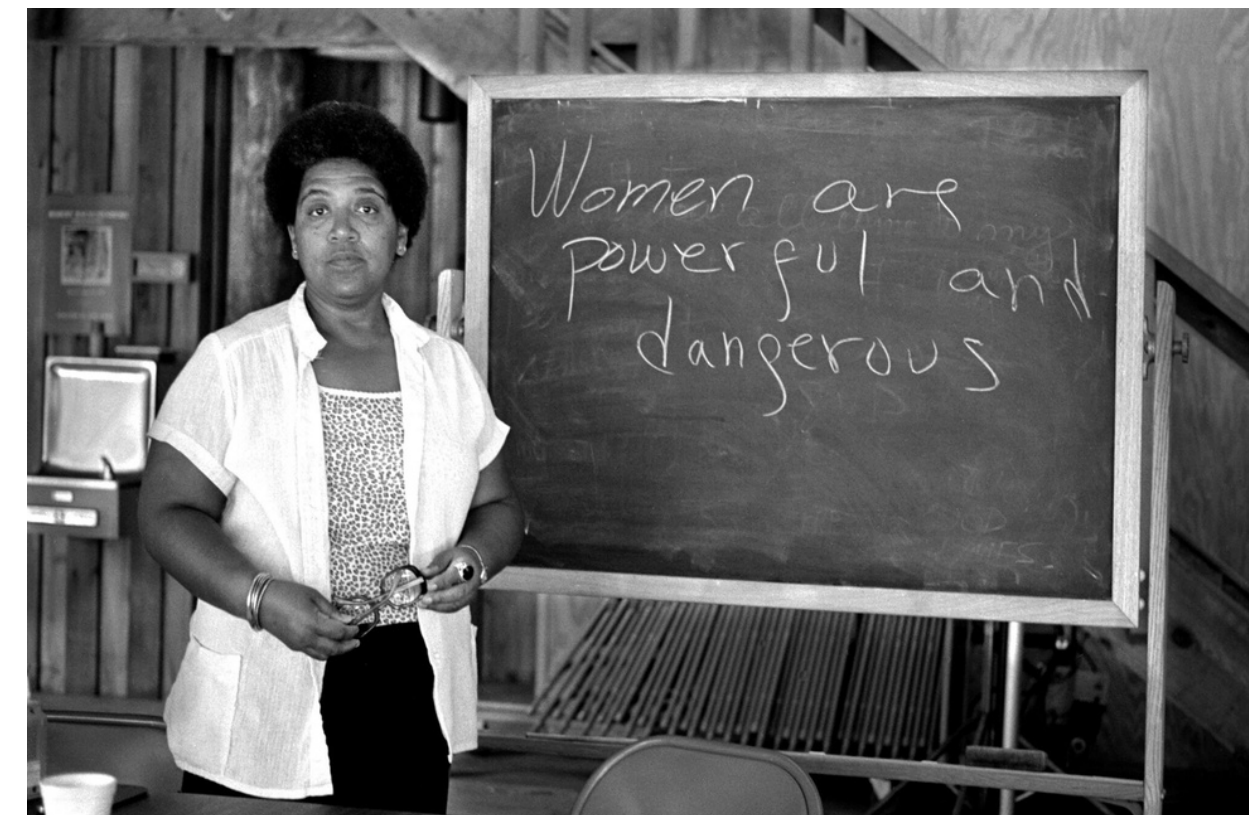
- Suffragettes and Racism/Classism
- Communist Women
- The Fight for Birth Control

2 **Combahee River Collective (1974)**

- Statement
- History, Relevance

3 **Black Women's Activism**

Ch. 4 of *Seeking the Beloved Community*



Bourgeois Ideology at the Turn of the Century

- bourgeois ideology — beliefs or values of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie; often a derogatory assignment to notions of eugenics or other ideas concerning the notion that 'some are born great' while others are not.
- materialist analysis — a form of interpreting events or data that focuses on the material world or the fundamentally physical aspects of existence; employed by Marxist-oriented scholarship to place material conditions as the focus of analysis (as opposed to the beliefs as the focus)



- "... men have great wrongs in the world between the existence of labor and capital, but these wrongs as compared to the wrongs of women, in whose faces the doors of the trades and vocations are slammed shut, are not as a grain of sand on the sea shore...The great distinctive advantage possessed by the workingmen of this republic is that the son of the humblest *citizen*, black or white, has equal chances with the son of the richest in the land." (Susan B. Anthony)
- "(T)he most odious oligarchy ever established on the face of the globe" was the rule of men over women. "An oligarchy of wealth, where the rich govern the poor; an oligarchy of learning, where the educated govern the ignorant; or even an oligarchy of race, where the Saxon rules the African, might be endured; but this oligarchy of sex which makes father, brothers, husband, sons, the oligarchs over the mother and sisters, the wife and daughters of every household; which ordains all men sovereigns, all women subjects—carries discord and rebellion into every home of the nation." (Susan B. Anthony)

Labor Union Movements at the Turn of the Century

- Homestead Strike of 1892, Pinkerton strikebreakers
- Pullman Strike 1894
- Wagner Labor Relations Act of 1935 & NLRB
- Taft-Hartley Act of 1947
 - jurisdictional strikes
 - wildcat strikes
 - solidarity or political strikes
 - secondary boycotts
 - secondary and mass picketing
 - closed shops
 - monetary donations by unions to federal political campaigns
 - Communist registration



Black Women Suffragists



"... personally, woman suffrage has never kept me awake at night ...(c)olored women, quite as much as colored men, realize that if there is ever to be equal justice and fair play in the protection in the courts everywhere for all races, then there must be an equal chance for women as well as men to express their preference through their votes." (Margaret Murray Washington)

"The Negro woman ... needs the ballot to get back, by the wise *use* of it, what the Negro man has lost by the *misuse* of it. She needs it to ransom her race.... A comparison with the men of her race, in moral issues, is odious. She carries the burdens of the Church, and of the school and bears a great deal more than her economic share in the home." (Nannie H. Burroughs)



"By her peculiar position, the colored woman has gained clear powers of observation and judgment —exactly the sort of powers which are today peculiarly necessary to the building of an ideal country." (Mary Church Terrell)

'The Southern Strategy' Fails, Cold War Begins

- "As for the woman suffrage campaign, it appears that all those concessions to Southern women made very little difference in the end. When the votes on the Nineteenth Amendment were tallied, the Southern states were still lined up in the opposition camp—and, in fact, almost managed to defeat the amendment. After the long-awaited victory of woman suffrage, Black women in the South were violently prevented from exercising their newly acquired right. The eruption of Ku Klux Klan violence in places like Orange County, Florida, brought injury and death to Black women and their children. In other places, they were more peacefully prohibited from exercising their new right...In the ranks of the movement which had so fervently fought for the enfranchisement of women, there was hardly a cry of protest to be heard." (Angela Y Davis)
- The Socialist Party is the only national political party to endorse woman suffrage before and during WWI.
- Unlike the Socialist Party, the International Workers of the World (IWW, Wobblies) recognize the unique oppression of Black people in the U.S. as distinct from the proletarian oppression under capitalism
- "There are two organizations in this country that have shown they do care about full rights for the Negro. The first is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.... The second organization that attacks Negro segregation is the Industrial Workers of the World.... The IWW has stood with the Negro." (Mary White Covington, co-founder of NAACP)
- Prior to World War II, the numbers of Black women working in industry were negligible. As a consequence, they were all but ignored by Socialist party recruiters. The Socialists' posture of negligence vis-à-vis Black women was one of the unfortunate legacies the Communist party would have to overcome. According to the Communist leader and historian, William Z. Foster, 'during the early 1920's, the Party ... was neglectful of the particular demands of Negro women in industry.' Over the next decade, however, Communists came to recognize the centrality of racism in U.S. society. They developed a serious theory of Black Liberation and forged a consistent activist record in the overall struggle against racism." (Angela Y. Davis)

Claudia Jones: "super-exploitation"

- In presenting white female leaders of the Communist and Socialist movements in the U.S. (like Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor, Anita Whitney, Elizabeth Hurley Flynn), Angela Davis argues that "the working class cannot assume its historical role as a revolutionary force if workers do not struggle relentlessly against the social poison of racism" (159). In Flynn's words:
 - "Every inequality and disability inflicted on American white women is aggravated a thousandfold among Negro women, who are triply exploited—as Negroes, as workers, and as women."
- "The continued relegation of Negro women to domestic work has helped to perpetuate and intensify chauvinism directed against all Negro Women...The very economic relationship of Negro women to white women, which perpetuates "madam- maid" relationships, feeds chauvinist attitudes and makes it incumbent on white women progressives, and especially Communists, to fight consciously against all manifestations of white chauvinism, open and subtle." (Claudia Jones)
- After the Taft-Hartley Act came the Smith Act, which resulted in communist party members like Claudia Jones to be deported





**songstress of
her time**

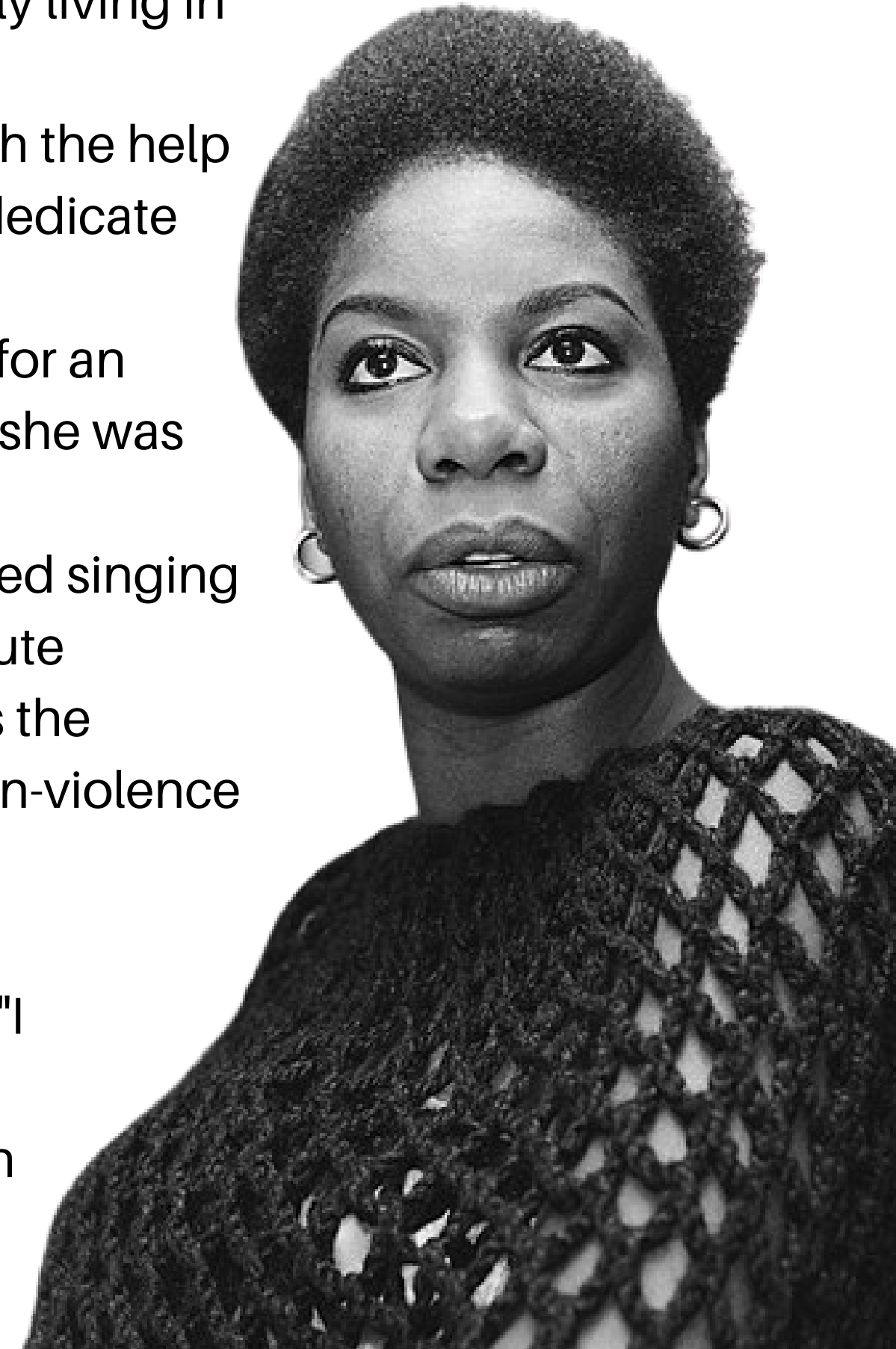
Nina Simone

1933-2003



Nina Simone (1933-2003)

- Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon, Simone was sixth of eight children in a poor family living in Tryon, NC.
- After she began piano lessons and excelled tremendously, she gave concerts with the help of white women in her hometown—which allowed her to collect donations and dedicate these to travel up to New York.
- She trained in New York at the Juilliard School in the summer of 1950, preparing for an audition for the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Despite a great audition, she was rejected by the school and was unable to audition again.
- It was during the next decade that she took on the stage name Nina Simone, added singing to her performances, and took private lessons from a professor at the Curtis Institute
- In the 1960s, she became heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement. She was the neighbor of Malcolm X and supported his nationalist agenda and rejected the non-violence approach of MLK Jr.
- Releasing songs and covers like "Mississippi Goddam" "Young Gifted and Black" "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free" "Black Is The Color of My True Love's Hair" and "Strange Fruit", she wrote of this time in her career: "I felt more alive then than I feel now because I was needed, and I could sing something to help my people"



The 'Waves' of Feminism in the U.S.

1

First Wave (1850s-1920)

- Focus: Women's suffrage/enfranchisement
- Legislation: Bourgeois white women get the right to vote (19th Amendment)

2

Second Wave (1950s-1970s)

- Women's Liberation Movement
- Focus: Equal pay for equal work, destruction of patriarchy, man is not the center
- Legislation: Civil Rights Acts, Birth Control, Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

3

Third Wave (1970s-2008)

- Introduction and centering of black women, working-class women
- Focus: Intersectionality; identity politics
- Legislation: Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), Don't Ask, Don't Tell

4

Fourth Wave (2008-present)

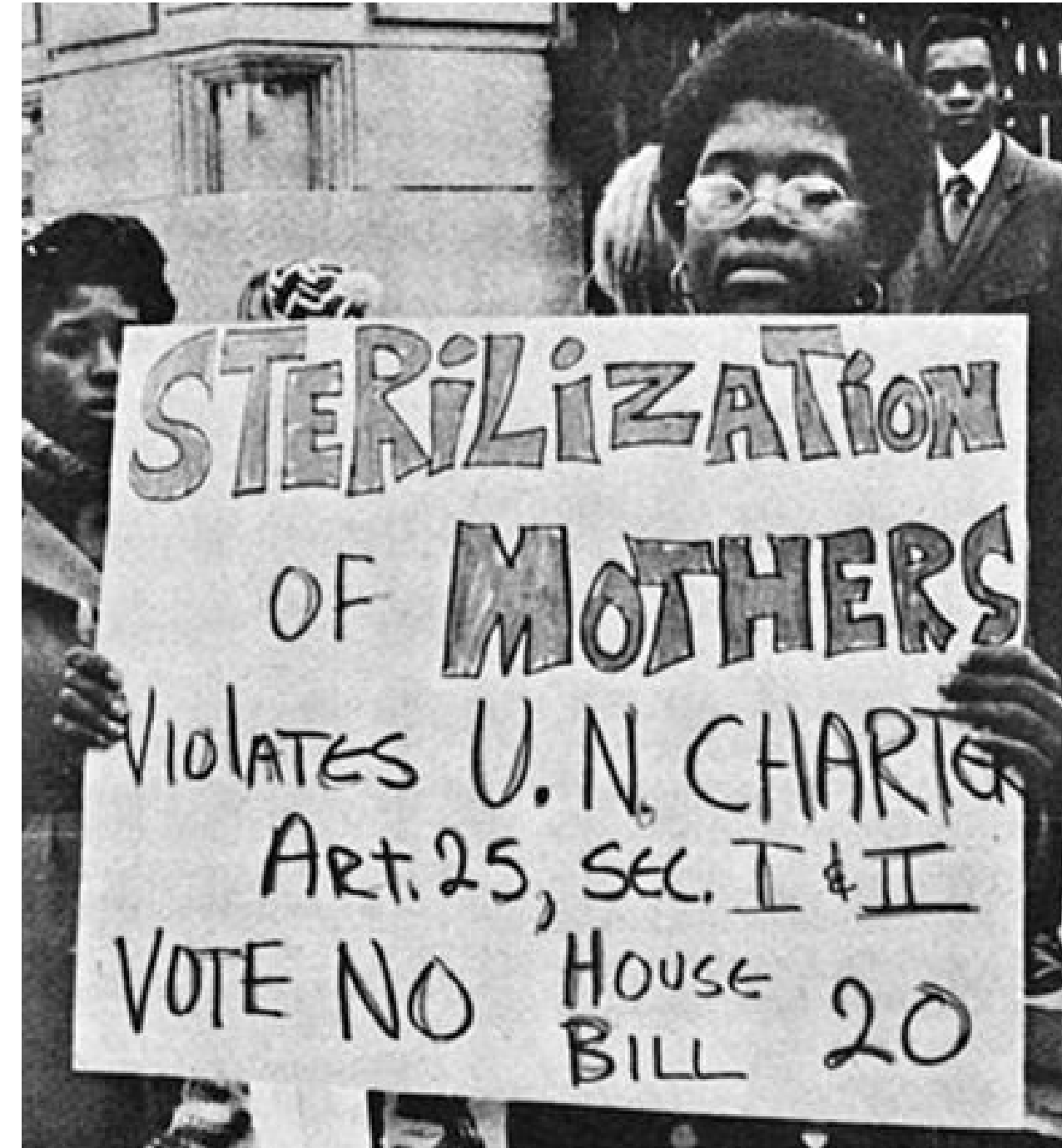
- Trans-inclusive feminism vs. Trans-exclusive feminism
- Focus: fluidity of identity, rejection of essential identities
- Legislation: Marriage Equality (2014), Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

Birth Control - History

- "Voluntary motherhood" had been an issue discussed in women's circles since the early 19th century; however, it seldom became a uniting factor across class barriers
- At the turn of the century, most abortions were advocated by eugenicists in order to commit genocide—including forced sterilization of black women, Puerto Rican women, and Native American women.
- While both upper-class women and middle- and lower-class women have long supported contraceptive methods of many kinds, it was often for very different reasons. Upper-class women often supported abortions in cases of miscegenation (under the ideological hold of eugenics pseudoscience that miscegenation would damage the white race). Moreover, bourgeois women often publicly condemned the practice of abortion but, as women of wealthy families, were more capable of receiving them safely and quietly.
- The other deep divide in class with regard to abortion, according to Davis, is the reasons for seeking contraceptives. For upper-class women, it was often to avoid inconveniences. However, for Black and brown women, this was often sought to avoid bringing children into a world they saw unfit for an innocent child.
 - Abortions and infanticides during slavery have been noted by many historians. The events Davis argue were out of desperation due to the oppressive conditions of slavery.
- This working-class narrative was co-opted by the birth control movement of the 1960s and '70s, "as if having fewer children could create more jobs, higher wages, better schools, etc" (205).
- After the Roe v. Wade decision, Congress and states took measures to make abortion for poor and Black and brown women all but impossible. The Hyde Amendment of 1977 made federal funding for abortions illegal (while sterilization remained completely free).

Forced Sterilization

- The Eugenics Society and government agencies throughout the 1930s-1970s encouraged the forced and legal sterilization of Native American, Chicana, Puerto Rican, and African-American women. In 1932, twenty-six states had forced sterilization laws for particular populations.
- For Native American women, the state-funded sterilization campaigns and propaganda machine ensured that America's original genocide was all but completed. By 1976, 24% of all Native women of child-bearing ages had been sterilized by the U.S. government.
- After President Roosevelt's argument that Puerto Rico's impoverishment was not due to the U.S.'s negligence of its Caribbean colony but was due to overpopulation, government-funded experimentation on the population throughout the mid-century left 35% of all Puerto Rican women of child-bearing age sterilized—at one point, there were 19,000 sterilization surgeries *per month*.
- Davis makes the argument that it is **not** the case that access to abortions resulted in the decrease of the rate of poverty in the U.S. in the 1970s-1980s but, in fact, it was the coordinated state-funded sterilization campaigns against poor people (mostly women of color) throughout the country that resulted in a flattening of the birth rate in poor communities.



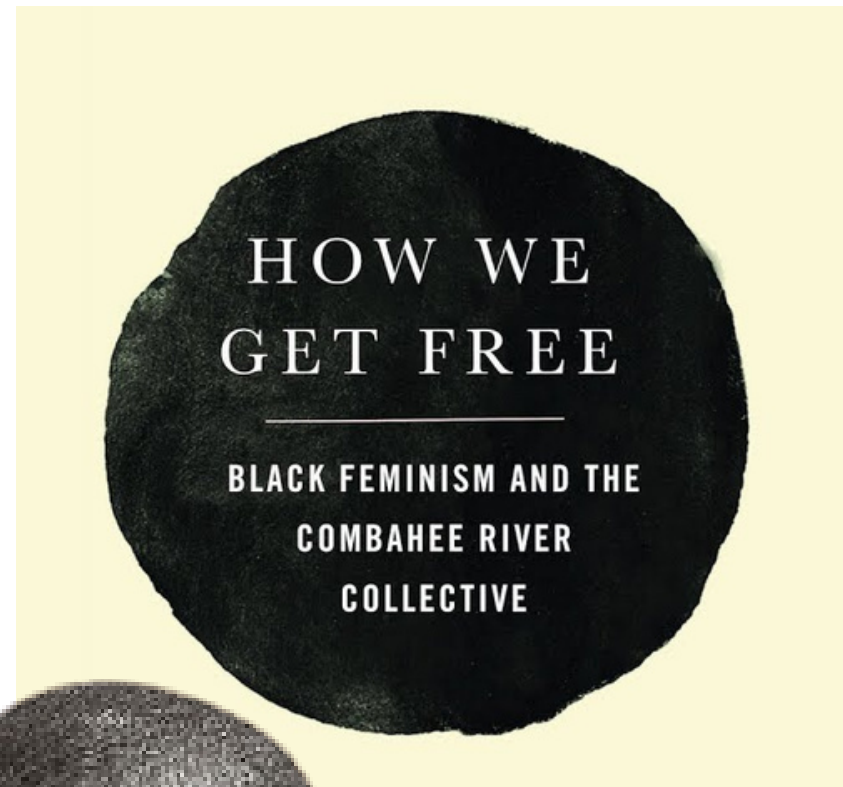
Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor's Introduction

- "Black women's experiences cannot be reduced to either race or gender but have to be understood on their own terms. For example, wage differentials between men and women are often used to demonstrate the persistence of sexism in the workforce. The main statistic cited is that women generally make 80 percent of what men make. Of course, that disparity unto itself demonstrates the injustice of sex discrimination in the American workplace, but it fails to capture the enormous injustice experienced by Black women. African American women make, on average, sixty-four cents on every dollar made by white men. In real dollars it meant that Black women were making, on average, \$34,000 a year compared to \$53,000 for white men. If we looked even closer, we could see that in Louisiana, Black women were making 43 percent of what white men in that state make. And when you consider that in 80 percent of Black families, Black women are either the sole provider or the main provider, it brings into focus the economic hardship experienced by most Black families in this country."
- "The year 2017 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Combahee River Collective Statement, which introduced to the world terms such as ***interlocking oppression*** and ***identity politics***. The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was a radical Black feminist organization formed in 1974 and named after Harriet Tubman's 1853 raid on the Combahee River in South Carolina that freed 750 enslaved people. The CRC formed as a radical alternative to the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). The NBFO itself had formed in response to what Black feminists believed was the failure of white feminist organizations to adequately respond to racism in the United States. But the identification of racism alone as a phenomenon in the lives of Black women was politically insufficient as an analysis or as a plan of action."
- "It is difficult to quantify the enormity of the political contribution made by the women of the Combahee River Collective, including Barbara Smith, her sister Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, because so much of their analysis is taken for granted in feminist politics today."

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's Introduction

- "The CRC described oppressions as 'interlocking' or happening 'simultaneously,' thus creating new measures of oppression and inequality. In other words, Black women could not quantify their oppression only in terms of sexism or racism, or of homophobia experienced by Black lesbians. They were not ever a single category, but it was the merging or enmeshment of those identities that compounded how Black women experienced oppression."
- "In the 1960s, Black feminist activists like Frances Beal described the oppression of Black women as 'double jeopardy,' which also recognized the specificity of their compounded oppressions."
- "The Combahee River Collective built on those observations by continuing to analyze the roots of Black women's oppression under capitalism and arguing for the reorganization of society based on the collective needs of the most oppressed. That is to say, if you could free the most oppressed people in society, then you would have to free everyone. For the Combahee River Collective, this was not an academic exercise. Not only was it crucial to understanding the particular experiences of Black women as compared to white women and Black men, but it also created entry points for Black women to engage in politics."
- "The Combahee River Collective Statement stands tall among the many statements, manifestos, and other public declarations of the period for its clarity, rigor, and political reach. It is an important document, not only as a statement of radical Black feminism but also in its contribution to the revolutionary left in the United States. The main reason is that the women of Combahee not only saw themselves as 'radical' but also considered themselves socialists. They were not acting or writing against Marxism, but, in their own words, they looked to 'extend' Marxist analysis to incorporate an understanding of the oppression of Black women. In doing so, they have sharpened Marxist analysis by recognizing the plight of Black women as an oppressed group that has particular political needs."

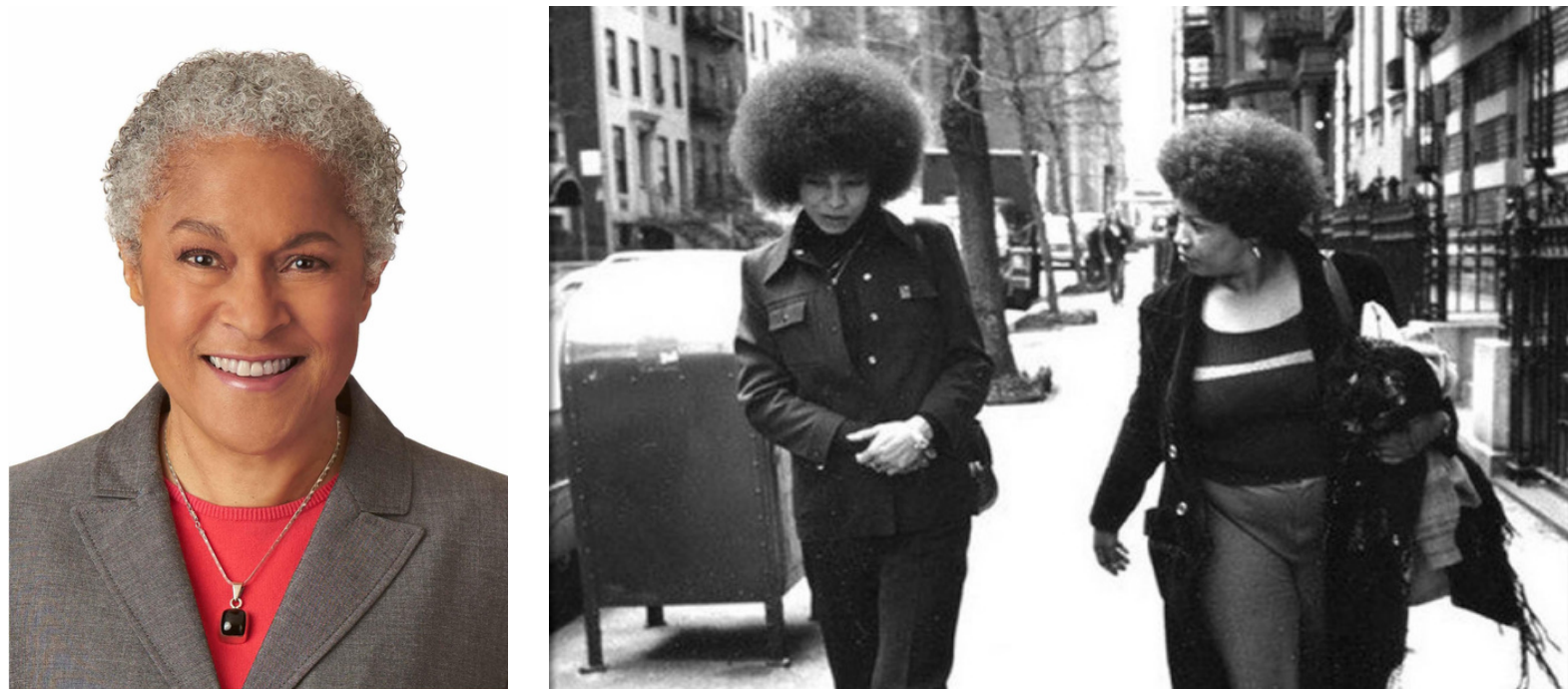
Keeanga-Yamahтта Taylor's Introduction



- "Combahee's grasp of the centrality of class in Black women's lives was not only based in history but was also in anticipation of its growing potential as a key divide even among Black women. Today that could not be clearer. The number of Black women who are wealthy and elite is small, but they are extremely visible and influential. From Michelle Obama to Oprah Winfrey to US senator Kamala Harris, they, as so many other Black wealthy and influential people, are held up as examples of American capitalism as just and democratic. They are represented as the hope that the United States can still deliver the American Dream...**The ability to distinguish between the ideology of the American Dream and the experience of the American nightmare requires political analysis, history, and often struggle.** The Combahee River Collective employed this dynamic approach to politics, not a reductive analysis that implied identity alone was enough to overcome the sharp differences imposed by social class in our society."
- Why study this text? "In the last several years, Black feminism has reemerged as the analytical framework for the activist response to the oppression of trans women of color, the fight for reproductive rights, and, of course, the movement against police abuse and violence. The most visible organizations and activists connected to the Black Lives Matter movement speak openly about how Black feminism shapes their politics and strategies today."

For Next Time...

THE PEAK OF THEORY: BLACK FEMINISM FROM 1974-1990



Readings:

- Ch 1 & all of Part III from Seeking the Beloved Community
- "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" by Hortense J. Spillers
- "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" by Patricia Hill Collins
- "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" by Kimberlé Crenshaw