

Feminism

Introduction (Part 1)**1979**

*...as Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will **ever** be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive...*

-“I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972-1978” in Conditions Four, 1979

Living in Boston, we worked on CONDITIONS: FIVE this year under yet more stringent and draining circumstances. As we did all the things mentioned above, twelve Black women were being murdered in Boston’s Third World communities between January 29 and May 28, 1979. While we were working to create a place for celebration of Black women’s lives, our sisters were dying.

-“Introduction” Conditions Five: The Black Women’s Issue, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel

Quiet as its kept, 1979 was an apocalyptic year. The world ended in small, significant and brutal ways. And another world was born. In 1968 Black Feminism had dared to name itself; by 1981 every Black feminist organization in the United States had fallen apart, but in 1979 enough was lost and enough was gained to shift the context through which Black feminism could survive.

On November 19th 1979 Audre Lorde wrote in her journal *“We have been sad long enough to make this earth either weep or grow fertile. I am an anachronism, a sport, like the bee that was never meant to fly. Science said so. I am not supposed to exist. I carry death around in my body like a condemnation. But I do live. The bee flies. There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it.”*¹

In November 1979 Audre Lorde wrote this in her journal. *“I am not supposed to exist. I carry death around in my body....”* November 1979 was not just any time to

¹ Audre Lorde. *The Cancer Journals*. San Francisco: Spinster’s Ink/Aunt Lute, 1980, 13.

have written this statement about how death and life live here in our bodies. Lorde, individually, was healing from her radical mastectomy when she wrote this, fighting cancer day by day, but the death she was holding in her body was not merely individual. The meaning of a body or even a singular life cannot be individual. As Lorde said during the same time period “the enormity of our task, to turn the world around. It feels like turning my life around, inside out.”² And it was Barbara Smith’s 1976 question in her talk on the plenary of the conference at the Modern Language Association “Is it possible to be a Black lesbian writer and to live to tell about it?” that had inspired Lorde to begin what she saw as the collective work of documenting the mythological significance of her life in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. “*I am not supposed to exist.*”³ Lorde and Smith and the communities they were accountable to could understand how this observation had a social meaning.

From January to May in 1979, twelve Black women are murdered in the streets of Roxbury and Dorchester in Boston.⁴ An ending the Combahee River Collective describes as the enduring result of a world shaped by racism and sexism.⁵ Twelve Black women show up dead in the streets, like a plague or a revelation. When the police are not blaming the victims for being out late at night, or suggesting the value of their lives was insignificant because they *must* have been sex workers, they chalk the killings up to Black on Black crime which they had never been convened to prevent. *I carry death around in my body, like a condemnation*. The media was silent when it was not cruel. Twelve Black women dead one after the other, day after day, week after week for months. Who cares? This was a cruel consensus expressing itself. They were never meant to survive.

² Ibid.

³ Lorde and Smith recall this in a conversation recorded in Jennifer Abod. *The Edges of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde*. Women Make Movies, 2002.

⁴ See Alonzo Speight. *The People United*. Boston: Third World Newsreel, 2008.

⁵ See Combahee River Collective. “Eleven Women: Why Did They Die?” self-published pamphlet, 1979.

And after summer break the lesson starts again. Fall 1979. This time in Atlanta. Black child after Black child disappears on the way home from school, on the way to the skating rink. Again and again, the children disappear. Small bodies appear in ravines and in nightmares. Rumors suggest that sometimes the kidnappers wear police uniforms. In police stations Black mothers are blamed unsympathetically for losing track of their children.⁶ *I carry death around in my body, like a condemnation.* How can they expect to recover this worthless and problematic form of lost property, when they as mothers are so hopelessly improper? Eventually, when someone, a Black man, and organizer of the neighborhood response organization, is blamed by the state for the murder of so many Black sons (in order to kill the dangerous neighborhood watches self-organized in Black communities, some say), no one is charged with any crime related to those little girls.⁷ The murders and disappearances of the little .girls don't count. Even more than their little boy counterparts, doomed creations of careless Black mothers, the little girls, potential creators of even more worthlessness, were never meant to survive.

On November 3rd 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina, the grim lesson continues. The Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi party open fire at a crowd gathered at a rally organized by the Communist party where demands for economic justice supported by the majority Black community of Greensboro are being presented. Later known as the Greensboro Massacre, and declared a human rights violation by a Human Rights Commission in 2008, this act of extreme hate violence was never punished as such. In fact, a number of the survivors of the shooting were arrested.⁸ Lesson? Advocating for economic justice in the United States is a criminal act. Preaching Nazism and shooting unarmed people gathered in a public place is not. During the McCarthy era, being a

⁶ Toni Cade Bambara. *Those Bones are Not My Child.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

⁷ Cara Page. "The Evidence of Things Seen: The Black Feminist Tradition of Witnessing," Presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference November, 2009.

⁸ See Greensboro Truth and Justice Commission: http://www.greensborotrc.org/hear_statements.php (accessed January 26th, 2010.)

Black woman who dared to organize for economic justice in the United States gained radical Black writer and thinker Claudia Jones imprisonment and eventual deportation.⁹ In Greensboro in 1979 it meant the law didn't care if you were murdered in broad daylight in front of hundreds of witnesses.

In her poem "Greensboro: North Carolina" June Jordan protests the legal protection of the hateful violence of the Ku Klux Klan and demonstrates the necessity for a poetics of survival which interrupts and recontextualizes the narrative of violence that 1979 printed on the bodies of Black people. Questioning the law she begins

We
studying the rule
you can
not say death to the Klan
you can
not say death to the Klan
 death to the Klan
you can
not say death to the Klan¹⁰

Here Jordan uses repetition and spacing to disrupt the relationship between what can and cannot be said. Setting apart "you can" she gives permission for another narrative and her spacing allows her to describe the norm while deviating from it, repeating the unspeakable: "death to the Klan/death to the Klan." Tying the ability to speak about the destruction of the Klan to the survival of Black people she goes on:

 you can
 not say a glass of water
 to a thirsty Black man
 you cannot
 say
a glass of water
you cannot
say
death to the Klan

⁹ Carole Boyce Davies. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ June Jordan, *Living Room: New Poems*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1985, 35.

death to the Klan¹¹

Through juxtaposition Jordan makes the argument that the abolition of the Ku Klux Klan is as necessary to the survival of Black people as is water. Actualizing the implication of the split she has imposed on the word "cannot" through her earlier line breaks, Jordan lets her statement stand alone. *Death to the Klan*. And although the androcentric figure she uses for the poem is "the Black man" as juxtaposed to "the white man" who refuses to give either water or legal protection to "the Black man," the poem is dedicated to Constance Evans, who from my investigation of several "Black World" newsletters from June Jordan's time teaching at SUNY Stonybrook, was an afro-centrally involved singer, and artist who was a student of Jordan's at Stonybrook.¹² It would seem then that this poem came out of a conversation with this student about what it is possible for the Black artist, a Black female artist and growing intellectual to say on behalf of the survival of her communities.

Meanwhile Black women who helped organize the rally and who dared to continue living in Greensboro experienced decades of punishment for speaking up on behalf of their communities. For example Willena Cannon, a key organizer of the rally, who chose to remain in Greensboro was targeted and followed by the police. Years later when her son Kwame was charged with a petty felony he was sentenced to the extreme (20 years for a petty robbery). She believes that he was punished not for his small crime, but for the larger crime of being her son.¹³ Organized radicals, disrupting racist southern hierarchies, were never meant to survive.

¹¹ Ibid, p 36.

¹² Black World Vol. 12d, Iss. 8, December 1983 p8, and Black World Vol. 12f, Iss. 1, 1984 p8

¹³ Personal communication, Nego Crossen, advocate for Willena Cannon and Kwame Cannon, August 11th 2008. Willena Cannon continues to work for economic justice at the Greensboro Housing Coalition.

So how does one survive a year like 1979? How does one expect to survive a year like 1979 when young Black women and everything they create is killed with impunity? 1979 is a year that reads like a threat to those who two years earlier proclaimed the doomed and heretical belief clearly stated in the Combahee River Collective Statement that “Black women are inherently valuable...our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.”¹⁴

How could a Black feminism survive that believed not only that Black women should *be* but also that they should be free? Survival, in 1979 required an ideological intervention into the meaning of life. And in order to imagine and argue for an alternative to the normalization of Black expendability, Black feminists in 1979 needed a literature of survival. The Boston Murders and the nationwide murders of Black women in Black communities were the occasion for fighting words that refused to accept the temporality of repeated violence. Ntozake Shange reclaimed the present in her poem “With No Immediate Cause” repeating the refrain

every three minutes

every five minutes

every ten minutes

every day¹⁵

reframing statistics about the routine rape, murder and abuse of women into an action call. Every three minutes, she insists, there is cause to respond. Appropriating the “immediate cause” that the law requires for acts of self-defense, Shange seeks to “establish immediate cause” describing responsiveness to covered up violence against women within their own communities as way of being present, a form of radical

¹⁴ Combahee River Collective. “Combahee River Collective Statement” in Barbara Smith ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 266. (Originally published in Zillah R. Eisenstein ed. *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979.)

¹⁵ Ntozake Shange. “With No Immediate Cause,” in *Nappy Edges*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972, 114.

immediacy renewed in response to the media and the state’s complicity in the devaluation of Black women’s lives. The form of the poem models an interventionist, survivalist relationship to time. The protest of the poem, the poet’s description of her day and her encounters with the specter of hidden violence, interrupts the timekeeping of the violence itself in the refrain, and the linear time of the refrain interrupts the trajectory of the poet’s experience. The members of the Combahee River Collective used Shange’s poem in the pamphlet “6 Women: Why Did They Die” which they published for their organizing and awareness raising effort in Boston.¹⁶ In her own response to the Atlanta Child murders, Nikky Finney, a southern Black lesbian poet whom June Jordan mentored, also sought to reclaim time: the future time stolen through the silence and complicity around the murders of so many children from Black communities in Atlanta. Whereas Shange appropriates the language of the law to create a counterpoetics that interrupts and contradicts the narrative of the law, Finney appropriates the language of debt to intervene into an economic narrative that characterizes the lives of Black children as void of any social value. In her poem “For the Next One Thousand Years” which she offers “*for the children whose lives we claim and whose deaths now claim us,*” Finney counteracts the narrative of perpetual debt attached to communities of color internally within an anti-welfare state and globally within a neoliberal empire;

in full we are paid
we owe nothing
on a bill that’s never existed
the final payment is in
and for the next one thousand years
we are paid in full¹⁷

¹⁶ Shange also has a poem about the Atlanta child murders called “About Atlanta” in her 1983 collection *A Daughter’s Geography*, to further protest a political economy in which the lives of Black children are seen as worthless, and their absence leaves no sign.

¹⁷ Nikky Finney. “For the Next One Thousand Years” in *On Wings Made of Gauze*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985, 40.

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The loss of the lives of these Black children, Finney insists, is a violation of the social contract, of a balance in the relationship between life and death. She insists

and world
 don't ever come to us again
 heart in hand
 hoof in mouth
 ancient eyes in full bloom
 don't even look this way
 asking to be replenished
 to be restocked
 we are paid in full
 for this
 and for the next millenniums¹⁸

It is telling that Finney's poem does not seek accountability from units like the Atlanta Police Department or the Mayor's office or even from the unknown murderers and kidnapers. Finney addresses the Chattahoochee River, in which some of the bodies of the children were found, representing the natural world itself, demanding a definition of survival resonant with the life cycles of the planet. She refuses the social devaluation of the lives of Black children by turning not to the state, but to the *place*, the rivers, which she reminds us, precede and trump the state, to account for the loss of these children. 1979 was an apocalyptic year. Finney insists in the penultimate stanza:

incensed enough we are
 until this world ends
 and something else begins
 paid up we are¹⁹

Survival by this definition is the claim for an existence and a relationship beyond the current world. The survival of those left, claimed by the deaths of these children, requires the end of a particular type of world. Finney projects a wronged "we" into a future past the system in which "we" have been wronged. Finney uses her poetic structure to intervene against the death sentence levied on Black children. In the first

¹⁸ Ibid, 41.

¹⁹ Ibid.

stanza "in full we are paid" becomes "we are paid in full." In the penultimate stanza she uses the counter-colloquial structure:

"incensed enough we are" and "paid up we are." The "we are" coming at the end of these two lines is the projected survival after the killing relation. Sylvia Wynter defines the poetic as the production of an impossible relation that interrupts the narrative of capitalism by describing, creating and modeling an alternate relationship.²⁰ The poetry created by Black feminists in this moment insists on a relationship that goes past the brutal reality they have witnessed.

In her poem "The Test of Atlanta 1979----" June Jordan questions the relationship of Black communities to their own children, using poetic form to dare readers into an intergenerational accountability that reframes the question of 1979, by focusing on intra-racial intergenerational relationship. Asking,

What kind of a people will lay down its
life for the lives of our children?

What kind of a people are we?²¹

Jordan answers Wynter's mandate for the poetic as a means of production towards a desired relation that does not yet exist. With this definition of the poetic in mind, I argue that the intervention into the narrative of gendered Black expendability and worthlessness required an intentional poetics of survival which functioned both in the written poetry and the creative forms of living practiced by radical Black feminists through which they reclaimed the present and became partners the impossible future we are living.

1979 called for a redefinition of survival.

²⁰ Sylvia Wynter "Ethno or Socio Poetics" in *Alcheringa* Vol. 2 No.2 1976, 87.

²¹ June Jordan. "The Test of Atlanta 1979" in *Living Room*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1985, 122.

To survive 1979 you would have to reject the limits of time. Because the lifetime of one body is shorter and shorter and shorter. Because the immortality of the archive will deny that you ever existed. Because time, the only resource you have, is being stolen and resold in an uneven labor market and the price of the ticket is too high. Survival in the face of 1979 means inventing a way to connect bodies across time, to leave traces and notes and warnings. Survival in 1979 requires a belief that an unlikely future can be created in the present out of language, relationship and desire.

To survive 1979 requires a radical relationship to space, a problematization of a national context from the seat of empire where the same laws that characterize Black and especially female life as sacrificial, justify an imperialist relationship to land, called rape only because of what they have already done to our bodies. In 1979 Black feminists in the United States imagined, remembered or decided that the socialist revolution in Grenada was related to the lives, lost and waiting in Roxbury and Atlanta and Greensboro. Black feminists in the United States imagined that there was a third world, and a Black internationalism that did not have to replicate the unsurvivable patriarchal forms they knew. This dissertation asserts that radical relationships to time and space are evident in the practices of time and space that Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Barbara Smith and Alexis DeVeaux, among other radical Black anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feminists, practiced. But none of this was ever meant to survive, and the most dangerous work of these feminists was not reproduced, passed on or translated, neither projected across time, nor over space. The time and space of survival is a retroactive reading practice that I am engaged in now. While the temporalities and spatialities of a queer Black diasporic feminism are descriptive of this archive, these descriptions and the archive itself are also recuperative. This time and space is in the making now. Towards their survival and ours.

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At Once Before and After: The Queer Time of Survival

*Terror. Knowing from moment to moment that who I am is on all counts hated. Black, woman, Lesbian. my breathing from moment to moment inevitable fear... That my most appropriate fate here in white-boy patriarchy is to be beaten beyond recognition. **Beyond recognition.***

-Barbara Smith, Journal Entry June 26, 1979²²

I want my name off the mast-head of Chrysalis as poetry editor, and I am quite prepared to take legal action to see that this is done.

-Audre Lorde, (unpublished) Letter to the Editors of Chrysalis, July 20, 1979²³

Two weeks ago, myself and another Black woman poet and another Black woman artist came with 18 inches of losing our lives inside an unbridled police riot in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our crime: To be Black and breathing on the streets of the 79th precinct. Tell me/show me how your hopelessly academic, psuedo-historical, incestuous, and profoundly optional profoundly trifling profoundly upper middle-class attic white publication can presume to represent our women's culture: the very tissue of our ongoing, tenuous, embattled experience....

As you have traded now, for years, on the presence of my name among your "Editors", I trust you understand that I entirely expect that you will print this last word which is my last contribution to Chrysalis, in fact.

-June Jordan, (unpublished) Letter to the Editors of Chrysalis, September 10, 1979²⁴

Martin Luther King Jr. is still dead

-June Jordan "Memoranda Toward the Spring of Seventy-Nine"²⁵

This dissertation examines the radical relationships to publishing, teaching and poetics developed by these Black lesbian and bisexual feminists in response to violence as part of a queer transtemporal process of survival against the odds. This survival is queer because it contradicts the social reproduction of abjection for racialized communities. This is the temporal shoreline, where time erodes and life is short, where

²² Barbara Smith. "Black woman, Lesbian, my breathing from moment to moment inevitable fear," in Margo Culley ed. *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985, 309.

²³ Audre Lorde. July 20th 1979 letter to the editors of Chrysalis. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 85, Folder 1. Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁴ June Jordan. September 10th 1979 letter to the editors of Chrysalis. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 85, Folder . Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁵ June Jordan. "Memoranda Toward the Spring of Seventy-Nine," in *Directed by Desire*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 302. (Originally published in *Passion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1980.)

the lives of children disappear, or are intentionally prevented. Where Black lesbian and bisexual feminists face the end of their lives, the co-optation of their words and the indifference of the archive. Where survival is a queer thing. This survival is diasporic because it calls for and draws on a poetics of self-determination for people of color transnationally....Survival, for those who did and did not live through 1979 required the invention of queer times and spaces of possibility.

Barbara Smith's diary entries during the Boston Murders are a key artifact in the 1979 redefinition of survival. In 1978 Barbara and Beverly Smith had introduced their collection of "letters from Black feminists" in the journal *Conditions* with the words "There is no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now."²⁶ Months later as the new year opened with the wave of murders, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel were both living in Boston and compiling the (dangerously) historical collection of writing that made up *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* and which eventually became *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* published by Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, an initiative envisioned and made real by Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith and other former participants in the Combahee River Collective Black Feminist Retreats in 1981. The Black women who witnessed the nation's apathy towards blatant attacks on the lives of Black women who were believed to be deviant and expendable clearly believed that their survival, if possible, would happen in print. They printed copy after copy of the pamphlet "6 women. Why did they die?" as an organizing tool, crossing out and changing the number as more and more women turned up dead.

But physical, gendered and economic violence also forced these women to think beyond their own threatened lifetimes. Like Black women in Britain who were also living

²⁶ Barbara and Beverly Smith. "'I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand': Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978." *Conditions* Four.4.1, 1979. 62-77

in the midst of violence against women in Black and immigrant communities and unanswered acts of racial violence (such as the SouthHall Massacre) some Black women, and Black lesbian and bisexual anti-imperialist radical women in particular, decided to archive their existence and presence in print.

Barbara Smith published an excerpt from her diary during the Boston Murders in Margo Culley's edited volume, *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*. Tellingly, her diary entry starts with a nightmare, not about facing murder in the street, but about the appropriation of Black women's work by white feminists in the print movement, an act that Smith viewed as violence. Smith's published diary meditations end with writing as well, when in the wake of her 24 hour a day response to the violence that was around her in Boston, Smith is able to go on a writers retreat, she wonders what it means for a Black woman to have time to think, write, or to live and breathe at all. (In "Chapter 5: Publishing and Survival," I will provide a close examination of the demise of the *Chrysalis* collective and will elaborate on how Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Barbara Smith characterized the racism within the feminist publishing scene as racist violence, akin to police brutality and imperialism.) For Smith and other "mothers" of the Black feminist publishing movement, the climate of extreme violence that characterized 1979 (and the time before, and the time after) the threat that they could neither protect themselves, the children of their communities nor their words was often conflated. June Jordan accused Susan Griffin²⁷ of being complicit with police brutality due to her disregard for her and Audre Lorde's critique of the disrespect for poetry and Black women in the operations of *Chrysalis* a feminist literary magazine. After demanding that her name be removed from the contributing editors list of *Chrysalis* in the context of Lorde's resignation and the police brutality that she

²⁷ (possibly the same Susan _____ named in Smith's diary entry as someone who in a nightmare published an article about Smith's family without crediting or sharing the proceeds with Smith)

experienced, Jordan writes a further letter elaborating that “*Chrysalis* and its allies do not fail Black and Third World peoples by accident: It is a failure guaranteed by a concept of identity that excludes my own, in the broad sense of my own.”²⁸ Jordan then goes on to describe her experience of listening to the radio on the way home to a newscast about “yet another white police murder of an unarmed, young Black man” and fearing that this time it was her son. Clarifying her stance against the underlying racism of *Chrysalis* she adds, “I am ready and working to defend my own right to life and the right to life of my son and the right to life of my people and the right to life of all Third World Peoples. Such a person as Susan Griffin who responds to me as she has, in this Third World context of non-theoretical urgencies persistently not addressed by *Chrysalis* as well as by S.G., I do regard as someone plainly prepared to let me, and my own, be destroyed.”²⁹ How is it that violence against the words of Black feminist poets *does* constitute an attack on Black children and a stand against the survival of communities of color?

This dissertation agrees with Jordan’s accusation, arguing that poetic practice, print and teaching are crucial elements of survival for oppressed communities, because they were never *meant* to survive. And survival is a function of meaning. Jordan’s analysis in this series of angry letters to and about the *Chrysalis* collective (in addition to her important essays on children’s literature and teaching) makes an explicit connection between the means of production for print publication and the biopolitical production or suppression of life in racialized communities. As I will discuss in “Chapter 1: Survival: An Intervention in Meaning,” Jordan had already advanced a definition of survival in her work on children’s literature that tied the production of literary possibility to the

²⁸ June Jordan. November 16th 1979 Letter to Adrienne Rich. June Jordan Manuscript Archives, Box 85, Folder 1, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

²⁹ Ibid.

possibility of an intervention against the racist implications of capitalism, which she understood to be the literal and social deaths of Black children. This dissertation continues that quarrel. The phrase *never meant to survive* emphasizes the importance of *meaning* to survival. Survival, is the practice of asserting a meaning for criminalized forms of life in print and in the social world that contradicts a dominant narrative which insists that certain lives are expendable. The use of the means of print publication to spread an alternative meaning of Black life was a primary preoccupation of self-defined Black feminists.

The 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement explicitly points out publication as a primary strategy of Black feminism,

We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.³⁰

Life in print proved extremely important to Smith, who hustled to get the Combahee River Collective Statement published in as many venues as possible and who created the anthology *Home Girls* to ensure that *Conditions Five*, which sold more than four times as many copies as any other issue of the journal *Conditions*, would not go out of print. Indeed, during the lifetime of Kitchen Table Press, *Home Girls* and every other title they published remained in print whether or not copies were selling. While she describes the activism that she engaged in response to the Boston Murders as the “most nightmarish yet dramatically transforming political work” in her life, Smith describes

³⁰ Combahee River Collective. “Combahee River Collective Statement,” in Barbara Smith ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000, 272.

Black Women’s Studies, the process of publishing and teaching that ensures that these stories survive over time, as her “legacy.”³¹

1979 was the beginning of the dissolution of Black feminist organizations including the Third World Women’s Alliance (formerly the Black Women’s Alliance), The National Black Feminist Organization, Black Women United for Action and the Combahee River Collective.³² But it was also the beginning of a period of sustained autonomous Black feminist publishing, marking an important transition in manifestation of Black feminism. I argue that the violence of 1979 and the political and social conservatism that institutionalized these violences demanded a strategic shift on the part of radical anti-capitalist feminists. In some ways the Black feminist print movement was and is the afterlife of Black feminist organizing in the United States. Through radical publishing and teaching, Black feminists like Barbara Smith insisted on the relevance of their shifting present and projected their visions and lessons into the future. These queer visions and lessons about how the world could be would not be sustained by literary markets, or even academic departments. The radical world that these Black feminists believed in exists only in the words and lessons they left and in our contemporary relationship to them, when and if we find them.

While some argue that Black feminism died or became tame or impotent when Black feminist theory moved out of the streets and into the academy, I would counter that the key theorists of a feminist anti-capitalist diasporic vision never accepted the amputation that would have made the academy or the mainstream literary market a

³¹ Barbara Smith. “Foreword” in *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizign in the Seventies and Eighties: Freedom Organizing Series #1*. New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1986, 5. Barbara Smith. “Building Black Women’s Studies,” in Florence Howe ed. *The Politics of Women’s Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers*. New York: The Feminist Press, 2000, 194-203.

³² Kimberly Springer. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

homespace for them.³³ While I concede that after 1979 some Black feminists agreed to market themselves within academic and literary markets and made sacrifices to do so, the queerest of these, also retained an anti-capitalist approach. Alexis DeVeaux and Barbara Smith especially demonstrate a model of Black feminist survival in the way they straddled community organizing, autonomous publishing, commercial journalism and the academy in order to make queer spaces of critique, passing on traces despite the designs of institutions that would never endorse their survival. Barbara Smith, as the anchor for *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* was also supportive of a number of other autonomous literary ventures by women of color. As one of the organizers of the Third World Lesbian Writers Conference and the first financial and in-kind contributor to *Between Ourselves* a women of color created newspaper published for a short time out of Washington D.C., Smith also made sure that the Combahee River Collective Statement was present in number of special issues created by women of color intervening into predominantly white feminist publications and wrote letters of support for women of color controlled periodical ventures in England and Canada as well. Alexis DeVeaux's is also an example of the critical production of experimental autonomous women of color led spaces for meaning making. Maintaining a critical stance towards the means of literary production, after publishing collections of poetry and children's books with a number of mainstream publishers, DeVeaux published an experimental anti-imperialist folder of poems called *Blue Heat* with her self-invented *Diva Publishing Enterprises* which she dedicated "to self-publishing."³⁴ She also ran a workshop for women of the Black diaspora in her apartment in Brooklyn. This collective, called the Gaptooth Girlfriends, self-published 3 anthologies of their poetry. Along with her partner at the time, Black feminist artist Gwendolyn Hardwick, she founded a group called the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Alexis DeVeaux. *Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings*. New York: Diva Publishing Enterprises, 1985.

Flamboyant Ladies who used the living room to hold Black feminist literary salons, craft radical performances, design t-shirts and even plan a day-long event on the impact of the nuclear crisis on the survival of Black communities. At the same time DeVeaux, with the partnership of her sister-comrade Cheryl Greene intervened in the pages of *Essence Magazine* a fashion and beauty magazine owned by Black men, to expose the largest reading audience of Black women in the United States to a Black diasporic political perspective before the term diaspora was in circulation. I argue that books, pamphlets, periodicals, classrooms and living rooms became strategic spaces of survival for Black anti-capitalist feminists under attack, allowing them to reach past the conservatism of the 1980's towards an impossible future: this instant and this triumph. A queer diasporic relationship to time, self, community and survival. Quilted secrets, hidden inner pockets, nail scraped passageways, found.

Looking Inward and Outward: the Queer Space of Survival

What a bad example, a dangerous precedent, an independent Grenada would be for the peoples of Color in the Caribbean, in Central America, for those of us here in the United States.

-Audre Lorde, Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report³⁵

Black painter and poet June Beer...quietly she asks me, "Do you think I have a future? Do we (Nicaraguans) have one? Some days I think maybe-maybe not."³⁶

*Compared with barefoot David standing up to Goliath, we, Black Americans, are so very rich and so very powerful. But when will we believe it? When will we emulate the spirit of the visions of the Sandinistas? **When will we seize the world around us with our freedom?***

-June Jordan, January 1984 "Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There"³⁷

³⁵ Audre Lorde. "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," in *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 179.

³⁶ June Jordan. "Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There," in *On Call: Political Essays*. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 72.

³⁷ Ibid, 75.

In her poem "Memoranda Towards the Spring of Seventy-Nine," June Jordan presents the deadly banality of the US mass media's representation of global and political events. "There must be something else on television," the speaker complains. "Martin Luther King Jr., is still dead," she reminds us.³⁸ Citing an MLK memorial sponsored by "The National Boat Show," The Daily News personal interest coverage of the overthrow of the Iranian Shah, an instruction booklet for cooking with a Chinese Wok, Channel Eleven's TV movie about Adolf Hitler, Kaptain Kangaroo and Woody Woodpecker and a Dear Abby Letter, Jordan transmutes the irresponsible representation of international relations, especially in the middle east, into a continued assault (or assassination) against racial justice in the United States. In *Living Room*, Jordan's anti-imperialist collection of poems, Jordan connects the Atlanta Child Murders and the Greensboro Massacre of 1979 to the revolution in Nicaragua and the Israeli imperialist action against Lebanon by writing about each of these sites of violence within the same text, using the domestic language of the "Living Room" to highlight the resonance between the racism of US domestic policy and foreign intervention, while suggesting a livable alternative.

How does one live here, on the shoreline, where civil rights recede with haste of backlash, where a neoliberal economic colonization of the hemisphere undercuts the revolutionary struggles in the Caribbean and in southern Africa. Survival, in 1979 in a political scene characterized by backlash in the form of Ronald Reagan's rise to electoral victory, Jerry Falwell's founding of the "Moral Majority," the election of Margeret Thatcher and a conservative parliament in England, some of those who were never meant to survive emphasized a diasporic relationship to race, space and gender. In Atlanta, Toni Cade Bambara and other Black feminist mothers who survived the Atlanta

³⁸ from June Jordan, *Passion: New Poems, 1977-1980*, Beacon Press, 1980. Anthologized in June Jordan, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005, 302.

Murders were in the midst of a radical health movement that envisioned the well-being of Black women in political terms, as holistic self-determination in community. The Black Women’s Health Project, founded by Byllye Avery and based in Atlanta, offered a transnational vision of Black women’s health sustained by methods from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and organized delegations to these regions to create an expansive vision of health. At the same time, in New York in the unlikely pages of *Essence* Magazine, Alexis DeVeaux and Cheryl Greene in collaboration with Bambara, June Jordan, Audre Lorde and others were engaged in a mission to expand the political vocabulary of US based Black women to include the freedom struggles that Black women were engaged in across the Caribbean and Africa in Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Grenada and elsewhere.³⁹

In 1979, after the age of anti-colonial revolutions abroad and civil rights and Black power visibility in the United States, the US state sought to reassert itself with conservative domestic policies and imperialist foreign policy towards the hegemony of capitalism. In 1979, Black feminists based in the US (many of whom like Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux and June Jordan were of Caribbean ancestry), aligned themselves with the socialist revolutions in Latin America and the Caribbean which threatened the United States’ aim of hemispheric capitalist hegemony. 1979 was a revolutionary year. In July 1979, a group of young people, called Sandinistas, many of whom were women and poets, achieved a socialist revolution in Nicaragua. The student-led socialist New Jewel Movement in Grenada came to power in the same year.

Writers such as Audre Lorde (of Grenadian ancestry, based in the US) Dionne Brand (Trinidadian, based in Canada) and Merle Hodge (based in Jamaica) and many others traveled to Grenada to participate in and witness the revolutionary process,

³⁹ More on this in Chapter 2: The Danger of (Queer) Black Maternity

claiming the first socialist revolution in a majority Black country as an achievement that required but also exceeded Grenadian national sovereignty. June Jordan traveled to Nicaragua to meet with fellow poets and female revolutionaries, writing an important article for *Essence* magazine that depicted the dangerous revolutionary situation of the Afro-Caribbean community in Bluefields, Nicaragua who knew they were facing imminent violence from an imperialist U.S. state that would not tolerate sustainable living outside of capitalism anywhere in the western hemisphere. Afro-Caribbean Nicaraguan poet and painter June Beer, literally wondered aloud to June Jordan whether she would live to grow old. Black feminists based in the US acknowledged the transnational scope of their political situation and aligned themselves with revolutions that, in the context of US military aggression and threat, were also never meant to survive.

Not surprisingly, the Black feminist writers and teachers that aligned themselves with these short-lived socialist revolutions highlighted the important roles of literature and literacy in these movements. Audre Lorde emphasized the "each one teach one" methodology in Grenada, an intergenerational process through which schoolchildren taught illiterate elders to read, while the elders taught the schoolchildren the lessons they had learned from life. June Jordan emphasized the role of poets as leaders of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, celebrating the fact that one of the first actions the revolutionary government took was to outlaw the exploitation of women in advertising and reporting that the Nicaraguan revolutionaries expressed a strong identification with Black revolutionaries in the United States such as Malcolm X. With these diasporic reports, which will be discussed in a later chapter in detail, radical Black feminists in the United States took a clear stance against capitalism and imperialism and argued that poetry and teaching were revolutionary acts, placing their local poetic and pedagogical work in a broader revolutionary context.

In her recent work on the life and intellectual contribution of Black communist Claudia Jones, Carol Boyce-Davies, also an Afro-Caribbean feminist scholar based in the US, laments the US-centrism of Black feminist theory and advocates for a transnational feminist historicization that challenges the violent construction of national borders, seeking to recuperate a radical Black feminist subject.⁴⁰ Arguing that Claudia Jones, who was deported in the 1950's for her communist activism in the United States, was effectively evacuated from the historical memory of Black, feminist, communist, and Caribbean scholars, Boyce-Davies asks for an approach that is leftist and transnational enough to center Jones's revolutionary life and work. In effect Jones, who died young of heart failure, and the legacy of her work were never meant to survive. Boyce-Davies can only describe Jones's position using Audre Lorde's term "sister outsider", she who (be)longs and yet is excluded, she who creates a radical relationship out of solidarity and love in the context of oppression and marginalization. I say that it is no coincidence that Boyce-Davies describes Jones's life through Audre Lorde's self-identification. This study of the radical anti-capitalist, anti-racist feminist work of Lorde, Jordan, Smith and De Veaux argues that there was indeed a Black transnational feminism that challenged capitalism directly. But it is no mere coincidence that Boyce-Davies describes it as a lack. Like Jones, this particular form of Black feminism is often forgotten, because of course, it was never meant to survive.

The transnationalism of Black anti-capitalist feminists produces a rival definition of survival contemporaneous with the pan-africanist idea of diasporic cultural "survivals" that arose during the anti-colonial period of the 1960's and early 1970's. In contrast to the concept of African "survivals" in the cultural practices of Black people in the Americas, heavily drawn upon by Black cultural nationalists who insisted that the most

⁴⁰ Carole Boyce-Davies. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

seemingly patriarchal African traditions should be reproduced in Black American communities, or the “global sisterhood” approach to feminism which suggested that a specific form of western feminism should apply to all of the women in the world, the form of survival and connection that radical Black feminist argued for was strategic. While Audre Lorde was a diasporic Grenadian, she acknowledged that in the context of the Grenadian revolution and the subsequent US invasion she was merely a distant “relative” and she emphasized the privilege the US Blacks had in the seat of empire and their responsibility to challenge the global racism practiced by the government they supported with their tax dollars. Similarly Alexis De Veaux in her diasporic reports on US complicity in the suffering of Black people in Haiti and South Africa, stressed the responsibility Black citizens of the United States had to act in solidarity and identification with Black people who were differentially suffering from the racism of the US State. The Black feminism articulated by Lorde, DeVeaux and others in the 1980’s was transnational feminism anticipating the definition that M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty provide in their key introduction to *Feminist Ideologies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*;

1. “a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in *different* geographical spaces, rather than as *all* women across the world
2. “an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than a set of traits embodied in all non-US citizens (particularly because of the racist heterosexist definitions of US citizenship)
3. “a consideration of the term ‘international’ in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes which foreground the operations of race and capitalism⁴¹

In *The Edges of Each Other’s Battles* a film documenting the 1990 “I Am Your Sister” Conference that Alexander, Angela Bowen and others created to celebrate the work of Audre Lorde, Alexander explains Lorde’s contribution to the understanding of

⁴¹ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty “Introduction” in *Feminist Ideologies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge 1997.

differential feminisms and transnational solidarity. "Feminism is not a scarce resource," Alexander reminds us, "but we cannot use one measure of feminism to the struggles of women all over the world."⁴² According to Alexander, it was Lorde's development of a philosophy of "sisterhood as survival" in theory and practice that provided the necessary critique to the homogenizing narrative that "sisterhood is global."⁴³

The theories of difference and the development of feminist Black internationalist developed by Lorde, Jordan and De Veaux especially in the early 1980's demonstrate how the survival of Black feminism was a transnational process that was not quite nationalist, but explicitly anti-imperialist. My argument is that what we understand as transnational feminism today depends on a theoretical project of redefining survival that Jordan and Lorde theorized in production and in poetics, discussed in detail in Chapter 1: "Survival an Intervention into Meaning" which offers a close textual reading of the queer uses of the term survival that Jordan and Lorde developed in the mid-1980's. The section that follows investigates how a queer intergenerational reading practice can allow these theories to survive in the present.

⁴³ *The Edges of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde*. Jennifer Abod, 2002. Alexander is using Robin Morgan's phrase "Sisterhood is Global" to stand in for a broader imperialist project of universalizing engaged in by white western feminists.