

Title: A full accounting: Thoughts on Black women's history and the sixties movements

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I wanted to share some insights from my work on radical Black women, Black Panther women, Black women on the left, and transnational activists. And also some grassroots activism I'm doing around sharing radical Black women's stories in community based settings.

In 1988 in an essay called "“Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired” Angela Davis wrote, “Politics do not stand in polar opposition to our lives. Whether we desire it or not, they permeate our existence, insinuating themselves into the most private spaces of our lives.”

Black women activists who are veterans of the movements of the 1960s and 70s have not collectively given voice to their struggles within the movement. Part of this may have to do with coming from movements and communities already stigmatized and a sense of loyalty to a narrative that erases them. Such that the erasure or burden itself becomes a burden, another movement legacy. Scholars have been complicit in this silence, preferring the militant strong Black woman hardened exterior without questioning if a blackened eye lay behind her glasses. Or asking about her pleasure politics.

Yet the contours of these Black women's stories appear faintly in the margins of their memoirs or are recounted by their sister friend when they have passed. The stories are told in their own unmediated voices: what they shared in letters, what they articulated in poems, and the self-portraits that they painted through autobiography. These sources reveal the struggle to care for their children in the movement; lack of self care; loneliness; poverty; substance abuse; physical abuse; sexual violence; imprisonment; colorism/sexism/class divides within the movement; loss of partners through imprisonment or death, and so on) These are not the movement politics that typically get exalted or examined with microscopic precision.

But don't we also need to know about the insides and the ends? The ins and the outs. There is HERstory there.

Letter from Mae Mallory to Julian Mayfield dated May 8, 1977.

"In all seriousness tho, I can appreciate the seriousness of high blood pressure. At this very moment I am suppose to be on complete bed-rest. My pressure was 210/150, the doctor said that he didn't know I managed to walk around. He even suggested that I might not get home to get to my bed and should be hospitalized from his office. Now, how could I go to the hospital in "this land of the free," or better yet, "Free World," when it costs \$40 just to attend the clinic at Kings County Hospital."

"Luckily, I am doing home nursingg,[sic] and my patients are very easy to take care of. When they sleep, I sleep. One patient is 96 years old, so she sleeps most of the time and this allows me to rest. My pressure has gone down, and I hope I can keep it down."

This letter reveals the impact of struggle and health and poverty in the work of a formidable movement legend turned eldercare provider, not an unrelated trajectory.

Broadening this perspective will not only impact Black women. I remember reading Susan Faludi's article April 2013 article in the New Yorker about Shulemith Firestone and it was AS much about interior movement politics AS about societal transformation. It included bouts of poverty, mental illness and stints on public assistance. Deeply felt sisterhood and deeply felt betrayal. It was a full accounting.

I await Black radical women's full accounting. Someone who is both activist and angst ridden. Someone whose health struggles are acknowledged. Allison Parker has written a wonderful article about Mary Church Terrell in this vein, exploring how and why she suppressed and hid various health problems, including depressing and debilitating still births. So perhaps tools and tools from health and disability studies can be employed in this project. Yet it is unsurprising that with everything known about Terrell and the prominence of the politics of appearance in her life, ""her health problems have been virtually ignored by historians."

I await the holistic biography of a radical Black woman whose subject is revealed to have both politics and sex.

In *The Problematic of Silence*, Evelyn Hammonds' wrote: "we know more about the elision of sexuality of black women than we know about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire." That was in 1999. Not to overlook the violence and racism that frames black women's sexuality, and the need to connect race, sex and violence but this is not all there is. Agency and desire also need to be part of the conversation. Rape is so real and weighty and horrific in black women's lives and in the movement. But even in the darkest hour black women, they resisted, enjoyed, desired, and all the other messy stuff of life. I find myself more interested in teasing out those kind of stories these days. Because otherwise, how are not simply/only/mainly victimized by history. Where is the joy? Is there a space beyond dissemblance? Could it be accurate to view Civil Rights and Black Power as a sexual revolution unfolding in tension and tandem with the woman's liberation movement?

Panther leader Ericka Huggins asked in a poem:

in the end

when all is history

and we are wherever

fate has taken us

what will it all look like

how will it be summed up?

how will you have become –

and all of us...

I wanted my intervention in this conversation to be a radical rethinking of the summing up that has gone on in these post movement moments. I go conferences and engage with Black Power politics and social movement scholars and speak about Black women. And I go to conferences and engage with issues of gender and sexuality and speak about Black women. In 2014, it still seems like all the women

are white and all the Blacks are men and some of us still have to be brave. In 2014, radical Black women are still in search of their mothers gardens and awaiting their full accounting.