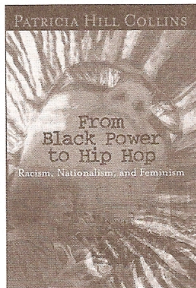


bitch READS

From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism

Patricia Hill Collins {TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS}



Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins asks many provocative questions in her latest book: How can black youth function in a contradictory society that still undermines issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality? How can black women combat despicable images of themselves in hip hop? How does mass media promote a so-called colorblind society?

It's a mouthful, for sure. And even Collins, a leading black feminist theorist, seems to know that the list of these social ills is a lot longer than the list of solutions to them. But sometimes it takes an academic—dense language and all—to step back and contextualize pop culture and political climates.

Collins, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, opens and closes with a discussion of dilemmas facing the hip hop generation. Politically, this includes a lack of both jobs and true social justice. Culturally speaking, the music and its attendant trends are often vapid and usually hostile toward women. In between, she touches on family structure and Afrocentricism as a civil religion. These critiques are important because they not only address the paradox of race but contribute to the quandaries this generation of youth faces. She looks at how popular culture idolizes middle-class white motherhood at the expense of black women. She takes to task the misogynistic tinge of Afrocentricism in the academy—drolly referring to it as kitschy—and how this posture has failed to include various perspectives when searching for the “authentic” black experience. These essays build upon each other and also explore inter- and intraracial struggles among blacks. Collins writes with informed authority; it's clear that she is an observer of the hip hop generation, rather than a participant. But she also knows that, even though she's of a different generation, as a social scientist she can nonetheless offer historical insight without excessive finger-wagging.

Collins is also aware that many African-American women have resisted identifying with feminism, in part because mainstream feminism has increasingly focused on the individual, whereas black women see race as part of collective identity politics. But as she notes, “African American women and girls who reject feminism by claiming that it is for White women lack access to important critiques of gender politics.” There are other legacies that are important tools for organizing—whether it be learning from the black women's club movement of the early 20th

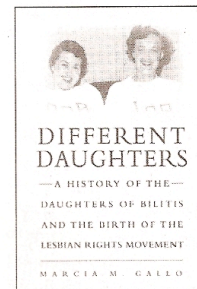
century or studying the words of women like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker. It may also be a matter of knowing where to look for black feminism: Mobilization of black women along gender lines is not impossible, but it is taking form outside of academic halls. Hip hop feminism, she argues, may well offer a greater chance of broad-based discourse. To that end, Collins applauds hip hop feminism and those black women writers and cultural producers who use popular genres to challenge misogynistic behavior:

Hip-hop culture reaches far more women than the relatively small number of women of color who manage to find women's studies classrooms within colleges and universities. Hip-hop culture is itself a response by Black and Latino youth who were denied access not just to college educations, but to schooling, adequate housing, recreational activities, and music lessons. Instead of being defeated and disenfranchised, these young people created new art forms from the fragments that they inherited.

These women are making the personal political, and Collins wants the connections between hip hop feminism and grassroots feminist organizations to flourish in order to see fundamental change. It's the only way to offset both the dominant culture and elements of black culture—sexism, homophobia—that have long been begging for change.

—NATALIE Y. MOORE

Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Birth of the Lesbian Rights Movement Marcia M. Gallo {CARROLL & GRAF}



Anyone who's been involved in gay, lesbian, or women's organizations is likely to come away from Marcia Gallo's detailed, often gossipy, and highly readable history of the Daughters of Bilitis realizing that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The salty insider stories Gallo relays deal with sharp differences of opinion between strong-minded women and the inevitable split

faced by contemporary lesbians: that of being pulled one way by the gay liberation front and another by the women's movement, and not feeling fully wanted or understood by either camp.

Gallo begins with the story of eight lesbians meeting in a San Francisco living room one night in 1955. Some were there to begin an educational group to further the legal and civil rights of lesbians; others were simply looking for a

social space in which to meet women. Gallo's kind but honest history makes it clear that this difference in intention was not the only problem inherent in the group.

A product of its conformist 1950s origins, DOB's stress on being acceptable to mainstream society often made even preliberation dykes chafe. There was the group's uneasy affiliation with the two main "gay" (read: male) groups at the time, which led some members to feel like the ladies' auxiliary of the gay-rights movement. There was a dress code of no "dungarees" and women's clothing only, although it's rumored that it was never enforced. Even then, long before the days of separatism and women-only spaces, many members would not turn out to hear male speakers. (That said, given the revelation that the FBI kept tabs on the group and its founders from the beginning, their conservatism and discretion hardly seem unwarranted.)

Still, the DOB provided support, offered legal advice, helped to quell loneliness and isolation, and created awareness of "homophile" issues among both lesbians and the mainstream. More evidence of the group's significance lies in the company it kept. One cannot look at the women who were active in the Daughters of Bilitis—Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Cleo Bonner, Billye Talmadge, Barbara Grier, Jewel Gomez, Valerie Taylor, Barbara Gittings, Lisa Ben, Martha Shelley, Helen Sandoz, and so many others—and not be in awe.

The story of the Daughters of Bilitis is also the story of *The Ladder*, which began as a member newsletter and later became the first national lesbian magazine, giving voice to lesbian writers who are in some cases still writing today. In fact, in the early 1970s, it was Rita Laporte and Barbara Grier's move to separate the magazine from the DOB (as a means of saving the publication from the group's infight-

ing, they claimed) that caused a rift that continues among those involved even to this day. In a footnote, Gallo notes that several DOB ex-members she interviewed for the book still refer to Grier's actions as "theft."

While at times *Different Daughters* becomes a tedious inventory of local chapters moving in and out of existence or a record of new leaders who directed the national organization one way or another, one can't help but be struck by the sheer courage of the women who founded and fought for this group. Beginning in a time when the mere suspicion of lesbianism meant losing friends, family, jobs, children, and reputations, the very existence of the DOB must have alleviated much loneliness and fear. Through conferences, media, and other activities, the group put a public face on lesbianism while never risking the identity of its many closeted members.

So what happened? Why did the DOB fall, never to rise again? According to Gallo, it was a series of seemingly inevitable factors: the rise of feminism and greater political awareness among lesbians, a post-Stonewall radicalism that couldn't abide the DOB's "old-fashioned" approach, the loss of *The Ladder*, the exhaustion and frustration of the leadership, and a diversity of lesbian experience that was a result of these changing times. Lesbians simply had more options, and the group could not (or would not) meet the growing demand for a more radical lesbian-feminist approach. And the DOB did rise—in the continuing work of its members, in the myriad groups that sprung up to take its place in the early and mid-1970s, and in a collective acceptance that working through difference is difficult but necessary. Now, thanks to *Different Daughters*, the details of those first difficult steps to getting where we are today will not be lost to time. —JOY PARKS

EFEMMERA

About What Was Lost: 20 Writers on Miscarriage, Healing, and Hope Jessica Berger Gross, ed. {PLUME} General wisdom holds that newly pregnant women ought to keep the happy news a closely guarded secret for the first 12 weeks or so because of the possibility of miscarriage. (From 20 to 25 percent of all pregnancies end in miscarriage, and the numbers are significantly higher in the first trimester; as feminist health book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* reminds its readers, pregnancy is "a wonderful possibility.") But as Jessica Berger Gross points out, this popular notion is the most visible element of "a wider veil of secrecy surrounding miscarriage and pregnancy loss" that, she argues, doesn't protect women and their partners from the pain of dealing with a miscarriage but rather adds a wholly unnecessary layer of shame,

