

Reflection

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In the beginning, it was indeed personal. I was in college, managing an unlikely balance between my life rooted in Black radical politics, resident advising, and sorority life. My boyfriend took the notion of the liberation struggle literally, preparing himself to fight, first with fists, then with weapons, when and if “they” came calling in the morning. I had no notion that the only person he would ever use his fists on would be me; nor that when “they” did come, it would not be to suppress Black liberation, but to arrest him for assault. But it did happen, after a messy break-up, in my 10th floor dorm room with the plate glass window. I landed just a foot short of it, the first of many near misses that could have changed my life forever. What did change at that moment, though, was my political trajectory, for the trauma of the violence was nothing compared to the devastating response of my various communities. Sorors fell silent; the University punished us both; the revolutionaries lobbied for forgiveness. One sister whom I had admired and emulated persuaded me that the community could take care of the situation, that the police had no place in our lives, and cared little about us. This I knew to be true: campus security prepared to do nothing until they overheard my warning to a few friends that my ex-boyfriend had weapons. A week after I dropped the charges, my ex-boyfriend threatened my life. For months as the threats escalated, support came from unlikely sources, a few non-aligned male friends who escorted me everywhere, and one Black male administrator who saw to it that I graduated. The sorors remained silent, the University did nothing, and the Righteous Sister did not call again.

The opportunity finally came, many years later, to ask her about this routine deployment of racial rhetoric to protect batterers. My recounting of the event brought forward not even the slightest flicker of recognition. The painful sacrifice that she had implored me to make in the name of racial solidarity and trust had been completely forgotten.

This was a moment of reckoning for me, and it came at a time when the boundaries of antiracism and feminism were revealing in popular culture the ways that their narratives of oppression utterly marginalized women of color. The mind-numbing defenses of Mike Tyson and Clarence Thomas, along with the colorblind and counterproductive responses of many feminists, made it impossible to ignore the consequences of these mutually exclusive rhetorical politics on women of color. At the same time, standard critiques made by women of color of mainstream feminism were reaching a point where the form of the argument was outpacing the substance. It is of course one thing to say we are different—no political- or identity-based group isn’t—including race-based political groups. To me the real challenge was the task of mapping, context by context, what difference our difference made. And it was in the arena of violence that experience indicated it was most acute. It seemed to me that only when we can articulate when and how difference matters can we effectively work to include our difference within the broader struggle to end the violence that circumscribes our lives.

The trajectory of this work has been surprising; it began simply as an effort to map what was happening on the ground, not as an indictment of feminism in particular, nor of

identity politics more broadly. It was instead an attempt to strengthen the legitimate impulse to organize around our identities as women or as people of color while recognizing and addressing its multiple dimensions. While over-reading and under-reading the basic argument is to be expected in the academy, I've been interested and in fact delighted that women working in the trenches receive exactly the point I was offering, and have found the article useful in their practice. So it seems that the end is where it began, in the personal.