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Chronicling an Activist Life

Virginia Eubanks and Alethia Jones

We started *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith* in 2008, at the height of the sub-prime mortgage crisis and in the midst of the ongoing economic collapse. The devastation to communities and families in the United States called into question free-market capitalism and representative democracy. By 2013, a flowering of social justice organizing and an upswell of courageous and principled action appeared around the world: the Arab Spring and other anti-totalitarian struggles in the Middle East and North Africa; the Puerta del Sol Square occupation of “Los Indignados” in Madrid, Spain; protests by tens of thousands of people in Britain and Greece against draconian austerity measures; and Occupy Wall Street, which inspired hundreds of occupations in cities across the United States and the globe.

Occupy Wall Street, one of the most hopeful recent efforts in the United States, was nevertheless beset with issues of classism, sexism, racism, and homophobia. It is not the first movement to earnestly struggle with these issues, and it won't be the last. But how do the organizations, coalitions, and movements we are building attend to issues of hierarchy, leadership, and transparency? How do we build new ways of being with each other that incorporate fairness, respect, and accountability across our differences? How can we pursue strategies and construct organizations that embody the futures we wish to create? Attention to these matters is at the heart of Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to create “beloved community” and of Barbara Smith's efforts to work with political movements to create a more just world.

This book is not a memoir, a biography, or a reader. It is a reflection and a conversation. *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* samples a lifetime of political work and commitment to liberation struggles, providing a mixed-media collage of voices and experiences from a variety of movements that, we hope, conveys useful lessons about the gritty work of pursuing social justice. The book uses Barbara Smith's life and work to dissect, analyze, and derive lessons

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1 from the freedom struggles she experienced, shaped, and supported. Often, we
2 critique the hierarchies “out there” while ignoring how we internalize them
3 and reproduce them “in here,” in our movements and institutions. This has
4 real consequences for organizing. One result is that the most privileged among
5 us—those closest to the white, middle-class, heterosexual, male, able-bodied
6 ideal—often reap most of the social status, political rights, and economic benefits
7 fought for by people’s movements. Barbara Smith’s membership in multiple
8 oppressed groups—Black, female, lesbian, working class—combined with her
9 anti-racist and anti-imperialist stance led her to operate from an approach that
10 refused to see any group as disposable and to insist that all of her identities
11 be respected. Then and now, she challenges movement organizers to pursue
12 innovative strategies that promote inclusion and accountability, forging patterns
13 different from the hierarchical and exploitative models that we have inherited.
14 We have drawn from her movement-building work and her participation as a
15 scholar, organizer, writer, publisher, elected official, and activist. The documents
16 and interviews juxtaposed in this book illustrate direct resonances between the
17 current historical moment and the fervent movements for Civil Rights, Black
18 feminism, women’s liberation, peace/anti-war, and gay and lesbian liberation
19 that shaped the 1960s and 1970s.

20 Activist Grace Lee Boggs argues that the next revolution is not only about
21 massive, visible protest in the streets—though some of the largest demonstrations
22 the world has ever seen have taken place in the last decade—but about cultural
23 change that allows us to combine spiritual growth, healing, and practical
24 actions to reinvent the material and political reality of our daily lives. In *The*
25 *Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*,
26 she writes,

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28 All over the world, local groups are struggling, as we are in Detroit, to
29 keep our communities, our environment, and our humanity from being
30 destroyed by corporate globalization. . . . Most of them are small and
31 barely visible, but together they are creating the largest movement the
32 world has ever known. . . . This movement has no central leadership and
33 is not bound together by any *ism*. . . . But they are joined at the heart by
34 their commitment to achieving social justice, establishing new forms of
35 more democratic governance, and creating new ways of living at the local
36 level that will reconnect us with the Earth and with one another. (Boggs
37 and Kurashige, 2011: 42)

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39 In her four decades of activism, teaching, and publishing, Barbara has grappled
40 with some of the most difficult dilemmas faced by broad-based diverse movements
41 for social change. Her faith in sweeping political change—the belief that massive
42 shifts in consciousness, institutions, and power can occur at any moment—is
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founded in her own experience where again and again, so-called ordinary people make history. This book offers lessons from that experience intended to help us all work more deeply to secure liberation for everyone in the next American revolution.

In some ways, this book is “typical” Barbara. You will learn about her, but the book is really about the freedom struggles to which she has devoted her life. So many sisters, mothers, aunts, godmothers, grandmothers, sista friends, girlfriends, and others have inspired us because they stood up for our dignity and gave voice to our humanity and dreams. When they weren’t allowed in the front door, they used back doors, side doors, windows, alleys, and every which way to make change for our communities. Like other dedicated grassroots activists, Barbara attends too many meetings, forges ties across many players, strategizes and analyzes to identify points of leverage, creates new initiatives and programs, and when needed, puts herself on the front line to bring about meaningful social and political change. She traces her activist lineage to Black women—like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and countless others—who spoke truth to power in order to free their people and to bring all humanity closer to creating a just world. She roots herself in the legacy of Black female movement activism and its distinctive mode of action, which is tenaciously committed, constantly present, and fundamentally humane. The Black feminist movement that Barbara helped to build in the 1970s grew from a tradition that existed for centuries and will continue into the future as long as injustice exists.

So many of these glorious women are unnamed in our history books and their stories are not told. Barbara sees this grassroots movement-building work as historically significant. As a scholar, writer, and publisher, she sought to preserve that record whenever and wherever she could, and her devotion to leaving a historical record makes this book possible. Over the past four decades, Barbara’s work on the front lines of a diverse array of movements has produced over two hundred books and articles. We selected the best and hardest to find pieces and combined them with a dozen new interviews commissioned exclusively for this project. In bringing together these otherwise scattered remnants of struggles and strategies into one place, we seek to facilitate a new generation of learning and leadership.

The decades Barbara spent insisting on full inclusion hold lessons others will find useful. The resulting truths may be uncomfortable, but, as Barbara says elsewhere, they are ultimately “truths that never hurt” (Smith 1998). The anxiety and discomfort these truths may provoke are simply growing pains that come from a deepened understanding and awareness of the world around us. We hope the book inspires your quest to fight for social justice in a world that is both riven with inequalities yet filled with endless possibilities for freedom.

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1 *Lessons in Movement Building*

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3 After mining the archives, talking to Barbara's contemporaries, and listening
4 in on the interviews conducted for this project, we identified core themes that
5 operate as key touchstones for the entire book. We share them explicitly here. We
6 offer them not as a "how to" primer that lays out a blueprint for growing social
7 movements but as a "what to ask" guidebook to fundamental questions and ideas
8 that social justice practitioners should grapple with to pursue their work with
9 heightened integrity, accountability, courage, and humor.

10 We do not claim originality. The eight points we identify are grounded in the
11 principles and practices of Black feminism that Barbara and her colleagues spent
12 decades articulating. Black feminism originates with Black women's experiences.
13 The commitment to eradicate the injustices committed against Black female
14 bodies and psyches creates a unique political analysis and practice. But this
15 approach is not essentialist; it does not assume that membership in a biological
16 or demographic category automatically confers an oppositional consciousness.
17 Instead, Black feminist analytical methods pay close attention to the particularity
18 of lived experiences. Consequently, we learn by analyzing our relationship to, or
19 membership in, oppressed and degraded social groups. We also learn through our
20 collective efforts and struggles to transform our experiences with injustice into
21 sources of liberation, freedom, respect, dignity, joy and love. By highlighting them
22 here, they serve as guideposts to help readers navigate through the rich array of
23 perspectives and experiences shared in this book.

24 The eight points consist of four conceptual pillars—*identity politics*, *coalition*
25 *building*, *intersectionality*, and *multi-issue politics*—and four core practices—
26 *awareness*, *integrity*, *courage*, and *redefining your own success*. We see the pillars
27 and practices as matched pairs where a key political principle is joined with
28 an individual behavior that strengthens one's ability to operate effectively in
29 constructing each pillar. These eight points allow us to deepen movement building
30 and enrich political consciousness.

31 *Identity politics* insists that the most insightful analysis of power often arises
32 from a deep knowledge of the material circumstances of oppressed people's lives.
33 That means understanding where we come from, our identities, and the forces
34 that shape us. To do so requires cultivating *awareness* by deepening our capacity
35 to examine our own identities. Awareness helps us gain consciousness of the
36 structures of privilege and oppression that permeate our lives. We experience
37 our humanity through our distinct embodiment—the time, place, gender, race,
38 nation, class, sexuality, physical body, age, languages, and political and social
39 culture that we inhabit. It is imperative to know, understand, and respect that all
40 people have unique social locations from which they experience the world. With
41 awareness we become more responsible in our actions.

42 The dominant culture holds that to name our specific social location is to be
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exclusionary, to be narrow, to limit what is possible. Black feminists demonstrate the opposite, that naming can be liberatory. Instead of colorblindness, Black feminists pursue universal human rights grounded in the distinct histories of actual people. As argued by members of the Combahee River Collective, for example, a society that respects Black women is a society with institutions and people who have the capacity to be just, inclusive, and fair to everyone without compelling conformity to a single standard. Creating such a society requires a most thorough revolution of the institutions and cultural practices that assign worth and privilege.

The second pillar, *coalition building*, connects the hard work of knowing ourselves to the even more difficult task of working with others across difference. Coalition building asks us to reach outward from our individual and local experiences to create connections and shared agendas with others nationally and globally. As Barbara says in “Where Has Gay Liberation Gone?”: “How limited would my politics be if I was only concerned about people like me!” (p. 186). Battles for social justice are long hauls that require the combined efforts of a variety of movements to succeed. Because reaching out is complicated, dangerous work, it requires *integrity*. It entails the genuine pursuit of something other than self-interest and personal advantage, and acting in ways that are consistent with your internal values. Coalition work calls upon us to be honorable, sincere, and principled in our dealings, even when others are not. It requires us to approach others with a spirit of revolutionary optimism, despite past disappointments, because diverse connections are the only way to win in light of our enormous, shared, global challenges.

Intersectionality demands that we each account for our specific social location within interlocking webs of power and privilege and understand that different strands of injustice—racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, xenophobia, trans-hatred, ageism, and others—are complexly interwoven. The concept of intersectionality*—which finds one of its origins in the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977 (p. 45) as the phrase “interlocking oppressions”—holds that those who inhabit multiple categories of disadvantage cannot be served by single-issue politics or analysis. Because oppressions are experienced simultaneously, our political analyses and strategies must also be multidimensional. Intersectionality also suggests that each of us embodies a complex mix of disadvantage as well as advantage. Each of us must recognize and contend with the oppressor within, as well as to value and nurture the aspects of ourselves that yearn for liberation. The recognition of this complexity can yield more nuanced organizing strategies than simplistic formulations that are rhetorically appealing but furnish little guidance to the complex inner dynamics of movement building. All of us have

*The concept of intersectionality has been elaborated by many scholars, most notably Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1998a and 1998b).

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1 the capacity to reinforce oppression or to further liberation. Our choices and our
2 analysis deeply matter.

3 Choosing to speak about identity can unmask many taken-for-granted social,
4 economic and political conventions that affix categories of worth. Thus, this
5 pillar takes enormous *courage*, a determination to look at difficult subjects and
6 to speak the truths that you see. Truth telling means identifying root causes of
7 problems; speaking the reality of our experiences in the service of justice and
8 freedom, even when it's inconvenient; and not being afraid to be challenging
9 when necessary. Barbara has repeatedly chosen to speak uncomfortable truths.
10 These truths are the foundation on which institutions and attitudes that respect
11 those who are too often disrespected, neglected, and exploited can be built. The
12 costs of telling the truth in the face of a status quo based on falsehood are real,
13 and the intellectual and political work necessary to create broadly representative,
14 multi-issue coalitions for social justice should not be underestimated. But earnest
15 engagement is fundamental. These truths are often unwelcome and can inspire
16 backlash and social recrimination. We chronicle some of the costs that Barbara
17 has borne as a result of her courage in the chapters that follow.

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20 **“Each of us must develop the capacity to recognize**
21 **and contend with the oppressor within, as well as**
22 **to value and nurture the aspects of ourselves that**
23 **yearn for liberation.”**
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26 Finally, *multi-issue politics* insist that we not prioritize the liberation of
27 one group of people over any other and that we deliberately work together to
28 dismantle overarching systems of oppression, not just to seek rights and benefits
29 for a single group or victories on a single issue. All justice-seeking interventions
30 must simultaneously attempt to eliminate economic exploitation, racism, sexism,
31 homophobia, and violence in society at large. If our aim is to bring transformative
32 changes in society, then we must be *willing to redefine success* away from narrow,
33 temporary, or qualified gains. We must move beyond a focus on winning a law,
34 election, or court case here and there and pursue instead the genuinely inclusive,
35 democratic politics that we seek to build. In fighting for social justice, we pursue
36 liberation for everyone. To do so, we need to see conditions for what they really
37 are and also to forge different ways of being and acting. As the Black Radical
38 Congress Principles of Unity state, “Our discussions should be informed not only
39 by a critique of what now exists, but by serious efforts to forge a creative vision
40 of a new society” (p. 205).

41 Black feminism challenges us all to forge effective alliances for social justice
42 across difference because our futures are bound up in each other. Black feminism
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was grounded in an identity and operates as a political practice. It can exist as an active commitment to fighting an exploitative and dehumanizing power structure. In order to achieve full humanity for all people, dominant cultural messages of inferiority imposed upon those marginalized from the mainstream for being the “wrong” race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class must be combatted; for those who derive power from conforming to the status quo, dominant cultural messages of superiority must be excised. Liberation for everyone or liberation for no one is a statement of strategic and moral fact.

Why We Did It and What We Learned

Alethia

When Barbara invited me to edit this book, I welcomed the opportunity to trace her journey from activist to elected official. I met Barbara when she was a member of Albany’s Common Council, the legislative body of New York State’s capital city. She soon guest-lectured in my graduate class, Inequality and Public Policy. “How,” I wondered, “did a member of the legendary Combahee River Collective and a pioneer of identity politics find her way to public office?” As an urban politics scholar and practitioner, I am always delighted when grassroots activists deploy the principles, practices, and skills forged in a life of movement building toward the conventional political arena. Major progressive shifts in politics and policy can result. I invited colleague and friend Virginia Eubanks to join this project because her background in women’s studies and her work on welfare rights and economic justice organizing complemented my strengths in race, ethnicity, and urban politics.

I was raised by my mother and grandmother in post-independence Jamaica in an atmosphere that regarded my Blackness and femaleness as positives and as sources of strength. Our newly independent nation designated Nanny, an escaped slave who successfully led insurrections to defeat the British, as a national shero. Once in the United States, the notion that I was less than anyone else because I was Black or female was ludicrous. This stance led me to detect the hypocrisy of elite education in the United States as I won scholarships to various Ivy League institutions. Educational scholarships were not a favor of benevolent whites for unprepared minorities but belated recompense for killing (literally and spiritually) so many talented and gifted people of color. I quickly realized that my opportunities at Columbia University were directly tied to the sacrifices of illiterate sharecroppers during the Civil Rights movement. I soon learned that many Caribbean activists fought for Civil Rights and dignity alongside African Americans, and that many African Americans dedicate themselves to international struggles to end colonialism and imperialism. I gradually came to understand

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1 that my presence in the United States is a product of globalized capitalism that
2 originated with the Atlantic slave trade but now operates through new systems
3 of coerced migration. Immigrants may migrate to seek a better life, but they
4 often do so in a context of colonial domination, U.S. cold war geopolitics, and of
5 lopsided international loans that cripple the economic prospects of many Global
6 South nations.

7 Reading dozens of Barbara's essays and interviews for this book provoked me
8 to reexamine my educational experiences in the United States. Although I studied
9 racism and colonialism in urban politics, and engaged in on-campus battles for
10 dignity and respect as a student leader, it took reading Smith's "Racism and
11 Women's Studies" and "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" to understand the
12 source of deep ennui that permeated graduate school at Yale University and my
13 academic career. Barbara's analysis helped me realize that racism and sexism
14 invisibly shaped the hidden curriculum that defined *how* I studied race and public
15 policy. Educational institutions socialize us into the dominant individualistic
16 career achievement model that renders the study of everything, even freedom
17 movements, as individual intellectual pursuits.

18 Barbara's articles and interviews filled in much of what was missing in
19 my formal education and shifted inchoate feelings to crisp analysis. Her work
20 validates the discomfort and dis-ease borne from the daily lived experience of elite
21 liberalism, where few overt racist references emerge but unstated presumptions
22 of white superiority—wrapped in language of individuality, rationality, and
23 qualifications—are pervasive. Barbara's work names what is missing—an explicit
24 discussion of the ways in which research bolsters or challenges structures of power
25 and disadvantage. Too often we are encouraged to use our education to secure
26 individual career kudos and financial security as our primary, if not our only, goal.
27 In that framework, education becomes a means to fit in and get ahead rather than
28 a tool of broader social change that helps to unravel the biases and assumptions
29 that justify an oppressive status quo. I was drawn to work that would make the
30 world a better place and relied on intuition to find allies and collaborators. But
31 I wonder how a more self-conscious awareness of the link between scholarly
32 projects and liberation movements would have altered my own academic work.

33 Barbara's writing stirs up questions about one's daily practices and strategic
34 choices. I suspect that if I had the benefit of Black feminism's "close examination
35 of the conditions of Black women's lives in a racist, capitalist, sexist, and
36 heterosexist hierarchical society" earlier in my life, I would have navigated
37 the obstacles to building a life devoted to social change differently. I learned
38 that Black feminism did profoundly shape my life, but not through intellectual
39 encounters, like reading and teaching the Combahee River Collective Statement
40 or encountering Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. Instead, extended relationships
41 with grassroots institutions with Black feminist roots helped me to reshape and
42 reroute my life path. (Those roots were unknown to me at the time and came to
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light during this book project.) During and after college, I participated in a local Black Women’s Health Project support group (later Be Present, Inc.). In 2004 I started working closely with the Women’s Theological Center (now Women Transforming Community) in Boston.

Though the political roots of these organizations were not explicit, their politics were evident in their work—deep, deliberate, and abiding attention to creating spaces to heal the scars of oppression and support women in creating a more healing, whole, and transformed world. Through these and other experiences, I gradually learned the art of crafting healing dialogues that advance social justice. Increasingly, designing and facilitating customized educational experiences for community and social justice groups grew in importance as crucial sites of political action. In these spaces, activists sharpen their tools to create a more democratic and just world. I locate my work in the tradition of Civil Rights activist Septima Clark, an educator who worked directly with ordinary people engaged in the social, political, and economic struggle to transform the conditions of their lives. I started this book as an assistant professor, but it ends with me working outside of academia as an educator in the labor movement. It seems appropriate that this realignment of the personal and the political occurred while working closely with Barbara.

Virginia

Barbara and I first came into contact through the welfare rights and economic justice organization I cofounded—Our Knowledge, Our Power: Surviving Welfare (OKOP). Many OKOP members live in the Common Council district of Albany, New York, where Barbara serves as a local elected official, and she reached out to express her support for our work. Our first real connection, thus, was through shared political commitments, though I had also assigned the Combahee River Collective Statement and *The Truth That Never Hurts* to my women’s studies students. I am glad that Barbara and I had already developed a “solidarity through practice” before Alethia invited me to contribute to the book. To be honest, I was deeply intimidated by the prospect of trying to capture her legacy in this collection, which required doing crazily nerve-wracking things like editing “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” an utterly groundbreaking document, down to a handful of pages. Without prior knowledge of Barbara’s remarkable kindness, generosity, and humor, I never would have had the guts.

I came of age as an activist in the 1990s at the height of what the Left called “identity politics” and the Right called “political correctness.” UC Santa Cruz, the progressive state school where I received my undergraduate education, boasted a plethora of racially, ethnically, and sexuality-specific clubs, organizations, centers, curricula, and events. As a straight, middle-class, white student, I had a mixed reaction to these experiences. On one hand, they helped me recognize

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1 my racial privilege, name my own experiences with gender oppression, and
2 understand others' experiences. On the other hand, I was often wracked with
3 guilt—for example, for not being “marginal” enough to have a legitimate political
4 analysis—and struggled to find a way to connect to activism.

5 Working on this book, I came to understand that during my college years,
6 I misunderstood the nature and the contribution of identity politics and
7 intersectionality to activism. First, I assumed that intersectionality only applies to
8 those who inhabit multiply marginalized positions, not to those of us who inhabit
9 relatively privileged subject positions. Second, I naively assumed that identity
10 politics referred only to the demographic position you inhabit, not to principled
11 struggle to understand and transform the unjust realities you encounter, whatever
12 your subject position. These misunderstandings left me feeling that I should
13 “give up” my privilege rather than using it for social change and led me to take
14 a backseat in work for social change. In the end, I developed what I hope is a
15 realistic awareness of the impact of unquestioned privilege on organizing, but
16 for a time, my confusion kept me from bringing my whole self to movement
17 building. A long period of paralysis might have been avoided if I found Barbara's
18 work earlier.

19 When I talk to friends about the process of researching, writing, and editing
20 this book, I call it my “master class in feminism.” As expressed in “Racism and
21 Women's Studies,” Barbara's is still, I think, the best articulation of a broad,
22 inclusive, expansive feminism:

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24 Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women:
25 women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women,
26 lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual
27 women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but
28 merely female self-aggrandizement. (p. 134 in this volume)

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30 Exploring Barbara's legacy has helped me reinforce, reaffirm, and strengthen
31 lessons I have learned in the last decade while working in multiracial, multi-issue,
32 cross-class feminist organizations: feminism must be based in practice; must
33 respond to the real, lived material conditions of women who are most oppressed
34 and exploited; and must focus on liberating *all* women.

35 For example, OKOP has developed an analysis of the welfare system that
36 recognizes the multilayered nature of oppression and privilege. In light of the
37 recession, anti-immigrant fervor, and an increasingly conservative political
38 culture, many working-class families are accessing public assistance programs
39 for the first time. Desperate to see their need for financial support as the result
40 of extraordinary factors out of their control, they often define existing recipients
41 as socially and culturally “Other”—more poor, more female, and more Black or
42 Brown—in order to separate “good” welfare recipients (new ones like themselves)

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from “bad” ones (those who needed help before the recession). This leads to a situation of enormous horizontal violence, where recipients blame each other for what are widespread structural and economic problems. In welfare rights work, not having an intersectional analysis can be deadly. It makes us blame those closest to us—our natural allies—for problems that are created by systems of domination.

Based partly on insights from Barbara’s work, OKOP has chosen a different path, developing strategies that rely on an economic human rights framework and public “truth telling” to help poor, working-class, and middle-class people see shared issues and concerns across race, gender, and sexuality. Framing our work in this way has opened up vast and exciting new alliances, leading us to build coalitions with remarkable national and international organizations such as the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign and the World Courts of Women, and to develop a multi-issue agenda that recognizes that a society that respects and supports mothers on public assistance is a society that encourages a fuller humanity for all people.

Barbara’s work has also inspired in me the courage to tell the truth about race, something that I, as a white woman, have been carefully conditioned not to discuss, or even acknowledge. In these times of “post-racialism” and “colorblindness,” Smith’s insights provide an important corrective. She demands that we tell the truth about our own lives. Better yet, she provides tools to build organizations, public forums, and social movements where we can be honest about the nature of our social experience and live to tell about it. As *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* developed, I found myself thinking, “I wish I had this book twenty years ago!” With it beside me, I would have felt less crazy, less alone, more resilient, more courageous. It would have made a vast difference in my practice, my thinking, my relationships, my life. I hope that the fundamental principles that Barbara and so many of her colleagues fought for and shared, and our small contribution in putting these resources into a single volume, do the same for you.

Roadmap to the Book

In traversing four decades and two hundred publications by and about Barbara, we selected items to create to create a book that sparks conversation and provokes reflection. We created a “remixed” format that, we hope, allows readers to experience Barbara’s key intellectual and political contributions in ways that inspire innovation in scholarship, activism, and organizing today. Each chapter has a clear theme that captures major segments of Barbara’s life and activism in more or less chronological order. However, we carefully blended a selected mix of key writings by Barbara, pictures and movement ephemera, and previously

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1 unpublished contemporary interviews. Each chapter features a primary interview,
2 but we interweave excerpts from different interviews throughout every chapter
3 to create “virtual conversations” about key events.

4 The interviews, which were commissioned specifically for this volume,
5 allow the reader to “listen in” to an honest conversation with knowledgeable
6 colleagues who are motivated and inspired by Barbara’s life and legacy. In some
7 cases, interviewers are contemporaries with whom Barbara had organized and
8 strategized, such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Joo-Hyun Kang, Vera “Mike” Michelson,
9 Barbara Ransby, and Matt Richardson. In other cases, they are activist-academics
10 who have closely studied the legacy and meaning of Black feminism, such as
11 Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Kimberly Springer. Loretta Ross, while not contributing
12 an interview specifically for this volume, conducted an extensive (unpublished)
13 oral history with Barbara in 2003 and kindly allowed us to include sections of it
14 in this book. We each conducted interviews with Barbara to explore areas of our
15 own interest and to fill in holes in the narrative as the book developed. You will
16 find sections of our interviews threaded throughout the book, weaving together
17 and highlighting what we think are important themes.

18 We concentrated on finding materials—writings by or about Barbara, key
19 historical documents, and archival photographs—that are not easily available
20 elsewhere. For example, you will not find what is perhaps Barbara’s most well-
21 known essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” here, but you will be able to
22 read a speech she gave at the Howard University Black Writer’s Conference in
23 1978—which included parts of that essay—and also experience the audience’s
24 rejection of Barbara’s unprecedented effort to perform a lesbian reading of
25 Black literature. We also chose to illuminate some aspects of Barbara’s work that
26 we think deserve more attention, such as her trenchant analysis of class and
27 capitalism. Nearly all of the documents in the book were extensively edited for
28 length. We encourage you to search out the pieces that most interest you and read
29 them in the original. Despite including many fascinating, important, and hard-
30 to-find documents, we do not claim to have put together the definitive account
31 of Barbara’s life and legacy. Rather, we hope to offer one interpretation of how
32 her work can be used to inform and inspire principled action today.

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