

Color of Violence

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Color of Violence is a collection of essays and poems by Black women who have experienced violence. It is a powerful statement of resistance and a call to action.

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The INCITE! Anthology

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence

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Contents

Introduction	1
I. Reconceptualizing Antiviolence Strategies	
1 Rethinking Antiviolence Strategies: Lessons from the Black Women's Movement in Britain	<i>Julia Sudbury</i> 13
2 Disability in the New World Order	<i>Nirmala Erevelles</i> 25
3 Federal Indian Law and Violent Crime	<i>Sarah Deer</i> 32
4 Feminism, Race, and Adoption Policy	<i>Dorothy Roberts</i> 42
5 The Color of Choice: White Supremacy and Reproductive Justice	<i>Loretta J. Ross</i> 53
6 Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing	<i>Andrea Smith</i> 66
7 A Call for Consistency: Palestinian Resistance and Radical US Women of Color	<i>Nadine Naber</i> 74
II. Forms of Violence	
8 The Color of Violence	<i>Haunani-Kay Trask</i> 81
9 Four Generations in Resistance	<i>Dana Erekat</i> 88
10 The War to Be Human / Becoming Human in a Time of War	<i>Neferti Tadiar</i> 92
11 The Forgotten "-ism": An Arab American Women's Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism	<i>Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi for Arab Women's Solidarity Association, San Francisco Chapter</i> 97
12 Reflections in a Time of War: A Letter to My Sisters	<i>Dena Al-Adeeb</i> 113
13 Don't Liberate Me	<i>S. R.</i> 118
14 "National Security" and the Violation of Women: Militarized Border Rape at the US-Mexico Border	<i>Sylvanna Falcón</i> 119
15 The Complexities of "Femicide" on the Border	<i>Rosa Linda Fregoso</i> 130

16	INS Raids and How Immigrant Women are Fighting Back	<i>Renee Saucedo</i>	135
17	Law Enforcement Violence Against Women of Color	<i>Andrea J. Ritchie</i>	138
18	Crime, Punishment, and Economic Violence	<i>Patricia Allard</i>	157
19	Pomo Woman, Ex-Prisoner, Speaks Out	<i>Stormy Ogden</i>	164
20	The War Against Black Women, and the Making of NO!	<i>Aishah Simmons</i>	170
21	Medical Violence Against People of Color and the Medicalization of Domestic Violence	<i>Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo</i>	179
III. Building Movement			
22	Unite and Rebel! Challenges and Strategies in Building Alliances	<i>Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez</i>	191
23	Sistas Makin' Moves: Collective Leadership for Personal Transformation and Social Justice	<i>Sista II Sista</i>	196
24	Disloyal to Feminism: Abuse of Survivors within the Domestic Violence Shelter System	<i>Emi Koyama</i>	208
25	Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex	<i>Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence</i>	223
26	Trans Action for Social and Economic Justice	<i>Transjustice</i>	227
27	"The Personal is the Private is the Cultural": South Asian Women Organizing Against Domestic Violence	<i>Puneet Kaur Chawla Sahota</i>	231
28	An Antiracist Christian Ethical Approach to Violence Resistance	<i>Traci C. West</i>	243
29	Taking Risks: Implementing Grassroots Community Accountability Strategies	<i>Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA)</i>	250
30	poem on trying to love without fear	<i>maiana minahal</i>	267
	Endnotes and Works Cited		270
	Index		305
	About the Contributors		321
	About South End Press		326

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The Color of Violence: Introduction

Andrea Smith, Beth Richie, Julia Sudbury, Janelle White,
and the INCITE! Anthology Co-editors

Many years ago when I was a student in San Diego, I was driving down the freeway with a friend when we encountered a Black woman wandering along the shoulder. Her story was extremely disturbing. Despite her uncontrollable weeping, we were able to surmise that she had been raped and dumped along the side of the road. After a while, she was able to wave down a police car, thinking that they would help her. However, when the white policeman picked her up, he did not comfort her, but rather seized upon the opportunity to rape her once more.

Angela Davis's story illustrates the manner in which women of color experience violence perpetrated both by individuals and by the state. Since the first domestic violence shelter in the United States opened in 1974, and the first rape crisis center opened in 1972, the mainstream antiviolence movement has been critical in breaking the silence around violence against women, and in providing essential services to survivors of sexual/domestic violence. Initially, the antiviolence movement prioritized a response to male violence based on grassroots political mobilization. However, as the antiviolence movement has gained greater prominence, domestic violence and rape crisis centers have also become increasingly professionalized, and as a result are often reluctant to address sexual and domestic violence within the larger context of institutionalized violence.

In addition, rape crisis centers and shelters increasingly rely on state and federal sources for their funding. Consequently, their approaches toward eradicating violence focus on working *with* the state rather than working *against* state violence. For example, mainstream antiviolence advocates often demand longer prison sentences for batterers and sex offenders as a frontline approach to stopping violence against women. However, the criminal justice system has always been brutally oppressive toward communities of color, including women of color, as the above story illustrates. Thus, this strategy employed to stop violence has had the effect of increasing violence against women of color perpetrated by the state.

Unfortunately, the strategy often engaged by communities of color to address state violence is advocating that women keep silent about sexual and domestic violence to maintain a united front against racism. Racial justice organizing has generally focused on racism as it primarily affects men, and has often ignored the gendered forms of racism that women of color face. An example includes the omission of racism in reproductive health policies (such as sterilization abuse) in the 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism. Those forms of racisms that disproportionately impact women of color become termed simply "women's issues" rather than simultaneously racial justice issues.

There are many organizations that address violence *directed at* communities

(e.g., police brutality, racism, economic exploitation, colonialism, and so on). There are also many organizations that address violence *within* communities (e.g., sexual/domestic violence). But there are very few organizations that address violence on both fronts simultaneously. The challenge women of color face in combatting personal *and* state violence is to develop strategies for ending violence that *do* assure safety for survivors of sexual/domestic violence and *do not* strengthen our oppressive criminal justice apparatus. Our approaches must always challenge the violence perpetrated through multinational capitalism and the state.

It was frustration with the failures on the part of racial justice *and* antiviolence organizations to effectively address violence against women of color that led women of color to organize “The Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color” conference held at University of California–Santa Cruz on April 28–29, 2000. The primary goals of this conference were: to develop analyses and strategies around ending violence that place women of color at the center; to address violence against women of color in all its forms, including attacks on immigrants’ rights and Indian treaty rights, the proliferation of prisons, militarism, attacks on the reproductive rights of women of color, medical experimentation on communities of color, homophobia/heterosexism and hate crimes against lesbians of color, economic neo-colonialism, and institutional racism; and to encourage the antiviolence movement to reinsert political organizing into its response to violence.

Few events have been as profoundly important to the antiviolence movement in the United States as this conference. It was initially conceptualized as a small gathering for impassioned women of color activists who were fed up with having our contributions ignored, taken for granted, and in many instances sabotaged by an increasingly mainstream social service-oriented agenda.

As news about the event spread, the conference grew both in significance and in scope. Women of color from across the country urgently called the organizers asking to be included in the discussion, imploring us to find a larger venue, and insisting that we consider the establishment of a longer-term strategic response to their anger and disappointment. This wellspring of interest made it clear to the cofounders of INCITE! that this conference could not simply provide opportunities for a small group of women of color to reflect on our experiences; instead, we had touched, and needed to tend to, a collective raw nerve.

In the years leading up to “The Color of Violence,” women of color came to understand that the once-radical analysis of violence against women had narrowed so greatly that almost all remnants of a social justice approach had virtually disappeared. The legacy of the lesbians of color, particularly Black lesbians, who built the movement had disappeared from the collective memory of the mainstream movement. Instead, women of color in the antiviolence movement were engaging in “high-risk activism.” Women of color tend to occupy roles in the antiviolence movement that place them on the frontlines of the work, and in situations where they must negotiate complex and at times adversarial relationships among and between their organizations of origin, their home communities, other communities, formal institutions of power, and perpetrators and survivors of violence.

Cultural workers and scholars addressing gender violence and the oppression of women of color are also often faced with marginalization in communities

of color and women’s communities, as well as within their academic and cultural communities; thus, their work can be identified as high-risk, too. In fact, it could be maintained that women of color involved in antiviolence mobilization share particularities—the motivation to negotiate and build solidarity with other women of color, the ideologies of resistance that contribute to taking action to transform systems, and the salience of race and class (and their intersection) in confronting gender violence—that, combined, make it more likely that these women will find themselves engaged in high-risk roles.

As a result, many women of color had left the antiviolence movement by the time the conference was convened in 2000, feeling forced out because of exhaustion and feelings of betrayal. These women of color had been attempting to do radical work in the face of deep contradictions inherent in the prevailing white feminist responses to violence, which refused to accommodate analyses of race and class. At best, the women of color who continued to do the work felt unappreciated and misunderstood, and many felt under personal and political attack as they attempted to provide support for women of color who had survived violence but had no other resources except programs controlled by white women. Even in programs where women of color were in leadership or working with white women acting as allies, the prevailing ideological conditions in the antiviolence movement made it incredibly difficult for women of color with a radical vision of structural oppression to do radical antiviolence work.

Within this context, “The Color of Violence” became an extraordinarily significant event. In unexpected ways, it offered myriad opportunities to advance radical analyses of violence developed by women of color while re-igniting a radical social justice movement to end violence against women. Two thousand women of color attended the conference; more than two thousand had to be turned away. The success of this gathering and commitment of the attendees disrupted the mainstream movement’s hold on the energies of women of color. At “The Color of Violence,” power was shifted from those who claim authority over antiviolence work, and women of color survivors of violence were empowered to speak the truth of their experiences.

From this conference, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence formed to continue efforts to develop strategies to end violence that addressed community and state violence simultaneously. The overwhelming response to this conference suggests that women of color (and their allies) are hungry for a new approach toward ending violence. INCITE! held follow-up conferences in Chicago (2002) and New Orleans (2005) in which thousands more attended. Many of the articles from this volume come from presentations at these conferences.

INCITE! stresses the importance of transcending the “politics of inclusion” to actually address the concerns of women of color. As the antiviolence movement has attempted to become more inclusive, attempts at multicultural interventions against domestic violence have unwittingly strengthened white supremacy within the movement. All too often, inclusivity has come to mean that the sexual or domestic violence prevention model, developed largely with the interests of white middle-class women in mind, should simply add a multicultural component. Antiviolence multicultural curricula are often the same as those produced

by mainstream groups with some “cultural” designs or references annexed to the pre-existing format, and most antiviolence programs servicing communities of color are constructed exactly like those in the mainstream, with the addition of “community outreach workers” or bilingual staff.

An alternative approach to “inclusion” is to place women of color at the center of the analysis of and the organization against domestic violence. That is, what if we do not make any assumptions about what a domestic violence *program* should look like, but instead ask: What would it take *to end violence against women of color*? What would this movement look like? What if we do not presume that this movement would share any of the features we take for granted in the current domestic violence movement? As mentioned previously, when we shift the center to women of color, the importance of addressing state violence becomes evident. This perspective then benefits not only women of color, but all peoples, because it is becoming increasingly clear that the criminal justice system is not effectively ending violence for anyone. In fact, *The New York Times* recently reported that the effect of strengthened anti-domestic violence legislation is that battered women kill their abusive partners less frequently; however, batterers do *not* kill their partners less frequently. Thus, ironically, laws passed to protect battered women are actually protecting their batterers.

When we shift the center of analysis, there is no permanent center of organizing. Rather, by constantly shifting the center to communities that face intersecting forms of oppression, we gain a more comprehensive view of the strategies needed to end all forms of violence. The articles in this volume reflect an attempt to shift the center, to better understand how various forms of intersecting oppressions contribute to the creation of a violent world, and to devise the strategies necessary to end violence.

The first section of this book focuses on reconceptualizing violence against women beyond interpersonal forms of sexual and domestic violence. As Andrea Smith has argued elsewhere, if we look at the history of women in color in general and Native women in particular, it is clear that sexual violence has served as a tool of patriarchy *and* as a tool of racism and colonialism. Consequently, it is problematic to assume that the state, in the form of the criminal justice system, can effectively address violence against women. Historically, it has been the primary perpetrator, particularly against women of color. In “Federal Indian Law and Violent Crime,” Sarah Deer demonstrates how federal policy, supposedly designed to protect Native women from violence, entraps Native women in further violence.

Julia Sudbury’s “Lessons from the Black Women’s Movement in Britain” considers the deleterious effects of reliance on the criminal justice system as the primary strategy for ending violence against women. While antiviolence activists often conceptualize the state as a protector, standing between women and violent males, Sudbury argues that this has not been the case for women who defend themselves against potentially lethal intimate violence. For women convicted of defending themselves against a violent partner, the criminal justice system becomes a site of secondary victimization. And for all women prisoners, the state acts as a punitive perpetrator of violence, subjecting women to invasive body searches, emotional and physical isolation, and physical and verbal abuse. Sudbury calls

for the antiviolence movement to develop a radical solidarity with women found guilty of “offending” the state, and suggests that women of color must resist the criminalization of survival strategies by women of color.

Nirmala Erevelles’ “Disability and the New World Order” further develops the links between globalization, violence against women, and ableism by analyzing the material conditions within which the social category of “disability” is constituted, and the ideological effects that these constructions have on the reproduction of race, gender, and class oppressions. In particular, Erevelles elaborates on the relationship between poverty and disability in Third World contexts. She reflects on the underlying assumptions behind structural adjustment programs (SAPs), delineating how SAPs impact women living in poverty and contribute to the social construction of disability in Third World contexts.

In “The Color of Choice,” Loretta Ross argues that reconceptualizing state violence also impacts how we look at reproductive justice for women of color. She challenges the prochoice framework and articulates a reproductive justice agenda for women of color that addresses white supremacy as it intersects with attacks on the reproductive rights of women of color. Dorothy Roberts’s essay, “Feminism, Race, and Adoption Policy,” further investigates how these logics contribute to a racialized gender violence within adoption politics.

Andrea Smith argues that much of the tension in women of color organizing is the result of simplistic understanding of white supremacy. In “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” she argues that white supremacy operates through three distinct logics—slavery, genocide, and orientalism—that impact communities of color differently. Women of color organizing, she asserts, will be more effective if it is not based on shared victimization, but rather on strategic alliances based on how we are particularly impacted by what she terms the “three pillars of white supremacy.”

Nadine Naber’s work addresses the connections between gender violence and state violence in the form of militarism and colonialism. Naber further investigates primitivist analyses of women of color, focusing on Arab women. She asserts that the discourse around “female suicide bombers,” particularly prevalent after 9/11, is part of an ideological framework that represents Arab women either as passive victims who need to be saved from Arab men or as barbaric terrorists who, according to the 2003 Interfaith Summit on Zionism (Washington, DC), “hate Jewish children more than they love their own.” Instead of entering debates within mainstream feminist discourse about whether or not we should “support” suicide bombing, Naber argues, we should ask: What are the conditions that give rise to suicide bombing? This excerpt from Noura Erekat’s poem, “Three Home Demolitions and One Pending Order,” poignantly portrays some such conditions, as well as the will to survive and resist the violence of Israeli occupation:

The second time they came
I stood in the doorway
Israeli bulldozers need to crush me
If they wanted to trample my home
Again

But the soldiers didn't care that I was
Fifteen and female
Long hair just made it easier to pull me away

They spit on Mama but she wouldn't move
Not her baby's home she screamed
She looked so strong, I swear
I thought her fingers would shoot lightning
It took three soldiers to take her down
Expose her breasts to the watchful sky
Spill her hair from her God-fearing hijab
And push her into the wailing dirt

Having reconceptualized violence against women of color, it becomes important to address the myriad forms violence takes, particularly as it is perpetrated by the state. The essays in the second section, "Forms of Violence," reveal violences against women overlooked in traditional activism and scholarship.

Andrea Ritchie's essay, "Law Enforcement Violence against Women of Color," contests the notion that the criminal justice system can effectively protect women. In her analysis of police brutality, she notes that the mainstream anti-police brutality movement tends to focus on men as victims, while the mainstream antiviolence movement does not defend women who are victimized by police—particularly when the victimization occurs as police respond to situations involving domestic violence.

In "Crime, Punishment, and Economic Violence," Pat Allard demonstrates how seemingly gender-neutral anti-drug laws serve to oppress women, particularly women of color, who are attempting to survive an exploitative economic system. And in "Pomo Woman, Ex-Prisoner, Speaks Out," Stormy Ogden further explores gender violence committed by the state in her essay on Native women in prison. Writing as a former prisoner, she analyzes how the incarceration of Native women in California can be understood as a continuation of the genocidal policies the US government has implemented against American Indians. Her essay reveals the extent to which the mainstream antiviolence movement, through its implicit support of the criminal justice system, helps to promote additional forms of violence against violence survivors who are prisoners.

Dana Erekat, S. R., and Dena Al-Adeeb address the impact of military violence on West Asian and North African women, particularly since 9/11. Their voices highlight the history and experience of surviving and resisting colonial violence. Renee Saucedo and Sylvanna Falcón address the gendered forms of violence that are perpetrated by the INS and Border Patrol. Saucedo looks at the tactics of sexual terrorism within INS raids, while Falcón's essay explores the rampant gender violence faced by women at the hands of the Border Patrol.

Rosa Linda Fregoso's "The Complexities of 'Femicide' on the Border" explores the intersecting logics of capitalism, national boundaries, and misogyny that have resulted in more than one thousand unsolved murders of women, primarily poor and indigenous. She complicates the explanation provided by critics of

Third World development policies—that the murders are simply the outcome of the introduction of maquiladoras to Mexico. The implication is that as transnational corporations introduce Western values and ideas to the Third World, they break down traditional gender roles. Fregoso argues that these interpretations, while critical of the Western development model, reinscribe primitivist notions of women in Mexico.

"The Forgotten '-ism,'" by the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), further explores the colonialist representation of Arab women in Zionist ideologies. This essay argues that Zionism—the belief that Israel should be a Jewish-only state and exclude the Palestinian peoples indigenous to the area—is responsible for policies of genocide against Palestinians that have relied heavily on gender violence. They note that mainstream feminist organizations have nonetheless failed to address the colonialist and apartheid policies of Israel when they might condemn similar practices in other countries. A consistent antiracist, anticolonial politics, AWSA argues, must recognize Zionism as an axis of oppression.

Within the context of Hawai'i, Haunani-Kay Trask argues that much of the colonial violence suffered by indigenous women can be understood as a "quiet violence" in which women of color are killed slowly through oppressive social structures. In particular, Trask focuses on the damage caused by nuclear testing in the Pacific, which has wiped out many Pacific Islander communities, with no public outcry. She argues that the strategy for addressing this violence is national self-determination that recognizes the United States as a settler colonial country, rather than reform within the current US system. Neferti Tadiar extends Trask's analysis to argue that the US war on terror is not an indication of "declining" democratic ideals in the United States, but rather a reflection of the United States as war. She notes that the United States is fundamentally structured under a colonialist ideology that holds that most peoples are not, in fact, human.

In "The War Against Black Women, and the Making of *NO!*," Aishah Simmons traces the eleven years it took to make her powerful and revolutionary film on Black women and sexual assault, and chronicles the fierce resistance and resourceful activism that Black feminists have always drawn from in matters regarding justice, visibility, and community accountability.

Recently, many antiviolence advocates have reconsidered their reliance on the criminal justice system as their primary strategy for ending violence. However, as Clarissa Rojas argues in "The Medicalization of Domestic Violence," there are innumerable ways the antiviolence movement can find itself coopted by the state. One such way is simply shifting from a criminal justice model to a medical model for addressing violence, even though the medical model both individualizes and pathologizes women who are victims of violence. Rojas further contends that while both approaches are problematic, each has been aggressively promoted to antiviolence activists as *the* model for ending violence.

Having established an expanded analysis of violence against women of color, the anthology moves to address the following question: What strategies are necessary to truly end violence against women of color in all its forms? In section three, "Building Movement," the contributors offer possible models for organizing from a more comprehensive and holistic analysis of violence. While there are no simple

solutions to these issues, these essays explore strategies that both challenge state power and rely on grassroots political organizing. These strategies also assume that part of the work of ending violence is the creation of communities that will hold perpetrators accountable.

Currently, anti-prison advocates often argue for “restorative justice models” as alternatives to prison for addressing crime. “Restorative justice” is an umbrella term describing a wide range of programs that attempt to address crime from a restorative and reconciliatory framework rather than a punitive one. That is, in contrast to the US criminal justice system, which focuses solely on punishing the perpetrator and removing him or her from society through incarceration, restorative justice efforts involve all parties (perpetrators, victims, and community members) in determining the appropriate response to a crime. However, as articulated in the Critical Resistance/INCITE! statement on gender and the prison industrial complex, these models often depend on a romanticized notion of “community” that seldom exists in practice. In the absence of this ideal community, there is no guarantee that restorative justice measures will actually hold perpetrators of gender violence accountable. Consequently, many survivors find themselves further victimized by these strategies, as they are often pressured by community members to “reconcile” with the offender with little regard to their safety or need for justice and accountability.

TransJustice contributes a statement that highlights the importance of a gender binary system in maintaining systems of capitalism, violence, and exploitation. Patriarchy, under which men are entitled to oppress women, depends on the acceptance of the construction of two and only two genders—men and women. Thus, this statement illustrates that challenging transphobia and the gender binary system is central to the work of the antiviolence movement.

Emi Koyama presents the bold critique that the domestic violence shelter system itself replicates the dynamics of abuse it seeks to eradicate. She argues that most shelters police women in a manner similar to the criminal justice system, and that the system particularly victimizes women who are already criminalized, such as sex workers and transgendered peoples. Koyama further suggests that an alternative approach, based in harm reduction, would not require survivors to act like “model citizens” in order to receive assistance, but would recognize, interrogate, and work with the conditions within which women actually live.

Sista II Sista in Brooklyn and Communities Against Rape and Abuse in Seattle describe models of organizing against violence that rely neither on the criminal justice system, nor on restorative justice models. Instead, they focus on grassroots political organizing strategies that attempt not only to circumvent the state, but also to oppose the violence the state inflicts in the forms of police brutality and the prison industrial complex. Traci West maintains that one of the sites critical to target with these grassroots strategies is spiritual/religious communities. She notes that because the Black church in particular has often implicitly or explicitly promoted violence against women, it remains an important location for organizing and transformation.

Puneet Kaur Singh further demonstrates that our work against violence today comes from a legacy of women of color who have created a space before us. The

Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbian-feminists, began meeting in 1974 to confront violence against women and girls. Thus, from the very inception of the antiviolence movement in the United States, Black women, and Black lesbians in particular, have been both central actors and challengers to the approaches and practices of the predominantly white antiviolence movement. Finally, longtime organizer Elizabeth Martínez reflects on her history of women of color organizing and calls on us to be hopeful, rather than despairing, because we have opportunities to build a better future for everyone. Her hope is reflected in the poetry of maiana minahal.

It is indeed hope, fierce resistance, and a belief in the power of women of color united in the face of the profound devastation wrought in the lives of low-income women of color, their families, and communities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that inspired the INCITE! New Orleans chapter to build the Women’s Health and Justice Initiative, which includes a clinic for low-income women and a Women of Color Organizing and Resource Center. This effort reflects the leadership of women of color struggling for the survival of their communities where government and non-profit responses to the state and interpersonal violence that followed in the wake of the storm have been systematically racist and sexist.

The historic Treme community in New Orleans, the first free community established by Black people in the US and home to hundreds of Black women and their families, many of whom are poor, hosted INCITE!’s Color of Violence III conference in March 2005. Our hearts continue to go out to the families and communities that graciously welcomed us, and we continue to provide them with as much support and as many resources as we can so that they can rebuild the rich and vital communities that have been devastated.

Unfortunately, due to strictly technical limitations, a full-length chapter providing an analysis of the feminization of disasters and displacements as experienced by women of color during and following Hurricane Katrina and sharing the struggles and successes of the INCITE! New Orleans chapter in rising and rebuilding does not appear in this anthology. INCITE!’s initial analysis of the raced, classed, and gendered dimension of this catastrophe is posted on our website, and a full-length article featuring the voices, analysis, and organizing efforts of the women of INCITE! New Orleans can be found in South End Press’s anthology on Hurricane Katrina, *What Lies Beneath*.

Another critical issue not addressed in this volume is the impact of the non-profit-industrial complex on the antiviolence movement. This subject is vast enough to warrant another anthology, which INCITE! will be publishing with South End Press. Entitled *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, this work challenges antiviolence activists to develop organizing models not dependent on the non-profit/NGO model that currently dominates antiviolence organizing (as well as social justice organizing in general) in the United States. For the antiviolence movement in particular, the non-profit model has contributed to the transformation of a complex, political, grassroots struggle against violence into a sprawling network of social service providers.

All of these essays represent our collective struggle to rethink strategies for eliminating violence. The question we ask as women of color is not how do we

set up a model antiviolence intervention program, but what will it take to end the violence against us? This anthology places women of color at the center of analysis and argues that neither white-dominated discourses on gender violence nor male-dominated discourses on racial violence provide the comprehensive analyses required to develop effective strategies to end racism and sexism. It is the hope of INCITE! that this work will provide a space to continue dialogue around strategies and analyses that can end violence and oppression against not only women of color, but against all peoples.

In the end, "The Color of Violence" conference reminded feminists of color that as we take power, we must remember that our goal as women of color is not to secure promises of more diverse workplaces, or inclusion in white feminist organizations. Our goal is nothing less than the liberation of our peoples. And if we are truly committed to ending violence against women, we must start in the hardest places in our own communities. These are the places where the mainstream movement has not made an impact. We can't look for the "easy alliances," or be the "friendly colored girls" that antiviolence programs and male-dominated community-based organizations demand us to be. As women of color activists, we must not deny the parts of ourselves and our work that is the least acceptable to the mainstream movement and to our communities. We must not let those who reject our liberation as a people coopt individuals and our work, and we must remember that our antiviolence movement will never be "legitimate" in a patriarchal, racist society.

Indeed, we have made very important progress. But that progress has cost women of color a lot. Too many deals have been cut that undermine our legitimacy. We have built too many coalitions with people who don't understand our work, we have collaborated too much with our enemies, and we have accepted too much abuse—so much so that twenty years into the antiviolence movement, the situation for women of color in prisons, at home, and on the streets is as dire as ever. Our movement's relevancy and our integrity as women of color are only as solid as our work against the oppressive, dangerous systems that imprison women. So we must build a solid base of feminists of color, and engage in independent mass mobilization around specific campaigns. Our work must be founded in a radical analysis and we must resist cooptation. Our work is not about populating ethnically specific programs, not just about reparations for the past, not just about multicultural interventions, and not about reform. Our work is about justice and freedom.

I RECONCEPTUALIZING ANTIVIOLENCE STRATEGIES