OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS
Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Abbriviate Tittle- Ind J Human Soc Sci
ISSN *(Online)*- 2582-8630
Journal Homepage Link- https://indianapublications.com/journal/IJHSS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15780925

INDIANA PUBLICATIONS
PRODUCTIVE AND QUALITY RESEARCH

Review Article

Volume-06|Issue-06|2025

Voicing the Margins: Feminist Identity and Resistance in Barbara Smith's *Home Girls*

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Article History
Received: 26.05.2025
Accepted: 28.06.2025
Published: 30.06.2025

Citation
Gupta, N., Bhat, I. A. (2025). Voicing the Margins: Feminist Identity and Resistance in Barbara Smith's *Home Girls*. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *6*(6), 10-16

Abstract: This paper explores the politics of feminist identity and resistance in Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology (1983), edited by Barbara Smith. By situating the anthology within the historical context of Black feminist and lesbian activism, the paper critically analyzes how the collection gives voice to marginalized Black women and redefines the contours of feminist thought. Drawing upon essays, poetry, and autobiographical reflections in the anthology, this paper examines how Home Girls subverts dominant patriarchal and white feminist discourses through its intersectional lens, its emphasis on collective identity, and its strategies of cultural and political resistance.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Barbara Smith, Home Girls Anthology, Intersectionality, Lesbian Feminism, Feminist Resistance, Combahee River Collective.

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) stands as a foundational text in the evolution of Black feminist literature and praxis. Compiled at a time when the voices of Black women, particularly Black lesbians, were systematically marginalized by both mainstream white feminism and Black nationalist discourse, the anthology reclaims space for articulating a politics rooted in the specificity of Black female experience. Smith, a co-founder of the Combahee River Collective, opens the anthology by asserting that "Black feminism is, on every level, organic to Black experience" (*Home Girls* xxv). This declaration challenges the assumption that feminism is solely the domain of white, middle-class women and asserts instead that the fight against interlocking systems of oppression is central to the lived realities of Black women.

Drawing on a tradition of community-rooted resistance, *Home Girls* elevates the personal to the political. The anthology foregrounds essays, poetry, and dialogues that reveal how race, gender, sexuality, and class cannot be disentangled, what Kimberlé Crenshaw would later theorize as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1243). In this way, the text anticipates a critical framework that has since become essential to feminist and critical race theory. Cheryl Clarke, one of the anthology's contributors, critiques the persistent homophobia in Black communities, insisting that "the very existence of Black lesbians challenges the tenets of Black nationalism and patriarchy" (*Home Girls* 190). Her analysis underscores the necessity of expanding Black liberation struggles to include gender and sexual politics, not as secondary concerns but as core dimensions of justice.

In parallel, Audre Lorde's poem "Tar Beach," included in the anthology, speaks to the power of memory and language in healing and resistance. Lorde reminds readers that "we were never meant to survive" (Lorde 159), thereby turning poetry into a mode of survival and resistance for Black women subjected to erasure and violence. Barbara Smith similarly employs personal narrative in her essay "Home" to reconstruct family and domestic life as spaces of both oppression and resilience: "I learned about Black feminism from the women in my family, not just from their strengths, but from their failings" (*Home Girls* xxi). In reclaiming their voices, the contributors collectively resist what the Combahee River Collective called "interlocking systems of oppression," a term that has become vital to understanding the structural nature of racialized and gendered inequality (Combahee River Collective 264).

This paper argues that *Home Girls* is not merely a literary anthology but a radical political project. It constructs a complex and inclusive feminist identity grounded in solidarity, community, memory, and truth-telling. Through creative forms and personal testimonies, the anthology enacts a politics of resistance that remains deeply relevant in contemporary feminist discourse. By voicing the margins, it does not simply fill a representational gap, it reshapes the terrain of feminist thought itself.

Barbara Smith and the Politics of Naming

Barbara Smith's contribution to feminist thought is both foundational and transformative, particularly in her articulation of "Black feminism" as a distinct epistemological and political framework. Her introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) resists the subsumption of Black women's experiences under dominant white feminist paradigms and patriarchal Black nationalism. She boldly asserts that "Black feminism is, on every level, organic to Black experience" (*Home Girls* xxv). In doing so, Smith engages in what Stuart Hall might call a process of "cultural signification", the strategic naming and articulation of identity in ways that contest dominant meanings and structures (Hall 443).

Smith's act of naming Black feminism is not merely rhetorical, it constitutes a radical intervention into a socio-political landscape that had historically silenced or distorted Black women's voices. In contrast to the erasures in second-wave white feminism, which often foregrounded the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, Smith centers the lives of women who have been multiply oppressed due to their race, class, gender, and sexuality. This is particularly evident in her editorial strategy, which prioritizes the voices of Black lesbians, a demographic often marginalized even within Black feminist circles. As she explains:

> *"We were all women. When I was growing up I was surrounded by women who appeared able to do everything... In her essay 'Home,' she acknowledges the domestic sphere as both a space of oppression and a crucible of feminist consciousness" (Home Girls xxi–xxii).*

Smith's emphasis on lived experience and embodied knowledge resonates with Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic and the personal as sources of political power. Lorde argues that "the personal as the political" is not a slogan but a methodology for feminist resistance (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 110). Smith similarly insists that Black women's stories, when told on their own terms, can challenge hegemonic structures and inspire collective resistance.

Furthermore, Smith's naming of Black feminism acts as a direct refutation of several prevailing myths about Black womanhood. One such myth is the idea that Black women are "already liberated," a notion rooted in both the Moynihan Report's "matriarch" thesis and patriarchal Black discourse. Smith counters this, writing, "An ability to cope under the worst conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life" (*Home Girls* xxviii). Her critique exposes how discourses of strength and resilience have often masked the material realities of exploitation and trauma that Black women endure.

Importantly, Smith's naming also constitutes a theoretical advancement. She introduces a model of feminism that is inherently intersectional, years before Kimberlé Crenshaw formally theorized the concept. Crenshaw's seminal work, "Mapping the Margins," draws attention to how Black women are often excluded from both antiracist and feminist frameworks due to their unique position at the crossroads of multiple systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1243). Smith's editorial practice in *Home Girls* demonstrates this insight by refusing to prioritize one axis of identity over another. Rather, the anthology reveals how race, gender, sexuality, and class co-construct each other in the lived experiences of Black women.

The Combahee River Collective Statement (2000), included in the anthology and co-authored by Smith, further expands this argument: "We find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation" (Combahee River Collective 264). The document's insistence on the simultaneity of oppressions, not just their intersection, marked a turning point in feminist theory and praxis.

The politics of naming that Smith engages in are thus deeply strategic and historically situated. As bell hooks notes in *Talking Back*, "the act of naming ourselves, claiming ourselves as subjects, is a radical political act" (hooks 9). Smith's editorial and intellectual work exemplifies this ethos. She does not merely advocate for inclusion within existing feminist canons, she demands a reconfiguration of those canons to accommodate the epistemologies and lived realities of Black women.

Smith's intervention also resonates with Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the "outsider within." Collins suggests that Black women intellectuals occupy a unique standpoint that enables them to critique dominant knowledge systems while constructing alternative frameworks rooted in collective memory, emotion, and community (Collins 14). *Home Girls* exemplifies this by blending academic, poetic, and autobiographical forms to produce a feminist epistemology that is as affective as it is analytical.

In sum, Barbara Smith's politics of naming redefined the terrain of feminist thought. Her articulation of Black feminism is not a derivative category but a site of radical theorization and political action. By foregrounding the experiences of Black women, particularly lesbians, Smith not only confronts erasure but constructs a discursive space in which resistance is both personal and collective, both political and poetic.

Resistance Through Collective Voice

One of the most compelling aspects of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* is its deliberate multiplicity, its refusal to present a singular voice or a

monolithic vision of Black womanhood. Instead, the anthology functions as a dynamic collective, bringing together poets, essayists, activists, and cultural workers whose voices resonate through different genres, styles, and ideological positions. This multiplicity itself is a mode of resistance, as it confronts the homogenizing tendencies of dominant narratives that often flatten or erase Black women's diverse experiences. Barbara Smith's editorial strategy underscores that Black feminist resistance is not individualistic but inherently collective, rooted in shared struggle and communal articulation (*Home Girls* xx–xxi).

The collective voices in *Home Girls* serve not only as a mode of representation but also as a method of survival and empowerment. Cheryl Clarke's essay, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," directly addresses the oppressive silences around Black lesbian existence, noting that "the very existence of Black lesbians challenges the tenets of Black nationalism and patriarchy" (*Home Girls* 190). Clarke's writing articulates a form of resistance that begins with visibility, the act of naming oneself and refusing erasure. Her contribution exemplifies what Audre Lorde describes as the "transformation of silence into language and action," a key tenet of feminist resistance (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 40).

This theme is further reinforced in Lorde's own contribution to the anthology, the poem "Tar Beach," which employs lyrical imagery and personal memory as a means of reclaiming space, identity, and voice. Lorde, who consistently emphasized that silence was a form of complicity, wrote elsewhere that "your silence will not protect you" (*Sister Outsider* 41). Her poetic contributions in *Home Girls* reflect a radical reclaiming of narrative space for Black women, especially those occupying intersections of race, sexuality, and gender. In transforming personal pain into public declaration, these voices embody what bell hooks refers to as the "oppositional gaze", a critical resistance to dominant narratives that have historically silenced or misrepresented Black women (hooks, *Black Looks* 116).

The anthology's structure itself enacts resistance. Rather than following a linear or hierarchical format, *Home Girls* is deliberately non-chronological and polyphonic. Barbara Smith includes essays alongside poetry, dialogues alongside manifestos, academic critique alongside lived testimony. This editorial decision, as Patricia Hill Collins would argue, affirms an alternative epistemology, one that values emotional expressiveness, personal narrative, and collective wisdom as valid sources of knowledge (Collins 259). The anthology thus enacts what Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga describe in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1989) as "radical coalition politics", a politics where solidarity does not depend on sameness, but on the recognition of difference as strength (Moraga and Anzaldúa xxiv).

This is evident in the inclusion of works like *Black Lesbian/Feminist Organizing: A Conversation,* which features dialogue among Tania Abdulahad, Gwendolyn Rogers, Barbara Smith, and Jameelah Waheed. Their discussion highlights the difficulties and tensions in organizing within communities that are often reluctant to acknowledge homophobia and patriarchy. The collective dialogue format emphasizes listening, witnessing, and shared vulnerability as practices of political engagement, hallmarks of what Bernice Johnson Reagon famously referred to as "coalition politics." Reagon explains that in coalition, "you don't get to be the same anymore", you are transformed through your engagement with others who are not like you (Reagon 357). *Home Girls*, in this sense, is not merely a collection of writings but a living practice of feminist coalition, in which diverse Black women come together to affirm, challenge, and transform one another.

Furthermore, the collective voice resists internalized oppression. As Cathy J. Cohen argues, queer Black feminism must critique not only structural inequality but also the internalized norms that suppress radical expressions of identity and community (Cohen 438). Contributors such as Alexis De Veaux, Jewelle Gomez, and Donna Kate Rushin use storytelling, theory, and poetry to confront internalized sexism and heteronormativity. Their work testifies to the emotional labor and courage it takes to speak truth within one's own community, a community that may itself be shaped by patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions.

The polyvocality of *Home Girls* also serves to dismantle binaries that often plague feminist discourse, public/private, personal/political, theory/experience. As Barbara Christian points out, "for people of color, theory is often lived experience" (Christian 68). The voices in *Home Girls* collapse these false dichotomies, showing that theory emerges through storytelling, memory, and embodied knowledge. Poems like Toi Derricotte's "The Damned" and essays like Jewelle Gomez's "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered" demonstrate how cultural production becomes an act of resistance, enabling Black women to redefine themselves on their own terms.

In conclusion, *Home Girls* resists through its collectivity. The anthology does not offer a unified voice because it understands that unity does not require uniformity. Instead, it fosters a multiplicity of voices that collectively dismantle silence, affirm difference, and build a shared politics of survival and resistance. By curating an intentional, intersectional, and inclusive chorus, Barbara Smith and her contributors perform what Alice Walker termed a "womanist" ethos, one that celebrates strength, community, and radical love (Walker xii). Through this cultural labor, *Home Girls* remains a living document of collective Black feminist resistance.

By publishing openly as Black lesbians and feminists, the contributors challenge not only structural violence but also the internalized oppressions within their own communities. The anthology thus becomes a cultural act of coalition-building, reflecting what Bernice Johnson Reagon calls "coalition politics," where "you don't get to be the same anymore" (343–357).

Intersectionality Before the Term

Although Kimberlé Crenshaw would not formally coin the term intersectionality until 1989, the conceptual groundwork for intersectional analysis was already deeply embedded in the writings of Black feminists during the 1970s and 1980s. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), edited by Barbara Smith, exemplifies this intellectual and activist tradition by foregrounding the interconnectedness of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the lived experiences of Black women. The anthology resists any single-axis framework of analysis, instead offering a multidimensional approach that anticipates Crenshaw's formal theorization of the term.

One of the most explicit articulations of intersectional thought in *Home Girls* appears in the reprinted Combahee River Collective Statement, which affirms: "We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective 264). This statement not only anticipates intersectionality but outlines a praxis-oriented epistemology that is both political and lived. Crenshaw herself cites the Combahee River Collective as foundational to her development of intersectionality, noting that their work exemplifies the "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1245).

In *Home Girls*, contributors consistently write from positions that refuse to fragment identity or prioritize one axis of oppression over another. For instance, Cheryl Clarke's essay "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" insists that homophobia cannot be treated as a secondary issue to racism or sexism. Instead, she argues that "Black lesbians exist as a political contradiction to the normative concept of the Black woman," and therefore must be acknowledged as central to any serious anti-oppression work (*Home Girls* 191). Her insistence on this multiplicity directly challenges the exclusionary tendencies of both Black nationalism and mainstream feminism, both of which have often constructed Black women, particularly queer Black women, as peripheral.

The anthology as a whole resists what Patricia Hill Collins later called the "additive model of oppression", a model in which race, gender, and class are treated as separate variables added together rather than experienced simultaneously (225). Instead, *Home Girls* presents an integrative model that reflects what Collins would later define as the "matrix of domination," in which "one's position in society is made up of multiple contiguous standpoints rather than a singular essentialist standpoint" (Collins 225). Through poetry, personal narratives, and political essays, the contributors demonstrate how their positionalities as Black, female, working-class, and queer intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization and crucially distinct strategies of resistance.

This understanding is further evidenced in Audre Lorde's contributions, which demonstrate that the personal is political, and the erotic, emotional, and embodied experiences of Black women are critical sources of knowledge and power. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde writes, "We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilify it, abuse it, and prostitute it. Of course, women so empowered are dangerous" (*Sister Outsider* 54). This emphasis on the embodied and emotional dimensions of identity aligns with intersectional theory's attention to the multiplicity of oppression, not just its structures, but also its affective and experiential dimensions.

In naming and examining their simultaneous experiences of sexism, racism, homophobia, and economic exploitation, the contributors enact what bell hooks calls an "oppositional consciousness." As hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, "the refusal to separate race from class from gender when considering the lives of women" is a necessary condition for genuine feminist praxis (hooks 23). *Home Girls* refuses such separations not only in content but in form: the anthology integrates poetry and scholarship, autobiographical fragments and political theory, creating a collective voice that speaks from and to the margins.

Moreover, the contributors in *Home Girls* do not merely theorize intersectionality; they live it. Their writings foreground a *both/and* logic rather than an *either/or* binary. As Barbara Smith observes,"[w]e do not choose between being Black or being women or being lesbian or being working-class; we are all of these things at once" (*Home Girls* xxvii). This refusal to rank oppressions or isolate identities challenges the fragmentation of feminist and antiracist movements and affirms the necessity of coalition-building across differences, a key dimension of intersectional praxis as articulated by later scholars such as Ange-Marie Hancock and Sirma Bilge.

Even the structure of *Home Girls* reflects this theoretical commitment. By placing essays such as "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered" by Jewelle Gomez alongside poems by Toi Derricotte and dialogues on organizing, the anthology performs intersectionality as editorial method. It does not separate emotional, intellectual, and activist labor but interweaves them,

suggesting that identity and struggles are always interconnected and mutually constitutive.

To conclude, while the term 'intersectionality' had not yet entered the academic lexicon in 1983, *Home Girls* fully embodies its principles. The anthology insists that the complexities of Black women's lives cannot be understood through compartmentalized frameworks. Instead, it offers a feminist epistemology grounded in the simultaneity of oppression and resistance, demonstrating that intersectionality is not merely a theory, but a lived reality, a collective methodology, and a radical political tool.

Personal Narrative as Political Intervention

Autobiographical narratives within *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* function not merely as personal recollections but as acts of political defiance and epistemological assertion. In her reflective essay *Home,* Barbara Smith invokes memory as a tool of resistance, recounting how she learned "the rudiments of Black feminism" from the women in her family, "not just from their strengths, but from their failings" (*Home Girls* xxi). In this framing, the domestic sphere transcends its traditional associations with private, apolitical life, becoming instead a crucible of feminist consciousness, where ideologies are both inherited and reimagined.

Smith's act of situating feminist knowledge within familial memory exemplifies how the personal becomes political, a central tenet of feminist praxis. The home, often coded as a site of silence or subordination, is reclaimed as a space where oppositional knowledge is generated and preserved. This politicization of the intimate parallels Toi Derricotte's poetic contributions, such as *The Damned* and *Hester's Song,* which chronicle the trauma, resilience, and interior lives of Black women navigating a world shaped by racialized and gendered violence (Derricotte, *Home Girls* 165–172). These poems resist the erasure of pain by naming it, thereby forging an archive of embodied Black female survival.

The anthology thus performs what feminist theorist bell hooks terms "theory in the flesh", a process in which lived experience becomes the foundation for political analysis and critical theorization (hooks, *Talking Back* 20). Rather than abstract theorizing detached from daily realities, this mode of engagement validates personal testimony as a legitimate form of knowledge production. The intertwining of biography and politics destabilizes binary divisions between intellectual labor and emotional experience, affirming that "speaking from pain" is itself a revolutionary act (Anzaldúa and Moraga, *This Bridge* xxv).

In this way, *Home Girls* transforms the genre of personal narrative into a form of insurgent feminist methodology, asserting that the interiority of Black women's lives, so often ignored or marginalized, is not only central to feminist discourse but is also a powerful instrument of collective liberation.

Lesbian Identity and Revolutionary Praxis

One of the most radical and enduring contributions of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* is its unapologetic centering of lesbian identity, not as a marginal or supplementary theme, but as a revolutionary praxis. In a political and cultural moment when even progressive movements like feminism and Black nationalism often excluded or silenced lesbian voices, *Home Girls* made lesbian identity visible, political, and central. As Barbara Smith and her co-contributors articulate in "Black Lesbian/Feminist Organizing: A Conversation," lesbianism in the anthology functions not merely as a marker of sexual orientation, but as a site of political refusal, a radical rejection of heteronormative family structures, patriarchal gender roles, and compulsory heterosexuality (*Home Girls* 285–311).

The conversation among Tania Abdulahad, Gwendolyn Rogers, Barbara Smith, and Jameelah Waheed exposes the layered difficulties of organizing as Black lesbian feminists in communities that often exhibit resistance to acknowledging either feminism or queerness. The contributors speak of the alienation from both mainstream feminism, which often ignored race, and from Black political movements, which frequently reproduced sexist and homophobic norms. Smith's assertion that "homophobia functions as a wedge to destroy solidarity" (*Home Girls* 291) underscores the internal fractures within radical politics and highlights the necessity of naming lesbianism as both personal identity and revolutionary stance.

This vision aligns with Audre Lorde's well-known assertion in *Sister Outsider*: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde 40). For Lorde and the other lesbian contributors in *Home Girls*, survival is not a passive act but an active resistance against a society that deems Black lesbian lives expendable. The act of existing openly, of loving other women, of imagining new forms of intimacy and kinship, all become forms of what Chela Sandoval has described as "differential consciousness," a tactic of resistance that works through identity in motion, mobilizing identity against systems of oppression (Sandoval 140).

Barbara Smith and other contributors also engage with lesbianism as a challenge to traditional understandings of family and kinship. In many ways, the anthology articulates what Cathy J. Cohen calls "queer politics", a political approach that questions normative institutions such as marriage, biological family, and state-sanctioned forms of reproduction (Cohen 450). The contributors to *Home Girls* build alternative models of community rooted in shared struggle, emotional reciprocity, and non-biological sisterhood. In this sense,

lesbianism becomes both a critique and a constructive political tool—a way of imagining what José Esteban Muñoz would later call "queer utopia," or the imaginative envisioning of other possible worlds (Muñoz 9).

Moreover, lesbian identity in *Home Girls* disrupts patriarchal assumptions about the role of women within Black communities. As Cheryl Clarke writes in *The Failure to Transform*: "The Black lesbian... negates the patriarchal norm, poses a direct threat to the sanctity of male privilege, and undermines the structures upon which masculinity rests" (*Home Girls* 191). Her writing makes it clear that lesbianism is not a lifestyle choice but a direct challenge to the political and cultural structures that reinforce gendered subordination.

The anthology's investment in lesbian voices also serves as a challenge to white feminist movements, which often failed to center the experiences of lesbians of color. As Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa emphasize in *This Bridge Called My Back*, lesbian women of color inhabit a doubly marginalized space and must therefore create their own frameworks of empowerment (Moraga and Anzaldúa 27). Barbara Smith's editorial work in *Home Girls* offers precisely such a framework. By including lesbian narratives alongside essays on labor, race, and reproductive justice, she refuses to separate sexuality from other dimensions of identity and struggle.

Indeed, the political commitment of the lesbian contributors in *Home Girls* resonates with what Adrienne Rich termed the "lesbian continuum," a framework that understands lesbianism not solely as erotic identity but as a mode of resistance encompassing emotional bonds, political solidarity, and creative collaboration among women (Rich 648). In this broader sense, *Home Girls* performs lesbian feminism as a cultural and political formation that contests domination while generating new epistemologies of care, kinship, and power.

In this way, the anthology not only legitimizes Black lesbian identity but enacts what Barbara Christian calls "a theory in the flesh," one grounded not in abstraction but in the daily experiences of oppression, love, and resilience (Christian 69). The contributors in *Home Girls* theorize through their bodies, their poetry, their relationships, and their organizing. Lesbian identity is not discussed abstractly but lived and materialized through the anthology's form and content.

To foreground, Black lesbian feminism in 1983 was nothing less than revolutionary. As Smith later reflected, the inclusion of lesbian perspectives was not an afterthought but "a necessary challenge to all the structures of domination that invisibilized us" (Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts* 89). *Home Girls* thereby marks a critical moment in the history of feminist thought, where lesbian identity became both the subject and the method of radical critique and political imagination.

CONCLUSION

Home Girls: *A Black Feminist Anthology* is more than a collection of writings, it is a transformative archive of Black feminist resistance. By centering the experiences of Black women, especially Black lesbians, the anthology challenges dominant feminist and Black nationalist discourses. Through its diverse voices and forms, it affirms that identity is intersectional and political, rooted in lived experience.

The anthology's strength lies in its collective voice, its refusal to fragment identity, and its commitment to solidarity across difference. It anticipates key feminist frameworks like intersectionality and redefines lesbian identity as both personal and political resistance. Through memory, storytelling, and radical care, Home Girls envisions liberation not just as critique but as community, creativity, and survival.

Its legacy endures as a foundational work that reshaped feminist thought and continues to inspire inclusive, intersectional activism and scholarship.

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