

# **But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States**

The Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed. All too often, "black" was equated with black men and "woman" was equated with white women. As a result, black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination.

## Black Women Confronting Sexism and Racism

Black women who participated in the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement were often discriminated against sexually and racially. Although neither all the black men nor all the white women in their respective movements were sexist and racist, enough of those with powerful influence were able to make the lives of the black women in these groups almost unbearable. This section investigates the treatment of black women in these two movements and aims to show how, due to the inability of black men and white women to acknowledge and denounce their oppression of black women, the movements were unable to meet the needs of black women and prompted the formation of the Black Feminist Movement, which, though it had been gathering momentum for some time, marks its "birth" with the 1973 founding of the National Black Feminist Organization in New York.

## Black Women in the Black Liberation Movement

Black women faced constant sexism in the Black Liberation Movement. Although there were several different movements for black liberation (the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, the Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and others) for the purposes of this paper they are all considered under the title Black Liberation Movement. The movement, though ostensibly for the liberation of the black race, was in word and deed for the liberation of the black male. Race was extremely sexualized in the rhetoric of the movement. Freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity. Take, for example, the assumption that

racism is more harmful to black men than it is to black women because the real tragedy of racism is the loss of manhood; this assumption illustrates both an acceptance of masculinity defined within the context of patriarchy as well as a disregard for the human need for integrity and liberty felt by both men and women.

Many black men in the movement were interested in controlling black women's sexuality. Bell hooks comments that during the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s, "black men overemphasize[d] white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a way to explain their disapproval of inter-racial relationships." It was, however, no contradiction of their political views to have inter-racial relationships themselves. Again, part of "freedom" and "manhood" was the right of men to have indiscriminate access to and control over any woman's body. As well, there was disregard for the humanity and equality of black women. Black men in the Black Liberation Movement often made sexist statements which were largely accepted without criticism.

Consider these two statements, the first by Amiri Baraka and the second by Eldridge Cleaver. And so this separation [of black men and women] is the cause of our need for self-consciousness, and eventual healing. But we must erase the separateness by providing ourselves with healthy African identities. By embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only of the divine complement the black woman is for her man. For instance, we do not believe in the 'equality' of men and women. We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals... Nature has not provided thus."

Baraka insists that men and women are unequal by nature. This is an attitude which he considers healthy and worthy of promotion to other black men and women. Not only are men and women different, he says, but there is no reciprocity in their relationship to each other; hence, a black man is not 'for' his woman as a black woman is 'for' her man. The two do not submit to one another; rather, the woman submits to her black man.

I became a rapist. To refine my technique and modus operandi, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto-in the black ghetto where vicious and dark deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day-and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey.

Cleaver later goes on to express his remorse at his action but retains his misogynist attitudes. One can see both sexism and racism at work in this citation: not only is he committing violence against women, but he considers the violence against black "girls" to be less serious than that against their white counterparts. While it is true that a crime against a white woman bore more

weight in the judicial system, the gravity of the crime-i.e., the damage it causes and terror it invokes both individually and within the community-is not diminished when committed against a black woman.

Sexual discrimination against women in the Black Liberation Movement not only took the form of misogynist writings, it was also a part of daily life. Elaine Brown recalls an organizational meeting of the Black Congress in which she and the other women were forced to wait to eat until the men were served food for which they had all contributed money. The "rules" were then explained to her and a friend: "Sisters... did not challenge Brothers. Sisters... stood behind their black men, supported their men, and respected them. In essence, ... it was not only 'unsisterly' of us to want to eat with our Brothers, it was a sacrilege for which blood could be shed."

Similar discrimination existed within the Civil Rights Movement. E. Frances White recalls, "I remember refusing to leave the discussion at a regional black student society meeting to go help out in the kitchen. The process of alienation from those militant and articulate men had begun for me."

It must be stressed that it was not only many of the men but also a great number of the women in the Black Liberation Movements who were enforcing strict gender roles on black women. In much the same way that women in dominant society do not resist but encourage sexism, black women fell prey to perpetuating patriarchy within the black community.

#### Black Women in the Feminist Movement

Black Women who participated in the feminist movement during the 1960s often met with racism. It generally took the form of exclusion: black women were not invited to participate on conference panels which were not specifically about black or Third World women. They were not equally, or even proportionately, represented on the faculty of Women's Studies Departments, nor were there classes devoted specifically to the study of black women's history. In most women's movement writings, the experiences of white, middle class women were described as universal "women's experiences," largely ignoring the differences of black and white women's experiences due to race and class. In addition to this, well-known black women were often treated as tokens; their work was accepted as representing "the" black experience and was rarely ever criticized or challenged.

Part of the overwhelming frustration black women felt within the Women's Movement was at white feminists' unwillingness to admit to their racism. This unwillingness comes from the sentiment that those who are oppressed can not oppress others. White women, who were (and still are) without question sexually oppressed by white men, believed

that because of this oppression they were unable to assume the dominant role in the perpetuation of white racism; however, they have absorbed, supported and advocated racist ideology and have acted individually as racist oppressors. Traditionally, women's sphere of influence has extended over the home, and it is no coincidence that in 1963, seven times as many women of color (of whom 90 percent were black) as white women were employed as private household workers. It has been the tendency of white feminists to see men as the "enemy," rather than themselves, as part of the patriarchal, racist, and classist society in which we all live.

Not only did some white feminists refuse to acknowledge their ability to oppress women of color, some claimed that white women had always been anti-racist. Adrienne Rich claims, "our white fore Sisters have ... often [defied] patriarchy ... not on their own behalf but for the sake of black men, women, and children. We have a strong anti-racist female tradition;" however, as bell hooks points out "[t]here is little historical evidence to document Rich's assertion that white women as a collective group or white women's rights advocates are part of an anti-racist tradition." Every women's movement in the United States has been built on a racist foundation: women's suffrage for white women, the abolition of slavery for the fortification of white society, the temperance movement for the moral uplifting of white society. None of these movements was for black liberation or racial equality; rather, they sprang from a desire to strengthen white society's morals or to uplift the place of white women in that society.

#### Toward a Black Feminist Movement

Faced with the sexism of black men and the racism of white women, black women in their respective movements had two choices: they could remain in the movements and try to educate non-black or non-female comrades about their needs, or they could form a movement of their own. The first alternative, though noble in its intent, was not a viable option. While it is true that black men needed to be educated about the effects of sexism and white women about the effects of racism on black women's lives, it was not solely the responsibility of black women to educate them. Noted Audre Lorde:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the

oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear it is the task of women of Color to educate white women-in the face of tremendous resistance-as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. In light of these facts, the women decided to forge their own movement, the Black Feminist Movement.

Building a Black Feminist Movement was not an easy task. Despite the need for such a movement, there were few black women in the early 1970s who were willing to identify themselves as feminists. Barbara Smith articulates the reservations of many black women about a black feminist movement:

Myths to divert Black women from our own freedom:

1. The Black woman is already liberated.
2. Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront.
3. Feminism is nothing but man-hating.
4. Women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns. People of color need to deal with the "larger struggle."
5. Those feminists are nothing but Lesbians.

These myths illustrate long-held misconceptions about black women, including the belief that the extraordinary strength black women have shown in the face of tremendous oppression reveals their liberation. In fact, this "freedom"-working outside the home, supporting the family economically as well as emotionally, and heading the household-has been thrust upon black women. Women of all races, classes, nationalities, religions, and ethnicities are sexually oppressed; black women are no exception. Upon further examination, the other myths prove to be false. Racism and sexism must be confronted at the same time; to wait for one to end before working on the other reflects an incomplete understanding of the way racism and sexism, as forms of oppression, work to perpetuate each other. Black feminism struggles against institutionalized, systematic oppression rather than against a certain group of people, be they white men or men of color. While it often requires no stretch of the imagination to infer man-hating in some early (and some recent) feminist writings, the goal of feminism is the end of sexism. It is only a sane response of an oppressed people to work toward their own liberation. Finally, the assumption that feminists are nothing but lesbians reveals the homophobia which persists in many black communities as well as a misunderstanding of both lesbians and motivations for joining the feminist movement.

## Definition and Focus of the Black Feminist Movement

Having decided to form a movement of their own, black women needed to define the goals of the Black Feminist Movement and to determine its focus. Several authors have put forth definitions of the Black Feminist Movement. Among the most notable are Alice Walker's definition and the Combahee River Collective Statement. Alice Walker, coined the term "Womanist" to describe the Black Feminist Movement.

She writes:

Womanist 1. From womanish. (opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one... Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength... Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not separatist, except periodically, for health.

In addition she supplements her definition saying, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." Noteworthy are the emphases on self-determination, appreciation for all aspects of womanhood, and the commitment to the survival of both men and women. This definition is both affirming and challenging for it commends a woman's stretching of her personal boundaries while at the same time calls on women to maintain their connections to the rest of humanity. The entire self, which is connected to others in the community, is valued in womanism.

The Combahee River Collective Statement sets forth a more specific, political definition:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that 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. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppression that all women of color face. It is a broad statement. For a single movement to deal with all of the issues listed requires multi-focused, strategic action, which is exactly what was needed for black and Third World women. It was important for black

feminism to address the ways that racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism all worked to perpetuate each other.

In these two definitions of black feminism/womanism, one can see the complementary nature of one's personal life in relation to one's political life. From the personal, the striving toward wholeness individually and within the community, comes the political, the struggle against those forces that render individuals and communities unwhole. The personal is political, especially for black women.

Black feminist writings were to focus on developing theory which would address the simultaneity of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism in their lives. In addition, the audience of these writings was to be black women, rather than white feminists or black male activists. As mentioned earlier, to continue to address the oppressor's needs would be a waste of valuable energy. Black women needed to develop a critical, feminist consciousness and begin a dialogue which directly addressed their experiences and connected them to a larger political system.

#### Early Actions and Organizations in the Black Feminist Movement

The specific issues worked on in the Black Feminist Movement, according to Barbara Smith, were/are: reproductive rights, sterilization abuse, equal access to abortion, health care, child care, the rights of the disabled, violence against women, rape, battering, sexual harassment, welfare rights, lesbian and gay rights, aging, police brutality, labor organizing, anti-imperialist struggles, anti-racist organizing, nuclear disarmament, and preserving the environment. To this end, several organizations were established during the late 1970s and early 1980s. A partial listing of the organizations and some noteworthy events includes:

- ¥ 1973 Founding of the National Black Feminist Organization in New York.
- ¥ 1973 Founding of Black Women Organized for Action in San Francisco.
- ¥ 1974 Founding of the Combahee River Collective in Boston.
- ¥ 1977 First publishing of *Azalea*, a literary magazine for Third World lesbians.
- ¥ 1978 Varied Voices of Black Women concert tour.
- ¥ 1979 Publishing of *Conditions: Five*, the first widely distributed collection of Black feminist writings in the United States. (It also included a sizable amount of black lesbian writings.)
- ¥ 1979 The Combahee River Collective protest of the murders of twelve black women in Boston.

¥ 1980 First National Conference on Third World Women and Violence in Washington, DC.

¥ 1980 First National Hui (Conference) for Black Women in Otago, New Zealand.

¥ 1981 Establishment of a Third World women's clinic in Berkeley, CA.

¥ 1981 Establishment of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

¥ 1981 Establishment of the Black Women's Self-Help Collective in Washington, DC.

¥ 1981 First Black Dyke Hui in Auckland, New Zealand.

The two earliest organizations formed in the movement, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), clearly reflected the goals put forth in the Combahee River Collective Statement. (Although the statement had not yet been written at the time of their inception, the ideas and dialogue which influenced the statement were being created during that time.). Their membership included black women from all class levels; well-educated, middle-class women worked together with poorly-educated women on welfare to address issues that pertained to all of them. Because all of the women were affected by sexism as well as racism in their various fields of employment, these issues were specifically addressed by these organizations.

## Conclusions

The Black Feminist Movement was formed to address the ways sexism, racism, and classism influence the lives of black women whose needs were ignored by the black men of the Black Liberation Movement and white women in the Women's Movement. The movement has spawned several important organizations which are committed to the struggle against all forms of oppression. They have created a unique model for cross-class organization in which the needs of the poor are not usurped by the needs of the middle-class and the wealthy.

The effectiveness of the movement has not been uniform in the white feminist and black communities. Many white women in the feminist movement have acknowledged their racism and made attempts to address it in anti-racist training seminars. Feminist theory now includes an analysis of the way race, class, sexuality, as well as gender influence women's lives. The women's studies departments of many prominent universities and colleges now have courses which focus on black women's writings and history, in the United States and in other countries. However, in the black community, the movement has not been as effective. The rhetoric of current black liberation movements still fails to adequately address issues which affect black women. Awareness of sexism has increased within the black academic community but the popular culture (especially that which primarily involves black men, such as the rap music industry) continues to be extremely sexist and misogynist.



There are several challenges facing the Black Feminist Movement. Most importantly, the movement must find a way to broaden support among black and Third World women. Education about the true nature and goal of the movement as well as resources and strategies for change must reach the women who have little or no access to the movement. There is a need for the development of mentor relationships between black women scholar/activists and young black students, both female and male. Individual struggle must be connected with a larger feminist movement to effect change, and so that new black feminists need not reinvent theory or search again for history that was never recorded. There is also a need to develop black female subjectivity to address black women as the primary audience of theoretical and critical black feminism. Black women and men need to develop a critical style which encourages further dialogue and development of ideas rather than merely "trashing" and silencing new black feminist voices. Respect for fellow black women must be developed and guarded in spite of the sexist, racist, and classist "cultural baggage" with which all Americans are weighed down. Differences among black women must be acknowledged and affirmed, rather than ignored. Finally, alliances must be strengthened between the black feminist movement and its parent movements. The black feminist movement must hold the current male-dominated black liberation movement accountable for its sexism and at the same time work with the movement to end the oppression of black people. As well, there must be a working dialogue between the white-dominated feminist movement and the black feminist movement to continue to develop theory and action which strives toward the end of sexism. The power and influence that each of these groups has cannot be ignored. As one NBFO member has said, "White women are our natural allies; we can't take down the system alone."