

Feminism

Michelle M. Wright

While variously understood, "feminism," in its Western contexts, usually means a belief that all human beings should enjoy the same political, economic, and social rights. As a "keyword," feminism is a concept often misunderstood as signifying a genealogy solely of women's rights and social, political, and economic advancement. This brief essay lays out the distortions that often attend initial or superficial engagements with feminism, specifically in African American studies, enabling a definition of feminism that ably skirts and negotiates those false avatars that seek to contain feminism to its least accurate meaning: a movement wholly about and for women.

Like all other ideologies and movement, the history of feminism is most often structured and analyzed as a linear progress narrative; in the white Western context, twentieth-century white feminist history has been organized as a series of generations, defined as "waves" (we are currently in "third wave" feminism). White U.S. feminism often points to its origins in the mid- to late nineteenth century with the rise of the suffragette movement, then marks its points of advancement through salient figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Barbara Gittings, Bella Abzug, and Gloria Steinem and events such as the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. U.S. Black feminism takes a much more complex route, as some of the earliest abolitionists were also Black feminists who showed how the failure to honor human rights rendered enslaved Black women

the most striking and cogent symbols of this oppression, where legally sanctioned rape and forced breeding not only rendered the Black female body into a grotesque machine for reproduction but denigrated her offspring, relegating children to the status of products, not humans. As this essay will show, at each crucial stage in African American history, Black feminists were often the ones looking at questions of justice and equality more deeply and broadly than were many of their counterparts.

In the late nineteenth century, the antilynching and human-suffrage advocates Mary Church Terrell, Frances W. Harper, and Ida B. Wells (among others) laid out blueprints for an equitable society that located Black women as the foundation and even bellwethers for this equality. After all, they reasoned, to what degree could a Black woman truly be free, much less teach others about equality and justice, if she were forced to obey men (whether father, son, husband, or male guardian) in all things, as the laws at the time dictated? From the outset, Black feminism not only enjoined us to look outward, at racist oppression, but also forced us to look at our own communities, where patriarchal norms are often held up as desirable goals and where asymmetries of power are presented as "natural" and/or "moral."

While these advocates' work is known to most Black feminists today, most traditional and dominant narratives of U.S. Black history foreground and focus on icons such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, celebrating them (and justifiably so) as inspirational and successful leaders of "the race" whose work has led to significant sociopolitical gains for African Americans. Yet these mainstream histories and biographies fail to tell the whole story: they ignore or remain ignorant of a remarkable and almost unique history of Black female writings and activism in the early fight for abolition and then socioeconomic power. Rather than (as is often assumed or claimed)

playing marginal roles primarily focused on the rights and plights of women, Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary were central and essential shaping forces (Margaret Washington, n.d.), whether through their activism, their organizing their mentoring, or their intellectual contributions that provided canny analyses of bigotry at the individual and state levels accompanied by forceful arguments and strategies to secure human suffrage.

For example, at the end of the Civil War, while W. E. B. Du Bois laid out a blueprint for socioeconomic and political parity in the now classic *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Black women activists, journalists, and writers such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Maria Stewart, Frances W. Harper, and Pauline Hopkins laid out far more inclusive projects for a Black future in which men and women worked together to secure human suffrage—while *Souls*, as Hazel Carby has pointed out in *Race Men* (1998), imagines Black men as the heroes that would either rescue the Black female damsels in distress or else resist their Jezebel charms. This is not to say that these Black female intellectuals were perfect: Wells tended to ignore the Black women who were murdered in her internationally famous antilynching crusade (e.g., *On Lynchings* and *Southern Horrors*, both published in 1892), focusing only on the men. And although Frances W. Harper should be celebrated for her ability to depict a complex and diverse Black collective emerging from the Civil War, both enslaved and free, novels such as *Iola Leroy* (1892) are uneven in their depiction of former slaves (although, to be fair, as Rod Ferguson notes in his landmark book *Aberations in Black* [2004], a majority of the Black cognoscenti also indulged in ugly stereotypes about the effect slavery had had on moral and cognitive intelligence).

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debated their place in the modern world, most especially within the United States, in view of their recent enslaved past. While Black feminist writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen are typically accorded credit for bringing women into these questions, they were asked far more difficult, broader questions than many of their male counterparts were simply because they *did* focus on, rather than ignore or marginalize, gender difference and, in doing so, supplied more lasting and universal solutions. While Langston Hughes’s poems and plays provide a brilliantly smooth and blended synthesis between “Negro” folk art and the Western modern in his imagery, cadence, and philosophies, Hurston’s *Of Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) underscore an endlessly reproductive tension between the folk and the modern, one in which aspects of each can be found in the other. The result, especially in *Their Eyes*, is a Blackness that, unlike most depictions in Harlem Renaissance writing, is untethered from a history of whiteness, much less the ultimately white-dominated yardstick of modernity and civilization. Larsen also provides a multidimensional Blackness that speaks beyond its time, especially in her novella *Passing* (1929), in which the destabilization of race, the lack of a clear dividing line between Black and white, reveals the unstable and constructed nature of gender, sexual, and class identities as well. In other words, racial hierarchies and intraracial heteropatriarchies seek to order and control “inferior” races, genders, classes, and sexualities all at once, neatly laying bare the lie that socioeconomic and political equalities can be secured one marginalized collective at a time. Similarly, Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) shows how Black women are so easily left behind even as Black collectives flourish through the growth of Black colleges and universities, Black intellectual society, and the Black church, thus connecting gender rights to

social institutions. Modeled on heteropatriarchal logic, social institutions offer limited power for women.

Unfortunately, the talent and achievements of these nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Black female artists and activists were largely bypassed in the wake of the civil rights and Black Power movements. While some figures, such as Bayard Rustin, and some legal gains, such as the Civil Rights Act, did in fact partially address gender parity, the concerns of Black feminists were at best marginalized and at worst aggressively rejected. One of the most memorable points in U.S. Black history in which Black women found themselves excluded and denigrated is during Black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which correlated to the foundation of the Combahee River Collective and especially the rise of Audre Lorde, a global feminist par excellence who made explicit and frequent connections between Black women from the United States and the Caribbean and the working classes, gender relations, labor relations, colonialism, Black Europeans, queer politics, parenting, interracial relations, nonexclusionary female coalitions, industrialization, climate change, environmentalism, and agricultural, as well as racism and misogyny in white Western health care. It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of a single male theorist whose work and vision intersect with so many topics, challenges, and crises informing our media, syllabi, and research projects today—and yet, while well-known, Audre Lorde is most often taught or cited in relation to Black women rather than the vast collectives and topics she influenced. Indeed, the viewpoints and politics of Combahee was so far ahead of its time that contemporary Black feminist thinkers, such as Brittney Cooper, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, and Erica Edwards, have revisited these writings and applied them to contemporary concerns—Taylor most explicitly with her edited volume *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (2017).

Even in African American feminism's disagreements, it has shed light on different views and practices across the African diaspora that more mainstream discourses on diasporic alliances and connections have ignored. The debate between "womanism" and "Black feminism" takes us into complicated territory, because Black women from African nations often have a different set of goals and ideals for achieving gender parity. These differences have led to vibrant, productive debates on the diverse beliefs, cultures, ideologies, and practices enjoyed by Black women from across the globe, and while they were born out of debates on feminism versus womanism, they are relevant to all those who define themselves as members of Black community. In other words, even in debate, Black feminism engenders a rich array of important concepts and arguments on the very nature of Blackness and its meaning in the world.

The concept of Black feminism as multidimensional has in fact been a central topic of conversation for the past twenty years—at least through Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality," as found in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989). A foundational and still-leading scholar of critical race studies, Crenshaw argues that the simultaneous oppressions faced by women of color through their marginalized racial and gender identities render them twice as invisible, including, ironically, in discourses on anti-Black racism or sexism/misogyny. Yet even as the idea of intersectionality has illuminated and brought to the fore specific oppressions, it has also generated a great deal of dispute over its efficacy as an agent of change, much less of social, political, and economic justice.

As Jennifer Nash has shown in "Intersectionality and Its Discontents" (2017), some of this debate may be misplaced, given that Crenshaw's focus is on domestic violence against women and court proceedings in which Black women are the defendants. In other words, one

cannot take intersectionality out of context and expect it to still work. Indeed, intersectionality has been used to conflate the *epistemological representations* of Black women with their *ontology*, that is, how they are seen (and treated) by others versus how they understand and perceive themselves. As a result, rather than seeking the corrective that Crenshaw pursues, "intersectionality" has often been misapplied to assert that due to Black women's status as "Other of the Other," as Michele Wallace put it some four decades ago in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), they are well and truly merely marginal players in this great game of history.

It seems, then, that a disturbing pattern emerges when we look at the fate of those discourses that have attempted to critique the marginalization of Black women in the U.S., from Michele Wallace to Kimberlé Crenshaw. Protesting the marginalization of Black women becomes a war of attrition, in which misguided allies of Black feminist thinkers outdo themselves in (re)presenting the ontology of Black women as next to nothing at all.

Hortense Spillers's move toward Black female embodiment as a site of resistance and correction, beginning with the now-canonical "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), may well become the most viable strategy in this depressing war. I would argue, however, that we also need to keep our focus on how Black feminists and writings and activities are represented in scholarly and pedagogical media. At the very least, underscoring the central epistemic theft of Black feminism might counter the rather rigid belief both within and without the academy that Black women and their concerns are, at best, a footnote in Western and global intellectual, political, and economic histories.

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Evidence of Things Not Seen" (2000). Dillard opines that an "endarkened feminist epistemology," one in which the goal is inclusivity and diversity (rather than the "great man" approach that girds most white Western bodies of knowledge), would not only increase the qualitative value of resulting epistemologies but positively impact minority students who are normally expected to imbibe a narrative in which bodies are simply objects on which historical agents and events act (662).

In contemporary Black studies, two central moves have been made that have a negative impact on Black feminism. In one, Black feminism is redefined as fully in lockstep with, rather than critical of, Black discourses that imagine the struggle for equal rights through Black male bodies alone. In the second, dubbed "anti-Blackness," any serious analysis of gender and sexual difference is rejected in favor of arguing that all Black peoples are all equally disenfranchised because of racism—regardless of their individual social, economic, and political privileges. Put together, the effect has been a near silencing of the ways in which sexism and homophobia impact Black women's lives and bodies, so that "Black feminist" discourse is reduced to critiquing anti-Black racism to the exclusion of all other bigotries, acts of violence, and power asymmetries sanctioned either by the state or within African American communities themselves.

There are, of course, many scholars today who practice and advocate a U.S. Black feminism that works to engage all relevant bodies and identities equally. These scholars and works should be brought front and center into our syllabi, our scholarship, our speaking invitations, and our collective publications. They are not "simply" feminist; as Mae G. Henderson has shown us in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" (1993), Black feminism is one of the least simple things of all.