



Why Black Feminism & Womanism?

Alice Walker's Definition of a "Womanist" from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Copyright 1983.

WOMANIST

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." 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. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Excerpts from “What We Believe” in the Combahee River Collective Statement of Black Feminists

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se—i.e., their biological maleness—that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic.

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's.

Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of Lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children.

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 oppressions that all women of color face.

Pioneers of Blk Feminism & Womanism

(Araminta/Minty/General) Harriet Tubman: Known mostly for her role as the “Moses of the South” for leading over 300 slaves to freedom on the *Underground Railroad* (1810-1850). She also was the 1st woman to lean an armed assault in the Civil War along the *Combahee River* in 1863.

Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree): Legendary abolitionist who ran away from slavery and became a well-known preacher and poet, delivering her famous speech, “*Ain’t I a Woman?*” at the 1851 Women’s Convention in Ohio. She also was active in helping freed slaves and Black soldiers.

Ella Baker: Key activist in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in 1957 the NAACP, and the Young Negroes Cooperative League. Though she was essentially ran the organizing of the **SCLC & NAACP**, she was not given a leadership position because they preferred males in those roles.

Elaine Brown: The only female leader of the **Black Panther Party** from 1974-1977. In her memoir, ‘A Taste of Power’ she wrote about her activism and how she left the Black Panther Party because of the intolerable sexism of the men.

Zora Neale Hurston: Harlem Renaissance anthropologist and writer of novel revered by many feminist authors of today, ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’ in 1937.

Alice Walker: Poet and author of the famous novel, ‘The Color Purple’ and activist in the 1960s Civil Rights movement. Created the term ‘Womanist’ to give Black women distinction from inapplicable White feminist issues.

Margaret Sloan-Hunter: Feminist, lesbian, and civil rights activate who founded the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973.

Barbara Smith: Primary writer, (along with Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier), of the Combahee River Collective Statement. Also a lesbian, she also challenged the sexism she experienced in the Civil Rights Movement.

Patricia Hill Collins: Sociology professor at the University of Maryland, she is the distinguished author of ‘Black Feminist Thought.’

Audre Lorde: Radical lesbian feminist activist, poet and writer of ‘Sister Outsider’. Leader in the Afro-German Women’s movement in the 1980s.

bell hooks: Activist, feminist, and author of dozens of books that call out the “White supremacist capitalist patriarchy” that exploits Black women.

Angela Davis: Political activist in the Black Panther Party, Communist Party, and scholar, (current professor at UCSC). Wrote “Women, Race & Class” among many other books.
Assata Shakur

Black Queer Feminist Lens

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” - Audre Lorde

A Black Queer Feminist Lens, allows us to see and understand that our identities make us vulnerable to multiple types of oppression. Therefore, liberation for all Black people can only be realized by lifting up the voices and experiences of historically silenced and vulnerable groups within Black communities. Specifically, queer, trans* feminine, poor, differently-abled and undocumented bodies are the ones most vulnerable because they are traditionally marginalized groups within already marginalized communities. It is in taking a Black Queer Feminist lens that one recognizes and humanizes Black bodies that have been made inferior.



White girls don't call their men "brothers" and that made their struggle enviably simpler than mine. Racism and the will to survive it creates a sense of intra-racial loyalty that makes it impossible for black women to turn our backs on black men – even in their ugliest and most sexist of moments. I needed a feminism that would allow us to continue loving ourselves and the brothers who hurt us without letting race loyalty buy us early tombstones.

– Joan Morgan, When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist

Womanism and womanist scholarship has to keep evolving and rejecting any form of oppression anywhere it appears. Anywhere. In the same way we want "mainstream feminism" accountable so must we be accountable too. This is one of the reasons why I think that Black trans women and Black LGBTQIA people and their conceptions of feminism has to be centered in womanism. If they can be free, all Black women can be free. If All Black women and all Black people can be free, all people can be free. The most marginalized have to be centered not excluded.

– Trudy, On Womanism and Greater Inclusivity In The Margins

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Mariame Kaba, @prisonculture
Mikki Kendall, @Karnythia
dream hampton, @dreamhampton
Feminista Jones, @FeministaJones

Suggested Reading List

- *A Church Beneath the Bulldozer*, Kush Thompson
- *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*
edited by Cherrie Moraga Gloria Anzaldua, & Toni Cade Bambara
- *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*,
Barbara Ransby
- *Feminist Theory from Margins to Center*, bell hooks
- *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, Alice Walker
- *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker
- *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, & Barbara Smith
- *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith
- *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*
edited by Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, & Komozi Woodard
- *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance - A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, Danielle L. McGuire
- *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara
- *Assata: An Autobiography*, Assata Shakur
- *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison
- *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston
- *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women and White Women*
Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell
- *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins
- *Naked: Black Women Bare All About Their Skin, Hair, Hips, Lips, and Other Parts*, edited by Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon

- *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist*, Joan Morgan
- *Selected Poems* by Gwendolyn Brooks
- *Women, Race & Class*, Angela Y. Davis
- *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor
- *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, Ntozake Shange.
- *Ain't I A Woman? Black Women & Feminis*, bell hooks
- *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Melissa Harris-Perry
- *Tenderheaded, or Rejecting the Legacy of Being Able to Take It*, Meg Henson Scales

Glossary

Black Feminism: A power-shifting relationship and critical social theory that Black women self-define and design to oppose a system of racial, gendered, sexual, and class oppression and to resist the negative images of Black womanhood existing in patriarchy and discriminatory social practices.

Oppression: Any unjust situation where, systematically, and over a long period of time where one group denies another group access to the resources of society.

Capitalism: An economic system in which companies (not owned by the government, but benefitting and regulated by the government) that satisfies supply and demand produce goods and services for people, and mainly benefits White men.

Patriarchy: A form of social stratification and power-relationships in society that favors men, mainly White men, and grants them more rights and privileges over women and oppresses women's social, political, financial, sexual and human rights.

Womanism: A term coined by Alice Walker to set aside mainstream White feminists from feminist women of color and primarily to resist Anti-blackness within the feminist movement.

Racial Oppression: Racial oppression is burdening a specific race with unjust or cruel restraints or impositions. Racial oppression may be social, systematic, institutionalized or internalized.

Sexual Oppression: discrimination or prejudice based on a person's sex, esp. discrimination against women. The oppression of women is rooted in class society and works in the interests of bosses.

Heterosexual Oppression: The presumption that everyone is heterosexual and that marriage on all forms of legitimate coupling and families are led by one man and one woman

Class Oppression: Class oppression, which is also referred to as classism, can be defined as prejudice and discrimination based on social class. It includes systems that are meant to benefit upper classes at the expense of lower classes.

Integrated Analysis: analysis of how environmental, social and economic issues contributes to the oppressive condition a group faces

Lesbian Separatism: Lesbian separatism is a form of separatist feminism specific to lesbians. This type of separatist feminism is a form of radical feminism that holds that opposition to patriarchy is best done through focusing exclusively on lesbians. Separatism has been considered by some lesbians as both a temporary strategy, and as a lifelong practice but mostly the latter.

The Combahee River Collective Statement (1974): A statement drafted by an organization of Black Feminists and Lesbians in Boston, Massachusetts to outline (1) the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; (2) the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of the collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.

**see the whole statement here: <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>*

The Weight of Oppression: An Activity to Experience Oppression within Already Marginalized Groups

1. Split into 3 groups
2. Within your group, choose 5 folks to be the “Weight Bearers”
 - a. 3 should be men, 2 should be women
3. The Moderator will tell each of the 5 Weight Bearers one word. The Weight Bearers cannot tell each other their word, or the audience their word.
4. **FROM NOW ON, THE 3 MEN IN THE GROUP ARE ABSOLUTELY PROHIBITED FROM SPEAKING. THE MEN CANNOT SPEAK.**
5. The words are Ruby, Emerald, Diamond, Pearl, and Rock. One of the Weight Bearers will have the “*Power Word*” which will be “*Rock*”. **ONLY THE MODERATOR, AND THE PERSON WITH THE “Power Word”** will know who owns the word “Rock”.
6. Each of the 5 Weight Bearers will have to bear a different amount of weight, or discomfort. **ALL Bearers will be uncomfortable**, but “some” will be more uncomfortable than others.
 - a. Moderators will choose the different levels of weight each of the 5 volunteers will bear.
 - b. There will be some books for weight, and you can use bags and other items your group has to put weight on that person.
 - c. If that person is not made uncomfortable enough, Moderator will have the person stand on one foot in addition to bearing weight.
7. After each Weight Bearer is uncomfortable, we will ask who has the “Power Word”? **BUT ONLY THE WOMEN CAN ANSWER THE QUESTION.**
 - a. **Whoever has the “Power Word” being Rock, can permit ALL Weight Bearers to drop their weight.**
8. The audience now has a choice to vote for ONE Black Female to drop their weight. **ONLY** the women get to voice their discomfort and why she is more uncomfortable than the other woman.
9. The woman gets to sit down, everyone has to clap for her winning.
10. Now everyone can drop their weight and sit down.

11. Moderator will now ask who has the “Power Word”, being “Rock”. And the Weight Bearer with “Rock” will now reveal his/her/themself.

12. Now we will discuss how there can be oppression within oppression when some groups, like Black women, have been and are silenced and barred from their rights.