

# WHAT'S IN A NAME? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond

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by Patricia Hill Collins

**B**LACK WOMEN ARE AT A DECISION POINT that in many ways mirrors that faced by African Americans as a collectivity. Building on the pathbreaking works by Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and other black women who "broke silence" in the 1970s, African American women in the 1980s and 1990s developed a "voice," a self-defined, collective black women's standpoint about black womanhood (Collins 1990). Moreover, black women used this standpoint to "talk back" concerning black women's representation in dominant discourses (hooks 1989). As a result of this struggle, African American women's ideas and experiences have achieved a visibility unthinkable in the past.

But African American women now stand at a different historical moment. Black women appear to have a voice, and with this new-found voice comes a new series of concerns. For example, we must be attentive to the seductive absorption of black women's voices in classrooms of higher education where black women's texts are still much more welcomed than black women ourselves. Giving the illusion of change, this strategy of symbolic inclusion masks how the everyday institutional policies and arrangements that suppress and exclude African Americans as a collectivity remain virtually untouched (Carby 1992; Du Cille 1994). Similarly, capitalist market relations that transformed black women's writing into a hot commodity threaten to strip their works of their critical edge. Initially, entering pub-

lic space via books, movies, and print media proved invigorating. But in increasingly competitive global markets where anything that sells will be sold regardless of the consequences, black women's "voices" now flood the market. Like other commodities exchanged in capitalist markets, surplus cheapens value, and the fad of today becomes the nostalgic memory of tomorrow.

While a public voice initially proved dangerous, black women's coming to voice ironically fostered the emergence of a new challenge. The new public safe space provided by black women's success allowed longstanding differences among black women structured along axes of sexuality, social class, nationality, religion, and region to emerge. At this point, whether African American women can fashion a singular "voice" about the black *woman's* position remains less an issue than how black women's voices collectively construct, affirm, and maintain a dynamic black *women's* self-defined standpoint. Given the increasingly troublesome political context affecting black women as a group (Massey and Denton 1993; Squires 1994), such solidarity is essential. Thus, ensuring group unity while recognizing the tremendous heterogeneity that operates within the boundaries of the term "black women" comprises one fundamental challenge now confronting African American women.

**C**URRENT DEBATES about whether black women's standpoint should be named "womanism" or "black feminism" reflect this basic challenge of accommodating diversity

among black women. In her acclaimed volume of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker (1983) introduced four meanings of the term "womanist." According to Walker's first definition, a "womanist" was "a black feminist or feminist of color (xi)." Thus, on some basic level, Walker herself uses the two terms as being virtually interchangeable. Like Walker, many African American women see little difference between the two since both support a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-determination. As Barbara Omolade points out, "black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty" (Omolade 1994, xx).

But despite similar beliefs expressed by African American women who define themselves as black feminists, as womanists, as both, or, in some cases, as neither, increasing attention seems devoted to delineating the differences, if any between groups naming themselves as "womanists" or "black feminists." The *name* given to black women's collective standpoint seems to matter, but why?

In this paper, I explore some of the theoretical implications of using the terms "womanism" and "black feminism" to name a black women's standpoint. My purpose is not to classify either the works of black women or African American women themselves into one category or the other. Rather, I aim to examine how the effort to categorize obscures more basic challenges that confront African American women as a group.

### Womanism

**A**LICE WALKER'S MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS of the term "womanism" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, shed light on the issue of why many African American women prefer the term womanism to black feminism. Walker offers two contradictory meanings of "womanism." On the one hand, Walker clearly sees womanism as rooted in black women's concrete history in racial and gender oppression. Taking the term from the Southern black folk expression of mothers to female children "you acting womanish,"

Walker suggests that black women's concrete history fosters a womanist worldview accessible primarily and perhaps exclusively to black women. "Womanish" girls acted in outrageous, courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions long limiting white women. Womanish girls wanted to know more and in greater depth than what was considered good for them. They were responsible, in charge, and serious.

Despite her disclaimer that womanists are "traditionally universalist," a philosophy invoked by her metaphor of the garden where room exists for all flowers to bloom equally and differently, Walker simultaneously implies that black women are somehow superior to white women because of this black folk tradition. Defining womanish as the opposite of the "frivolous, irresponsible, not serious" girlish, Walker constructs black women's experiences in opposition to those of white women. This meaning of womanism sees it as being different from and superior to feminism, a difference allegedly stemming from black and white women's different histories with American racism. Walker's much cited phrase, "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender (1983, xii)" clearly seems designed to set up this type of comparison — black women are "womanist" while white women remain merely "feminist."

This usage sits squarely in black nationalist traditions premised on the belief that blacks and whites cannot function as equals while inhabiting the same territory or participating in the same social institutions (Pinkney 1976; Van Deburg 1992). Since black nationalist philosophy posits that white people as a group have a vested interest in continuing a system of white supremacy, it typically sees little use for black integration or assimilation into a system predicated on black subjugation. Black nationalist approaches also support a black moral superiority over whites because of black suffering.

Walker's use of the term womanism promises black women who both operate within these black nationalist assumptions and who simultaneously see the need to address "feminist" issues within African American communities partial reconciliation of these two seemingly incompatible philoso-

phies. Womanism offers a distance from the “enemy,” in this case, whites generally and white women in particular, yet still raises the issue of gender. Due to its endorsement of racial separatism, this interpretation of womanism offers a vocabulary for addressing gender issues within African American communities without challenging the racially segregated terrain that characterizes American social institutions.

This use of womanism sidesteps an issue central to many white feminists, namely, finding ways to foster interracial cooperation among women. African American women embracing black nationalist philosophies typically express little interest in working with white women — in fact, white women are defined as part of the problem. Moreover, womanism appears to provide an avenue to foster stronger relationships between black women and black men, another very important issue for African American women regardless of political perspective. Again, Walker’s definition provides guidance where she notes that womanists are “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (xi). Many black women view feminism as a movement that at best, is exclusively for women and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men. Sherley Williams takes this view when she notes that in contrast to feminism, “womanist inquiry...assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men” (1990, 70). Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men.

Walker also presents a visionary meaning for womanism. As part of her second definition, Walker has a black girl pose the question “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” (xi). The response of “the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented,” both criticizes colorism within African American communities and broadens the notion of humanity to make all people people of color. Reading this passage as a metaphor, womanism thus furnishes a vision where the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctive-

ness and integrity.

This meaning of womanism seems rooted in another major political tradition within African American politics, namely, a pluralist version of black empowerment (Van Deburg 1992). Pluralism views society as being composed of various ethnic and interest groups, all of whom compete for goods and services. Equity lies in providing equal opportunities, rights, and respect to all groups. By retaining black cultural distinctiveness and integrity, pluralism offers a modified version of racial integration premised not on individual assimilation but on *group* integration. Clearly rejecting what they perceive as being the limited vision of feminism projected by North American white women, many black women theorists have been attracted to this joining of pluralism and racial integration in this interpretation of Walker’s “womanism.” For example, black feminist theologian Katie Geneva Cannon’s (1988) work *Black Womanist Ethics* invokes this sense of the visionary content of womanism. As an ethical system, womanism is always in the making — it is not a closed fixed system of ideas but one that continually evolves through its rejection of all forms of oppression and commitment to social justice.

Walker’s definition thus manages to invoke three important yet contradictory philosophies that frame black social and political thought, namely, black nationalism via her claims of black women’s moral and epistemological superiority via suffering under racial and gender oppression, pluralism via the cultural integrity provided by the metaphor of the garden, and integration/assimilation via her claims that black women are “traditionally universalist” (Van Deburg 1992). Just as black nationalism and racial integration coexist in uneasy partnership, with pluralism occupying the contested terrain between the two, Walker’s definitions of womanism demonstrate comparable contradictions. By both grounding womanism in the concrete experiences of African American women and generalizing about the potential for realizing a humanist vision of community via the experiences of African American women, Walker depicts the potential for oppressed people to possess a moral

vision and standpoint on society that grows from their situation of oppression. This standpoint also emerges as an incipient foundation for a more humanistic, just society. Overall, these uses of Walker's term "womanism" creates conceptual space that reflects bona fide philosophical differences that exist among African-American women.<sup>1</sup>

ONE PARTICULARLY SIGNIFICANT FEATURE of black women's use of womanism concerns the part of Walker's definition that remains neglected. A more troublesome line for those self-defining as womanist precedes the often cited passage, "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). Just before Walker offers the admonition that womanists, by definition, are committed to wholeness, she states that a womanist is also "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). The relative silence of womanists on this dimension of womanism speaks to black women's continued ambivalence in dealing with the links between race, gender and sexuality, in this case, the "taboo" sexuality of lesbianism. In her essay "The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s," black feminist critic Barbara Smith (1990) points out that African American women have yet to come to terms with homophobia in African American communities. Smith applauds the growth of black women's fiction in the 1980s, but also observes that within black feminist intellectual production, black lesbians continue to be ignored. Despite the fact that some of the most prominent and powerful black women thinkers claimed by both womanists and black feminists were and are lesbians, this precept often remains unacknowledged in the work of African American writers. In the same way that many people read the Bible, carefully selecting the parts that agree with their worldview and rejecting the rest, selective readings of Walker's womanism produce comparable results.

Another significant feature of black women's multiple uses of womanism concerns the potential for a slippage between the real and the ideal. To me, there is a distinction between describing black women's

historical responses to racial and gender oppression as being womanist, and using womanism as a visionary term delineating an ethical or ideal vision of humanity for all people. Identifying the liberatory *potential* within black women's communities that emerges from concrete, historical experiences remains quite different from claiming that black women have already *arrived* at this ideal, "womanist" endpoint. Refusing to distinguish carefully between these two meanings of womanism thus collapses the historically real and the future ideal into one privileged position for African American women in the present. Taking this position is reminiscent of the response of some black women to the admittedly narrow feminist agenda forwarded by white women in the early 1970s. Those black women proclaimed that they were already "liberated" while in actuality, this was far from the truth.

### Black Feminism

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN who use the term black feminism also attach varying interpretations to this term. As black feminist theorist and activist Pearl Cleage defines it, feminism is "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities — intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic" (1993, 28). In its broadest sense, feminism constitutes both an ideology and a global political movement that confronts sexism, a social relationship in which males as a group have authority over females as a group.

Globally, a feminist agenda encompasses several major areas. First and foremost, the economic status of women and issues associated with women's global poverty, such as educational opportunities, industrial development, environmental racism, employment policies, prostitution, and inheritance laws concerning property, constitute a fundamental global women's issue. Political rights for women, such as gaining the vote, rights of assembly, traveling in public, officeholding, the rights of political prisoners, and basic human rights violations against women such as rape and torture constitute a second area

of concern. A third area of global concern consists of marital and family issues such as marriage and divorce laws, child custody policies, and domestic labor. Women's health and survival issues, such as reproductive rights, pregnancy, sexuality, and AIDS constitute another area of global feminist concern. This broad global feminist agenda finds varying expressions in different regions of the world and among diverse populations.

Using the term "black feminism" positions African American women to examine how the particular constellation of issues affecting black women in the United States are part of issues of women's emancipation struggles globally (Davis 1989; James and Busia 1994). In the context of feminism as a global political movement for women's rights and emancipation, the patterns of feminist knowledge and politics that African American women encounter in the United States represent but a narrow segment refracted through the dichotomous racial politics of white supremacy in the United States. Because the media in the United States portrays feminism as a for-whites-only movement, and because many white women have accepted this view of American apartheid that leads to segregated institutions of all types, including feminist organizations, feminism is often viewed by both black and whites as the cultural property of white women (Caraway 1991).

**D**ESPITE THEIR MEDIA ERASURE, many African American women have long struggled against this exclusionary feminism and have long participated in what appear to be for-whites-only feminist activity. In some cases, some black women have long directly challenged the racism within feminist organizations controlled by white women. Sojourner Truth's often cited phrase "ain't I a woman" typifies this longstanding tradition (Joseph 1990). At other times, even though black women's participation in feminist organizations remains largely invisible, for example, Pauli Murray's lack of recognition as a founding member of NOW, black women participated in feminist organizations in positions of leadership. In still other cases, black women combine allegedly divergent

political agendas. For example, Pearl Cleage observes that black feminist politics and black nationalist politics need not be contradictory. She notes, "I don't think you can be a true Black Nationalist, dedicated to the freedom of black people *without* being a feminist, black *people* being made up of both men and *women*, after all, and feminism being nothing more or less than a belief in the political, social and legal equality of women" (1994, 180).

Using the term "black feminism" disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective "black" challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women. Since many white women think that black women lack feminist consciousness, the term "black feminist" both highlights the contradictions underlying the assumed whiteness of feminism and serves to remind white women that they comprise neither the only nor the normative "feminists." The term "black feminism" also makes many African American women uncomfortable because it challenges black women to confront their own views on sexism and women's oppression. Because the majority of African American women encounter their own experiences repackaged in racist school curricula and media, even though they may support the very ideas on which feminism rests, large numbers of African American women reject the term "feminism" because of what they perceive as its association with whiteness. Many see feminism as operating exclusively within the terms white and American and perceive its opposite as being black and American. When given these two narrow and false choices, black women routinely choose "race" and let the lesser question of "gender" go. In this situation, those black women who identify with feminism must be recoded as being either non-black or less authentically black. The term "black feminist" also disrupts a longstanding and largely unquestioned reliance on black racial solidarity as a deep tap root in black political philosophies, especially black nationalist and cultural pluralist frameworks (Dyson 1993). Using family

rhetoric that views black family, community, race and nation as a series of nested boxes, each gaining meaning from the other, certain rules apply to all levels of this "family" organization. Just as families have internal naturalized hierarchies that give, for example, older siblings authority over younger ones or males over females, groups defining themselves as racial-families invoke similar rules (Collins forthcoming). Within African American communities, one such rule is that black women will support black men, no matter what, an unwritten family rule that was manipulated quite successfully during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings. Even if Anita Hill was harassed by Clarence Thomas, many proclaimed in barber shops and beauty parlors, she should have kept her mouth shut and not "aired dirty laundry." Even though Thomas recast the life of his own sister through the framework of an unworthy welfare queen, in deference to rules of racial solidarity, black women should have kept our collective mouths shut. By counseling black women not to remain silent in the face of abuse, whoever does it, black feminism comes into conflict with codes of silence such as these.

SEVERAL DIFFICULTIES accompany the use of the term "black feminism." One involves the problem of balancing the genuine concerns of black women against continual pressures to absorb and recast such interests within white feminist frameworks. For example, ensuring political rights and economic development via collective action to change social institutions remains a strong focal point in the feminism of African American women and women of color. Yet the emphasis on themes such as personal identity, understanding "difference," deconstructing women's multiple selves, and the simplistic model of the political expressed through the slogan the "personal is political," that currently permeate North American white women's feminism in the academy can work to sap black feminism of its critical edge. Efforts of contemporary black women thinkers to explicate a long-standing black women's intellectual tradition bearing the label "black feminism" can attract the atten-

tion of white women armed with a different feminist agenda. Issues raised by black women not seen as explicitly "feminist" ones, primarily issues that affect only women, receive much less sanction. In a sense, the constant drumbeat of having to support white women in their efforts to foster an anti-racist feminism that allows black women access to the global network of women's activism diverts black women's energy away from addressing social issues facing African American communities. Because black feminism appears to be so well-received by white women, in the context of dichotomous racial politics of the United States, some black women quite rightfully suspect its motives.

Another challenge facing black feminism concerns the direct conflict between black feminism and selected elements of black religious traditions. For example, the visibility of white lesbians within North American feminism overall comes into direct conflict with many black women's articles of faith that homosexuality is a sin. While individual African American women may be accepting of gays, lesbians and bisexuals as individuals, especially if such individuals are African-American, black women as a collectivity have simultaneously distanced themselves from social movements perceived as requiring acceptance of homosexuality. As one young black woman queried, "why do I have to accept lesbianism in order to support black feminism?" The association of feminism with lesbianism remains a problematic one for black women. Reducing black lesbians to their sexuality, one that chooses women over men, reconfigures black lesbians as enemies of black men. This reduction not only constitutes a serious misreading of black lesbianism — black lesbians have fathers, brothers, and sons of their own and are embedded in a series of relationships as complex as their heterosexual brothers and sisters — it simultaneously diverts attention away from more important issues (Lorde 1984). Who ultimately benefits when the presence of black lesbians in any black social movement leads to its rejection by African Americans?

The theme of lesbianism and its association with feminism in the minds of many African Americans also overlaps with another

er concern of many African American women, namely their commitment to African American men. Another challenge confronting black feminism concerns its perceived separatism — many African Americans define black feminism as being exclusively for black women only and rejecting black men. In explaining her preference for “womanism,” Sherley Ann Williams notes, “one of the most disturbing aspects of current black feminist criticism (is) its separatism — its tendency to see not only a *distinct* black female culture but to see that culture as a separate cultural form having more in common with white female experience than with the facticity of Afro-American life” (1990, 70). This is a valid criticism of black feminism, one that in my mind, must be addressed if the major ideas of black feminism expect to avoid the danger of becoming increasingly separated from African American women’s experiences and interests. But it also speaks to the larger issue of the continuing difficulty of positioning black feminism between black nationalism and North American white feminism. In effect, black feminism must come to terms with a white feminist agenda incapable of seeing its own racism as well as a black nationalist one resistant to grappling with its own sexism (White 1990). Finding a place that accommodates these seemingly contradictory agendas remains elusive (Christian 1989).

#### Beyond Naming

**A**FRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S EFFORTS to distinguish between womanism and black feminism illustrates how black women’s placement in hierarchical power relations fosters different yet related allegiances to a black women’s self-defined standpoint. While the surface differences distinguishing African American women who embrace womanism and black feminism appear to be minimal, black women’s varying locations in neighborhoods, schools, and labor markets generate comparably diverse views on the strategies black women feel will ultimately lead to black women’s self-determination. In a sense, while womanism’s affiliation with black nationalism both taps an historic philosophy and a set of social institutions orga-

nized around the centrality of racial solidarity for black survival, this position can work to isolate womanism from global women’s issues. At the same time, while black feminism’s connections to existing women’s struggles both domestically and globally fosters a clearer political agenda regarding gender, its putative affiliation with whiteness fosters its rejection by the very constituency it aims to serve.

**N**O TERM CURRENTLY EXISTS that adequately represents the substance of what diverse groups of black women alternately call “womanism” and “black feminism.” Perhaps the time has come to go beyond naming by applying main ideas contributed by both womanists and black feminists to the over-arching issue of analyzing the centrality of gender in shaping a range of relationships within African-American communities. Such an examination might encompass several dimensions.

First, it is important to keep in mind that the womanist/black feminist debate occurs primarily among relatively privileged black women. Womanism and black feminism would both benefit by examining the increasing mismatch between what privileged black women, especially those in the academy, identify as important themes and what the large numbers of African American women who stand outside of higher education might deem worthy of attention. While these African American women physically resemble one another and may even occupy the same space, their worlds remain decidedly different. One might ask how closely the thematic content of newly emerging black women’s voices in the academy speak for and speak to the masses of African American women still denied literacy. Black women academics explore intriguing issues of centers and margins and work to deconstruct black female identity while large numbers of black women remain trapped in neighborhoods organized around old centers of racial apartheid. Talk of centers and margins, even the process of coming to voice itself, that does not simultaneously address issues of power leaves masses of black women doing the dry cleaning, cooking the fast food, and

dusting the computer of the sister who has just written the newest theoretical treatise on black women.

Second, shifting the emphasis from black women's oppression to how institutionalized racism operates in gender-specific ways should provide a clearer perspective on how gender oppression works in tandem with racial oppression for both black women and men. This shift potentially opens up new political choices for African Americans as a group. Just as feminism does not automatically reside in female bodies, sexism does not reside in male ones. It may be time to separate political philosophies such as black nationalism, Afrocentrism, and feminism, from the socially constructed categories of individuals created by historical relations of racism and sexism. Black men cannot have black women's experiences but they can support African American women by advocating anti-racist and anti-sexist philosophies in their intellectual and political work (see, e.g., Marable 1983; hooks and West 1991; and Awkward 1995). Focusing on gender as a structure of power that works with race should provide the much needed space for dialogues among black women, among black men, and between black women and men.

This approach promises to benefit the black community as a collectivity because it models sensitivity to the heterogeneity concerning not only gender, but class, nationality, sexuality, and age currently operating within the term "black community." Thus, the womanism/black feminism debate also provides an excellent opportunity to model a process of building community via heterogeneity and not sameness. For African American women, breathing life into Alice Walker's seemingly contradictory meanings of "womanist" and "black feminist" means engaging in the difficult task of working through the diverse ways that black women have been affected by interlocking systems of oppression. Some black women will have to grapple with how internalized oppression has affected them because they are poor while others must come to terms with the internalized privilege accompanying their middle and upper-class status. Other black women must grapple with the internalized

privileges that accrue to them because they engage in heterosexual behaviors or how American citizenship provides them rights denied to women elsewhere in the Diaspora. Working through the interconnected nature of multiple systems of oppression and potential ways that such intersectionality might foster resistance becomes significant in moving quite diverse African American women forward toward Walker's visionary term "womanism." A commitment to social justice and participatory democracy provide some fundamental ground rules for black women and men concerning how to relate across differences.

**F**INALLY, DESPITE THE PROMISE of this approach, it is important to consider the limitations of womanism, black feminism, and all other putatively progressive philosophies. Whether labeled "womanism," "black feminism," or something else, African American women could not possibly possess a superior vision of what community would look like, how justice might feel, and the like. This presupposes that such a perspective is arrived at without conflict, intellectual rigor, and political struggle. While black women's particular location provides a distinctive angle of vision on oppression, this perspective comprises neither a privileged nor a complete standpoint. In this sense, grappling with the ideas of heterogeneity within black women's communities and hammering out a self-defined, black women's standpoint leads the way for other groups wishing to follow a similar path. As for black women, we can lead the way or we can follow behind. Things will continue to move on regardless of our choice.

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**Notes**

1. For a detailed treatment of Alice Walker's and other black feminist writers' connection to black nationalist politics, see Dubey (1994).

**The Words of My People**

The words of my people  
 So incorrect by the white man's definition  
 But so beautiful to my ears  
 I's seen, gon' be, lordy please have mercy  
 These words are deeply embedded in my  
 history  
 They have passed down countless stories  
 From generation to generation  
 The words . . . of my people.

**by Billy Williams, Jr.**