

## Introduction

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# African American Feminist Practices

Abstract political and moral statements, however inspiring they may be, do not in themselves produce social change. Real change requires real-life action. This collection of first-person narratives provides much-needed examples of the concrete ways in which contemporary African Americans, both women and men, live by feminist principles, not just as beliefs or theories but by our actions in concrete situations.

Feminists—whether inside or outside academic settings—are accustomed to working with ideas and models that are part of a larger ideology of social justice, which we need to understand and transform our world. Feminism, however, is more than a set of theories and perspectives associated with a particular ideology; it is something we put into practice. How can ordinary people, whether or not they identify themselves as feminists, apply to their daily lives the basic idea that women are as fully human as men? And if we do identify as feminists, how do we relate our feminist ideas and values to our behavior? The African American women and men in this book share personal accounts of how they encountered feminist ideas and are using them now as a guide to living, expressed in relevant, everyday practices.

A person, female or male, whose feminism is practical recognizes that there is an imbalance of power between men and women in our society and acts publicly and privately in ways to correct that imbalance.<sup>1</sup> The personal chapters included here reveal how feminist principles affect people's perception of their ability to change themselves as well as society.

At the heart of our autobiographical chapters, we address the following questions with examples from our lived experiences: How can people understand what the personal benefits of feminism are, when so much of the information available about it is conveyed through elitist (and often biased and hostile) print and electronic media sources? In what ways can feminists contribute to the rehumanization of society when we ourselves have been deeply traumatized by its dehumanizing aspects? As we fight for social justice institutionally, how can we practice it individually? How can we make feminism work in our lives?

Authors in the collection emphasize that we must reflect seriously on our everyday lives; otherwise, we become oblivious to the reality that there may be a huge gap between our expressed feminist ideas and the real values that drive our acts. If there is a gap, we become activists in the abstract but not in our everyday behavior. Personal reflection on the real-life consequences of our human frailties reminds us that we are not above reproach. As we fight for the realization of certain values at the institutional level, we must also realize that these values are meaningless if they are absent from our habitual practices. Admittedly, we have contradictions. *African Americans Doing Feminism* reveals how we learn to face them *and* work to transcend them. Our experiences suggest that if we maintain a long-term commitment to change, if we are truly accountable to a movement that represents our best intentions, our behavior will gradually fall in line with our ideas.

### The Personal Is Political: Institutional Forces and Individual Behavior

Sometimes the personal is not *self-evidently* political; therefore, in each chapter the contributors to this book attempt to make the connection between our individual problems, perceptions, and choices and the institutions that have shaped those factors. We believe it is important to make the link between private and public worlds because the difficulty in changing ourselves is related, in part, to the difficulty of changing political and economic structures that reinforce dehumanizing behavior that demeans women and men.

Often, when we change our interpersonal behavior to support our feminist beliefs, we collide with other people, power relations, and institutions that strive to censure us. Our struggle to dismantle the effects of sexism in our personal lives also requires changing the institutional structures that reinforce sexism and the other oppressive systems that intersect with sexism (e.g., racism, heterosexism, and economic inequalities). Because of those connections, while reading this work it is important to remain mindful of the social forces that both shape and sanction individual behavior. These are not simply stories about personal issues that feminists have with others. Rather, these “sociopolitical” narratives demonstrate how underlying our personal life experiences are institutional factors that shape our experiences and our responses to what happens to us. Our responses either support or challenge the assumptions and practices of institutionalized injustices such as sexism and racism.

While our narratives emerge from personal experiences we have had as feminists, this collection does not depend solely on personal reflection. We have also linked our actions as feminists to feminist theoretical perspectives. Authors offer intersectional analyses of their lives, stressing how their practice

of feminism cannot be separated from awareness of systems of race, sexuality, and class oppression. Together our life stories conclude that dismantling sexism and other forms of oppression necessitates collective action that will bring about changes in the economy, the labor market, social policy and the state, as well as in the domestic sphere, the nature of sexual encounters, and the social construction of racial and sexual difference.<sup>2</sup>

All chapters in this book connect the personal to the political, making clear our belief that as we strive to change at the personal level, we must simultaneously strive at the collective level through organized action. All but three chapters (Neal, chapter 2; Cleage, chapter 8; and Lemons, chapter 12) are published here for the first time. This collection contributes to the continued development of feminist theory in practice, grounding it in the diverse experiences of self-identified African American feminists. Although African American feminists were targeted, their definitions and experiences of feminism could be drawn from a wide variety of available feminisms.

We reject monolithic notions of what an “African American feminist practice” is, or even what an African American feminist is. However, certain themes emerge, such as (1) how interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class) affect Black women’s lives; (2) the adoption of a multipronged approach to problem-solving that tackles multiple inequalities, as well as Black women’s multiple identities and roles, and (3) our commitment to addressing both racial and gender equalities, without ranking one as more important than the other.<sup>3</sup>

As editor, given the dynamic nature of language and expressions of feminism, Black feminism, and womanism,<sup>4</sup> I did not tell authors how to define “feminist.” Instead, I encouraged them to use the definitions that were rooted in their lived experiences. These chapters expose the ways that “race, gender sexuality, and class categories intertwine and transform each other; although these categories are socially constructed, they have real consequences for real people.”<sup>5</sup> Together, they present identities as elastic and expansive, demonstrate respect for the variety of voices within the movement, and challenge the politics of what is “respectable and acceptable.” We share stories many women and men are uncomfortable telling or have previously refused to tell.<sup>6</sup> Our practices can be adopted regardless of one’s racial designation or cultural background, given the humanistic values that underlie them. However, our experiences do not necessarily reflect the experiences of all Black feminists.

As African American feminists, in particular, we strongly believe that anyone who dismisses the relevance of feminism for African American individuals and institutions is expressing cynicism, rather than a commitment to the social justice concerns of African American women and men. We are painfully aware that racism on the part of many White, middle-class feminists has affected each historical period of the women’s movement and that narrow interpretations of

feminism have not served us, as African Americans.<sup>7</sup> However, we believe that African Americans do have something to gain from feminist perspectives that appropriately and critically consider the personal and political interconnections among race, class, sexuality, and other systemic forces.

In addition, this collection challenges those African Americans who think that we must refrain from “airing dirty laundry” as proof of our loyalty to radical Black politics. We emphasize, instead, the radical need for African Americans to *change* our behavior—rather than hide our behavior—and we claim our right to make mistakes and evolve, like most human beings. That is the concept of radical Black politics to which we are loyal.

Our autobiographical chapters suggest that the development of feminist practices by women of color is a dynamic process. This finding is consistent with previous edited collections by women of color, such as *The Black Woman*; *This Bridge Called My Back*; *Home Girls*; *Making Face/Making Soul*; *Yell-Oh Girls!* and *Colonize This!*<sup>8</sup> As we move toward a society of mutual respect and safety for all, we have found it helpful to share honestly with one another how the combined effects of patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, classism, and other oppressive forces continue to distort our lives—even as we try to resist such forces. Every one of us has experienced both hope regarding the process of change and despair when it is slow, uneven, bumpy, and full of contradiction and backlash. We understand and accept that in a racially divided, heterosexist, market-driven, patriarchal society, we must be willing to risk alienation from men and women both inside and outside our various communities.

We also acknowledge that only slowly, and with enormous pressure from—and corresponding bitterness for—African American feminists, will we see significant changes in African American communities and society at large. Backlash notwithstanding, we intend to leave no one out of our humanist vision for social change. We believe that anyone, at any given moment, can become a part of the solution.

Our experiences have taught us that anyone can teach us something, and that as social change agents we always have more to learn. For shared and creative power to be rediscovered, as our narratives make clear, it is essential not to assume that we know how everything should be done. We would like to avoid the misguided, authoritarian notion that we have indisputable truths to *impose*. That certainly does not mean we have nothing useful to *propose!* Each narrative is an attempt to demonstrate open-mindedness by affirming our feminist insights without putting down others (feminists and nonfeminists alike) who actively choose (or lapse into) other options.

As with most feminist anthologies, a middle-class bias is evident, given that most women and men nowadays are exposed to feminist perspectives and writings in university settings. Fortunately, the conversational writing style of

most of the authors makes the volume accessible to high school, college, and lay-educated readers alike. Moreover, despite the fact that colleges and universities offer the most supportive setting for many African American feminists, individuals who work outside academic settings contributed more than half of the narratives in the collection. Chapters in the collection were written by people who were born between 1923 and 1973.

### Overview of the Volume

*African Americans Doing Feminism* addresses five broad areas. In part 1, “Family Values,” contributors write about their decisions to have or not have children and their experiences with feminist parenting. Angela M. W. Thanyachareon, a lawyer, embraces full-time mothering and explains, in chapter 1, why breastfeeding is both a feminist and a human rights issue. Writer and academic Mark Anthony Neal discusses how progressive Black feminist politics expand his notions of fatherhood and Black masculinity (chapter 2). Research psychologist and professor Aaronette M. White, a reproductive-rights activist who was sure she did not want to have children, describes voluntarily having a tubal ligation, as a means of practicing what she preached (chapter 3).

Part 2, “Community Building” includes feminists who are involved in both individual and group empowerment activities. Omar Freilla, a Black Latino environmentalist and administrator, recalls how his personal commitment to his feminist partner led to a public commitment and the founding of Black Men for the Eradication of Sexism at Morehouse College (chapter 4). Social worker Mary Anne Adams, an openly proud lesbian, describes how her own coming-out process motivated her to help lesbian and gay students of color obtain scholarships, thereby building a community from former outsiders (chapter 5). Witnessing Black men’s violence against Black women helped political science professor Todd C. Shaw speak out against violence on college campuses and “come out” to women friends who validated his feminist perspectives on gender, sexuality, and relationships (chapter 6). Vera C. Martin offers her rationale for living out her retirement years in an RV park, to fulfill her need for a community of women who embrace being old and lesbian (chapter 7).

Part 3, “Romantic Partnerships,” examines intimate involvements that ultimately strengthened the feminist commitments of authors. In chapter 8, writer and activist Pearl Cleage shares the concrete ways in which she and her husband practice feminism, making marriage viable for a progressive African American couple. Health educator and executive William Dotson (chapter 9) tells how a twenty-year “off-again-on-again” relationship with a Black feminist woman helped him gradually redefine how he understood and lived manhood.

Dorothy M. (chapter 10), already a feminist, struggled to stop being both victim and perpetrator in a violent lesbian relationship, finally getting the help she needed to sustain her recovery.

“Healing Practices” are covered in part 4. These chapters detail how feminists learn from painful conditions in their past and become the people they want to be. Professor Carolyn M. West finds solace in the words and actions of Black feminist foremothers while fighting a sexual harassment battle that she ultimately wins (chapter 11). Gary L. Lemons, a professor of English, articulates his vision of “Black feminist male recovery” as a childhood survivor of and witness to domestic violence (chapter 12). In chapter 13, sociology professor Carolyn E. Gross describes how she developed resilience as a survivor of incest, and how both radical and Black feminist perspectives continue to help her thrive. Psychotherapist Vanessa Jackson (chapter 14) uses both ancient and contemporary woman-centered strategies to heal from depression, countering the oppressive myth of the Black superwoman in her own life and in the lives of her clients.

Part 5, “Career Dilemmas,” presents the variety of work-related options feminists choose and the feminist perspectives that help them navigate occupational challenges. In chapter 15, Sister Sojourner Truth explains how feminist and womanist theologies help her stay committed to the revolutionary resistance that lies at the heart of her spiritual vocation and her choice to remain a celibate nun. Deloise (Dee) A. Frisque left the academic world to start her own business, relying on feminist principles to guide her through recurring bouts of self-doubt and fear (chapter 16). When Marian Cannon Dornell felt like a mere “token” Black student in nursing school, a group of White feminist-oriented women became her allies (chapter 17). Her narrative parallels that of Mary Church Terrell, an early 20th century Black feminist, allowing the reader to see how similar pressures can be overcome with comparable support networks. In chapter 18, life coach Anitra L. Nevels describes her vocational journey, in the course of which an epiphany in an emergency room led to her decision to teach women financial literacy. *African Americans Doing Feminism* makes clear that self-identifying as “feminist” and making feminist choices are not always easy or comfortable. A certain level of vulnerability, contradiction, redefinition, and uncertainty can be found in the narratives, reflecting the realities of adult feminist identity development and the adoption of “doable” practices. But, none of us would have it any other way. Our future and our self-respect depend on it.

## Notes

1. White, A. (2008). *Ain't I a Feminist? African American Men Speak Out on Fatherhood, Friendship, Forgiveness, and Freedom*, ix (New York: State University of New York Press).

2. For an overview of African American feminist thought, see Guy-Sheftall, B., 1995 (*Words of Fire: African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New)).

3. For additional discussion of African feminist themes, see the following: Collins, P. H., 1990, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman); Guy-Sheftall, B., 1995, *Words of Fire: African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New); Simien, E. M., 2006, *Black Feminist Voices in Politics* (New York: State University of New York Press); Smith, B., ed., 1983, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. (New York: Kitchen Table).

4. Valenti, J., 2007, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*. (Emeryville, CA: Seal); Phillips, L., 2006, *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge); Pough, G., E. Richardson, A. Durham, and R. Raimist, eds., 2007, *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* (Mira Loma, CA: Parker).

5. White, E. F., 2001. *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 15.

6. Ibid.

7. For historical examples of racism in the feminist movement, see the following: Caraway, N., 1991, *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1991); Giddings, P., 1996, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow); Joseph, G., and J. Lewis, 1981, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (Boston: South End, 1981); Ware, V., 1992, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (New York: Verso). For a more hopeful view of a particular slice of recent feminist history, see Valk, Anne M., 2008, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press).

8. Cade, T., 1983, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Signet); Moraga, C., and G. Anzaldúa, eds., 1981 *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone); Smith, B., ed., 1983, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table); Anzaldúa, G., ed., 1995, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute); Nam, V., 2001, *Yell-Oh Girls! Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American* (New York: HarperCollins); Hernandez, D., and B. Rehman, eds., 2002, *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* (Emeryville, CA: Seal).