Stepping out of the third wave: A contemporary Black feminist paradigm

Chiquita D. Howard-Bostic, Instructor, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Abstract

Black feminists have engaged in dialogue that confronts and transforms reactionary thinking and problematic performance projected toward Black women and other women of color. In accordance with Springer (2002), I posit that the 'wave analogy' presented in support of white feminist discourse is both problematic and untenable to the roles of women of African descent as feminists. Hence, by restraining models of Black feminism into a Eurocentric bottle, or wave, universal categorization of feminism has obscured the historical role of race in feminist organizing.

Roth (2004) introduces a typology of separate feminist movements engaged among African-American, Chicana, and White feminists. Parallel with Roth's typology, I adopt a scheme of logic to expunge African-centered thought from the agenda of the traditionally defined 'three waves' of feminism. I offer a brief history of a current/contemporary paradigm of Black feminist thought and liberatory feminism. This transition from the wave analogy into contemporary Black feminist thought allows for a deconstruction of the wave ideology. Hence, the positions and themes that define the scope of contemporary Black feminism are rooted in a transition from a universal conceptualization of women's rights and gradual movement toward difference among women.

Introduction: Toward Difference and Consensus Building

This essay has a three-fold purpose. First, I define black feminist dialogue. Second, I posit that the 'wave analogy' of historical feminist discourse is both problematic and untenable to past and present roles of black feminist scholars and activists. Finally, I introduce viewpoints offered by Black feminists from 1990 to the present, many of whom are radically different or challenge past generations of Black feminist thought. I conceptualize these active mechanisms of theory and practice as a distinct paradigm or movement for women of color. This movement holds 'difference' and 'consensus building' on the platform of social action. Using a contemporary Black feminist voice, I explore how contemporary Black feminists advocate for political, social, and economic change in the United States and globally.

What is Black feminist Dialogue?

Black feminist dialogue is process of identifying self-conscious struggles that empower women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community. When we engage in dialogue, we create a collage of meaning and simultaneously spoken voices that should be interpreted as both modes of social action and knowledge that is self-proclaiming. Regardless of our viewpoint, the ultimate historical and current goal of Black feminists is to create a political movement that not only struggles against the 'racial construction of sexuality,' but that also seeks to develop institutions to protect the minds and bodies of Black women with multiple experiences (Higginbotham 1992, 263). Hence, the context and meaning of this dialogue becomes situated within systems that we urge, be broken down through the insertion of knowledge characterizing the reality of life for women of color.

Black feminists have broadened the scope of coalition building beyond the context of knowledge and consciousness building. This contemporary stage of Black feminism expands notions of liberatory action. Engaging a consensus-guided form of generating social change, we absorb and disseminate education in ways that promote freedom and divert oppression for all women of color. We have exposed the system of interlocking domination and oppression, and have uncovered radical notions of superiority and white privilege that impact society as a whole.

Black feminism has evolved into a more generous paradigm of thought. Rather than embellish the definitive nature of ourselves, we center our notion of collective consciousness within multiple standpoints of difference. In other words, we support the creation of new

meaning that operates to generate social change. Our mission is larger than self-actualization. We understand that one cannot create space for herself without transforming the space situated around her. Hence, we persist to fight against the distortion of female identity maintenance and formation, while we simultaneously establish a space for new, multi-cultural, racial, and sexual images in the context of the system of domination that we co-exist in.

Black feminist dialogue continues to fight against an interlocking system as a matrix of domination. Self-definitions and valuations, confrontation, and intellectual though remain at the surface of our conversation (Hill-Collins 1990). However, we have learned that the richness of both consensus and coalition-building is an approach necessary to solve critical problems.

The Challenge: Stepping toward the Third Wave

Some researchers claim that feminist movements have been counterproductive to women's liberation. These researchers fail to understand that cultures of domination create a context for exposing weak relationships. It has been necessary for feminisms to transition through various modes of difference. New meanings are created by demonstrating 'difference' as it relates to the existing structure. I hereby expose the hidden argument nested in claiming counterproductive features of feminist thought: In a stratified society, illustrations of strength held by one group blindly imply weaknesses held by another. Hence, social instinct that centers such a hierarchal perspective may compel us to look down upon, rather than to embrace 'the other.' The rationale for identifying difference among diverse groups of women is *not* to create opposing ideas. The process is expressive and tedious; however, effective leadership compels consensus building, which is a platform of communication among all women that has been absent in the past.

I challenge the reader to focus on the contributions of Black feminist dialogue; center a call to offer credit to other forms of feminism for progress during past personal missions. Since we are now clearly aware that what happens in one community will share a relationship with the occurrences in adjacent communities, we must revise our conversation. In this conversation, we will work toward coalition building. We will transition Black feminist thought far from the traditional feminist wave analysis. Since we have a new way of understanding history and an empowering method of distributing knowledge, let us embrace this new path driven by Black feminist writers and activists.

We must recognize that feminist perspectives do not arise in a bubble. Through trial and error, women continue to learn that we live in a world filled with a magnitude of values; many conflict across race, class, and gender. It is through sacrificing, understanding, and respecting difference that we are able to cooperate and coexist. We cannot pretend that each of us fit into the same mold or that without difference, equity will arise. We can only build a stable bridge, and walk across this bridge hand-in-hand when appropriate times (compromise) arise. Rather than co-exist blindly in this system of domination, we must be familiar with our strengths and shortcomings. Other feminists should not allow rebels of feminism to strip away the significance of understanding difference through this process of consensus building. The truth is, in many cases, consensus requires a type of revolution that exposes power roles in society. It allows feminists to stimulate accord among our leaders. Without understanding the framework of power, one will not ever know or have the capacity to challenge their position.

Bridging Separate Roads: Let's Not Wave Difference

Three 'wave' markers have been articulated for understanding the history of feminism. I posit that the wave analogy casts two impressions: first, feminism has a consistent pattern; and second,

there has only been one feminist movement. As we excuse ourselves from the analogy by which others are situated, we do not wish to extract importance from those waves. Instead, let us allow Black feminists an opportunity to actively generate consensus building among all women.

Cott (1987) holds that feminism did not emerge as a term of political discourse until 1910; whereas, Guy-Sheftall (1995) argues that the first generation of feminism emerged in mid-1800. Guy-Sheftall stages the commencement of feminist activism at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 when Mott and Cady Stanton discussed the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women.

Guy-Sheftall (2002) traces the second wave back to 1910, when women were granted suffrage. Additional shifts and increased scholarly recognition of Black feminist thought occur during phases of mass feminist mobilization from 1960 and 1980. Contemporary Black feminist literature and activism has emerged since 1980. These scholars have critically assessed, formulated, and introduced creative ways of Black feminist theorizing.

Generations of Black feminist thought (similar to third wave white feminism) are situated in both waves one and two. First and second generation Black feminist scholars spent excessive time and energy trying to 'break' the white feminist movement of its bizarre racist, hierarchal single movement rhetoric. With that being said, third generation Black feminists refuse to be bound by a feminist ideal not of their own. It is during the third generation's fight that Black feminists take ownership of and define feminism for past generations (Walker 1995). This forward movement has been necessary for social change in the face of feminism. At this exact point, a contemporary or modern Black feminism has emerged. We see a modified and unique set of experiences and reference points. Ultimately, as Black feminists have experienced forms of liberation, new forms of questions have developed.

Roth (2004) contends that there have been separate roads to Feminism enacted by Black, White and Chicana feminists. Her 'separation-oriented' thesis paints a continuum of difference that produces a framework for contemporary Black feminist. Distinctiveness among feminisms allows feminists to establish a bridge that connects these roads to feminism. Before now, we have formed our own feminist identity, used personal experience to break silence, and operated as a community separate advocates (Davis and White 1971; Jacobs 1987). There are now both traditional and contemporary action templates among Black feminists that embrace a fight to bridge the gaps in understanding difference among all women in the context of promoting social change.

The Transition: A Contemporary Black Feminist Dialogue

 The contemporary paradigm Black feminism does not portray a single, monolithic standpoint. In the mid-1990's, Alice Walker initiates an intricate analyses of preceding paradigms of feminist thought. She predicts the current multifaceted feminism and its introduction of modern truths and distinguishing points regarding difference (1995, 150-151). Differences such as region, skin tone, sexual orientation, age, and class dichotomize and distinguish these theorists (Taylor 2001, 25).

The 'personal is political dialogue' is a long-lasting theme of the liberatory feminism (Cleaver 1997). We apply these liberatory practices to prevent and restrain anti-racist and anti-sexist politics. Through these struggles, we encourage higher levels of unity, integration, and interaction among feminists and other participating groups. Black feminists are also successful at partnering various institutional frameworks and generating accessible language to advocate feminism to policymakers and common people.

Categorization among Black female scholars as womanist or Black feminist has been a critical issue confronting African-American women as a group. Senna (1997) argues that the uniqueness of contemporary feminism is its move away from creating definitions of feminism that allows for internal contradictions and multiple truths. More recently, advocates for color-coded differences are challenging themselves to collectively construct, affirm, and maintain self-defined, standpoint-related perspectives. In her womanist application of intersectional and centered analyses of Black women's abuse experiences, Nash (2005) considers how race and gender inequalities help foster less-explored constructions of and reactions to intimate male partner violence. A forward-movement of coalition-building has become a strategy for overcoming problems of racial, sexual, class, and power-based conflict.

Nadasen (2005) connects a nuanced analysis of liberation with material assistance and market employment to challenge the underlying assumptions of current liberal economic and political policy formation. She encourages participation among scholars and those who are less affluent to demand more equitable and just social programs (240). Here, we notice how Black feminists host a shared voice across socioeconomic status.

Research alludes to the heteroglossic nature of the Black woman's voice. Our powerful voices place us in a competitive discourse with Black men and white women. However, Black woman are working for race and gender. Limbert and Bullock (2005) use critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism (CRF) as analytical tools for examining restrictive welfare polices and race, class, and gender hierarchies. Among other scholars, they use counter-hegemonic views and liberatory practices to attack political rhetoric emphasizing meritocracy.

Latino and Asian feminists also occupy distinctive places within racial hierarchy and categories of gendered meanings. Zinn and Dill (2001) introduce methodological approaches for multiracial feminism, a new set of theories and methodological approaches emerging from the challenges put forth by Black feminist scholars. Application of centered perspectives by third world women, multicultural and multiracial feminisms, and symbolic expressions as critical centered perspectives are also climatic in the new vision for this generation of Black feminists.

In fact, Black women have an ability to speak in multiple tongues. Jordan (2001) advocates the existence of 'reality research' that incorporates methods of respect, basic tenets of culture, and a centered indigenous oral-history standpoint (158-159). She conveys the lived experiences of indigenous through song and dance, and expressions of inner feelings from the informant's position. This contemporary approach allows the native to use decoding and critical analysis of scholarship to prevent outsider misinterpretations of its symbolic meaning.

New public safe space structured along axes of sexuality, social class, nationality, religion, and region have engendered longstanding differences among Black women (Hill-Collins 1996). Black feminist queer theorists, for instance, gage in an exploration of the contestations of the categorization of gender and sexuality (Bowleg 2003). This viewpoint is interdisciplinary yet focuses specifically on collaboration and conflict between women of color. Hence, to confront multiple forms of discrimination, scholars apply Black feminist thought to situate policy in a broader context of power relations.

Black feminist also advocate against male violence, empowerment, and accessibility and knowledge of public resources. White (1999) positions Black feminism as a nexus between social movements that engender mobilizing strategies and collective action. She describes the apparent dialectical relationship that emerges between supporters and proponents of the anti-rape movement (94-95). Her approach considers individual level, organizational, and macro level factors across a race, class, and gender framework. Hence, contemporary feminist strategies are

expanding their analysis to include more comprehensive measures to approach issues of inequality.

Black feminist ideologies continue to shape formal and informal Black political agendas. Alexander-Floyd (2003) appropriates a framework for oppositional gender politics that subverts the goals of inequality and liberation. She directs critical attention to ways in which Black macho, superwoman constructs re-articulate and re-define Black political discourse. Rather than having a single charismatic leader for mobilization, we apply a decentralized, group centered, grassroots democratic model (Ransby 2000, 1218). In 1995, Kimberly Crenshaw organized a national meeting to address the alleged sexist politics of the Million Man March. Projects as such ignite conversation about gender role formation and revitalizing relationships between men and women of color.

Contemporary feminism also embodies a fearless rise of Black feminist jurisprudence. Black feminists recognize the inconsistency of policy formation and institutional practices. Williams (1991) examines occupational status as it relates to negative perceptions of women of color. She challenges exclusive categories, universal language, and objective unmediated voices of legal systems.

Contemporary Black feminist thought is now central in uncovering complexity of national and state processes of policies and programs. The Black feminist nature of transnationalism produces social, political and economic impacts may affect people all around the globe (Springer 2001). The concept of transnationalism focuses on the heightened interconnectivity between people all around the world and the loosening of boundaries between countries.

Our dual activist/scholar role stimulates great initiatives to actively promote social change. Black feminists do not limit scholarship to policy reformation. We now gage the spirit of active co-operation and participation in local and nation-wide networks.

Conclusion: Trust, Knowledge, and Consensus

In the context of a historically-recognized notion that Black scholars have been positioned separately from other feminists during wave analyses on feminist thought, I examined new Black feminist efforts to bridge gaps in feminist thought (Cooper 1988). Although some Black feminist scholars project 'thematic' collective assessments of Black female experiences, the current generation of Black feminists is proactive about respecting and exposing difference. In the past, Black feminism was sporadically situated in the framework of feminisms; however, the current paradigm holds a distinct and impressive place in a world-view on women's rights.

I hold firmly that we should not clump past Black feminist agendas into a melting pot of feminist wave rhetoric. Instead, we should embrace difference and allow for separate feminisms to dictate ways in which their separate paths complement and differ from one another. As difference is introduced, we will broaden trust, bridge knowledge gaps, and generate creative avenues for consensus.

References

Alexander-Floyd, N.G. "'We Shall Have Our Manhood': Black Macho, Black Nationalism and the Million Man March." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 3(2) (2003): 171-203.

Bowleg, L. "Triple Jeopardy and Beyond: Multiple Minority Stress and Resilience among Black Lesbians." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 7(4) (2003): 87-108.

Cleaver, K. N. "Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism." In *Critical race feminism: A reader*, ed. A. K. Wing. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Cooper, A. J. H. *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Cott, N. F. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, ed. B. Smith. San Francisco: Kitchen Table, 1982.

Davis, A. and D. G. White. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3(4) (December 1971): 3-15.

Guy-Sheftall, B. "Response from a 'Second Waver' to Kimberly Springer's 'Third Wave' Black Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27(4) (2002): 1091-1094.

Guy-Sheftall, B. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: New Press, 1995.

Higginbotham, E. B. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17(2) (Winter 1992): 251-274.

Hill-Collins, P. "What's In a Name?: Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *Black Scholar* 26(1) (1996): 9–17.

Hill-Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Jordan, N. "Toward an Indigenous Method," in *Gender Inequality Feminist Theories and Politics*, ed. Judith Lorber (Los Angeles, California: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2001), 155-162.

Limbert, W. M. and H. E. Bullock. "'Playing the Fool': US Welfare Policy from a Critical Race Perspective." *Feminism & Psychology* 15(3) (2005): 253-274.

Nadasen, P. *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Nash, S. T. "Through Black Eyes: African-American Women's Constructions of their Experiences with Intimate Male Partner Violence." *Violence against Women* 11(11) (2005): 1420-1440.

Ransby, B. "Black Feminism at Twenty-one: Reflections on the Evolution of a National Community." *Signs* 25(4) (Summer 2000): 1215-1221.

Roth, B. *Separate Roads to Feminism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Senna, D. *Caucasia*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.

Springer, K. "Third Wave Black Feminism?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27 (2002): 1059-1082.

Springer, K. "The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 1(2) (2001): 155-91.

Taylor, U. Y. "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism." *Black Scholar* 28(2) (Summer 1998): 18-28.

Walker, R. *To be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. New York: Anchor, 1995.

White, A. M. "Talking Feminist, Talking Black: Micromobilization Processes in a Collective Protest against Rape." *Gender & Society* 13(1) (February 1999): 77-100.

Williams, P. J. *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991.

Zinn, M. B. and B. T. Dill. "What is Multicultural Feminism?" in *Gender inequality: Feminist theories and politics*, ed. J. Lorber (Los Angeles, California: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2001): 149-154.