

Lacey Bailey
Dr. Downing
African American Literature
Assignment #2
882Words
May 1, 2004

Black Feminism

Black women endure a double blow in American society. Not only are they black, but they are also women. These two minorities have historically experienced much discrimination and oppression. These are the turbulent circumstances that African American Women have faced and will continue to face. Black women broke silence in 1970 and developed a voice, “a self-defined, collective standpoint about black womanhood” (Troutman-Robinson) in the 80s and 90s. From this standpoint, black women began to speak up and out about the representation in a white male dominated world. They have worked hard to form an identity that is all their own, and fought the injustices brought not only to their race, but also to their gender. From this struggle, African American women have made long strides to make their presence, ideas and experiences known.

Black Feminism was a term coined in the 1970's to give special attention to the courage, independence, of black women during the harsh times of slavery and legal racism (Smith). This term has also become synonymous with the title “womanism” defined by Alice Walker, a renowned feminist, as a word to describe a young girl who is responsible, in charge and very serious. Womanist became wordplay for many young black girls. “Womanist [was] to feminist as purple [was] to lavender.” These two words became interchangeable and put a label on those black women who were getting involved in politics, and issues concerning African American women (“What’s”).

Some of the issues that these empowered women cared about were lynching, battering, racism, sexism, class oppression, female representation in politics, homophobia and sterilization abuse (Smith). But sterilization abuse was an issue that separated a lot of black women. In a bold statement from the Black Unity Party in Peekskill, NY they stated that taking “the pill means that we are contributing to our own genocide” and they also believed that by taking the pill or having the choice of abortion that it was simply an effort by the white supremacists to “sterilize the world’s non-whites out of existence” (Robinson). They took this to an extreme although some black women took a different approach. Some believed that the use of birth control was a woman’s choice and chose this because “poor black men won’t support their families.” This is their way of liberating black women, and putting them in control of their own lives (Robinson).

Control was a major demand of feminists and black feminists alike. From the beginning of the 20th century, black women have banded together to create organizations including The National Association of Colored Women and African American Women in Defense of Ourselves. These organizations soon became networks connecting black women across the nation. This brought power in numbers for the movement (Smith).

These women also began grasping their identity. Their identity was becoming increasingly realized as more and more publications of African American women’s works emerged. Amy Jacques Garvey wrote about civil rights on the women’s page in

The Negro World (Troutman-Robinson). In 1947 Ann Petry published an article combating sexism within the black community in Negro Digest entitled "What's wrong with Negro Men?" These and others inspired the creation of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) which held conferences drawing large crowds of African American women (Smith).

It is often a misconception that all feminists, black or white, are homosexual. There was much discrimination among black women, towards lesbian black women. This problem threatened everything that was built by the black feminist generation that came before. So, in 1977 a chapter of the NBFO issued a paper that attacked this stereotype. This paper "called for a sisterhood among black women of all sexual orientations" and allowed many heterosexual black women who were reluctant to identify themselves as feminists join the movement. This was a crucial moment in the black feminist movement (Smith).

In the 1980s further integration was set in place. Black women asked all races women to expand their scope of what they considered a woman's issue and combine their organizations and to share the leadership with African American feminist leaders (Smith). They believe that women are bonded by biology and that if women would chose to identify with one another on a more basic level regardless of skin color, sexual orientation or class that advancements can be made. This union of similar interests believed that women's issues should be important to all women. And from this issues were addressed, ignorant people were swayed, a culture's identity and purpose was gained and the black woman, and white woman could join together to fight sexism and racism as one (Robinson).

Whether labeled "womanism" or "black feminism" this is a movement that could not be ignored. Just as any minority struggles, black women have taken the challenge, taken the blows, and finally are beginning to take the recognition they deserve. The fight for equality of all races and genders will no doubt live on forever, but that did not and will not stop the advancement and aspirations of black women across our nation. From slavery, to the present state of the feminist movement, black women have decided that they "can lead the way or follow behind" ("What's). They have chosen to lead.

Works Cited

- Robinson, Patricia. "Poor Black Women." Women's Liberation Movement. Apr. 1997. SpecialCollections Library, Duke University. 1 May 2004. <<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/poor>>.
- Smith, Barbara. "Black Feminism." Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History. Houghton Mifflin. May 2004 <http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wh_013106_blackfeminis.htm>.
- Troutman-Robinson, Denise. "Black Women's Language." Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History. Houghton Mifflin. 1 May 2004 <http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wh_004100_blackwomens1.htm>.
- "What's in a name? Womanism, black feminism, and beyond." Sistahspace. Black World Foundation May 2004 <<http://www.sistahspace.com/nommo/wom509.html>>.

