Contested Memories: A Critical Analysis of the Black Feminist Revisionist History Project

by

Valethia Watkins, Ph.D., J.D.
valethia.watkins@howard.edu
Director, Women's Studies Graduate Certificate Program;
Assistant Professor of Africana Studies-Department of Afro-American Studies,
Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Abstract

The issue of how to properly name and frame the intellectual and activist traditions of Black women is contested terrain. This paper examines a development within Black Women's Studies that the author refers to the *Black Feminist Revisionist History Project* (BF-RHP), a subjective practice of indiscriminately and randomly labeling historically significant Black women as feminist, often posthumously. This paper analyzes the political significance of the BF-RHP along with the tendency of certain feminists to claim the legacy of pivotal Black women for themselves.

> "…F]eminism does not automatically reside in female bodies…"
> —Patricia Hill Collins [1]

> "It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences." —Audre Lorde [2]

The Politics of Difference and the Power of Naming

Properly framing and naming the intellectual and political tradition of Black women has become contested terrain and reflects the political and ideological diversity and differences among Black women. Black women are often treated as if they are a homogenous group when, in reality, they are diverse in their political consciousness, perspectives, ideas and commitments as any other group. Black women do not speak with a single voice; hence, efforts to articulate "*the"* Black women's standpoint or perspective are misleading and hegemonic by definition. One of the ways this political diversity has manifested itself within Black Women's Studies and Black political life has been an on-going debate between competing conceptual and analytical approaches of Africana womanism on the one hand in contradistinction with feminism, and womanism unmodified on the other hand. Interestingly, within this debate it is rarely acknowledged there are still many Black women who eschew all of the traditional labels as they continue to search for meaningful alternatives. Each school of thought has engaged in an intellectual and political battle to win the hearts and minds of Black women and to become either the dominant or exclusive framework used to frame, guide, and determine how research on Black women is done and analyzed. In addition, they have scrambled to determine which label becomes the default political name for Black women's intellectual and activist traditions.

Was Ida B. Wells a feminist? What about Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, or Harriet Tubman? Were any of these ancestral women self-identified feminists? What criteria should be used as the litmus test for calling them feminist, especially if they were not self-identified as feminists?[3] If they did not choose—intentionally or unintentionally—to use this label to describe themselves then is it even proper or historically accurate to characterize or label them as feminists? Why does it or should it matter whether or not they used the term "feminist" to describe their own activism, intellectual work, organizations, or political commitments, if they inspired people who are followers of feminism? If these historical figures never overtly professed to being feminist, but they advocated for women and opposed gender discrimination what possible harm is there in labeling and framing them as exemplars of feminism and feminist icons posthumously? Whose interests does it serve or not serve and does it fundamentally change the meaning and significance of the historical legacy of these important Black women leaders for Black Women's Studies in general and Africana history in particular?

In this essay, I explore the aforementioned questions and their implications for the field of Black Women's Studies within the Discipline of Africana Studies. Specifically, I address the attempt of many self-identified feminists and others under the influence of feminism to construct a usable past via the strategic intellectual and political initiative this essay refers to as the "*Black Feminist Revisionist History Project* (BF-RHP)". The Black Feminist Revisionist History Project is defined as the subjective practice and pattern of indiscriminately and randomly labeling historically significant Black women as "feminist" often posthumously in historical narratives, reference materials, encyclopedias, journal articles, textbooks, and via social media.

This imposition of a feminist label on many of these figures is tantamount to "discursive domination"[4] to use African Women's Studies Scholar, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi's terminology, a mode of appropriation and codification of knowledge, which within the context of this essay, I contend, results in the assertion of what can in effect be interpreted as staking a proprietary claim over historically significant women in our collective memories. In other words, this is a concerted effort to control and monopolize the interpretation of them and their contributions to the Africana world. Is there evidence in the retrievable data of a consistent and transparent criterion for the proper imposition of this label on a given historical figure? Does the label of feminist align with the person's own self- definition or is this a largely external imposition? This paper analyzes the meaning, political significance and theoretical considerations of the BF-RHP. The construction of a usable past provides current manifestations of (Black) feminism with an intellectual and political genealogy that extends anterior to the mid-twentieth century as well as provides a means to mitigate for feminists the potential political damage and vulnerability emanating from the sensitive issue that feminism remains a controversial and contentious subject matter among and between Black women. It should be noted that throughout this essay I use the designation African to refer to people of African descent in the diaspora; Moreover, I have also used the terms Black, African, and Africana interchangeably in this essay.

Feminism has demonstrated historical difficulty in grappling with differences between women. Black feminist and LGBT advocate Audre Lorde was one of the pioneering voices challenging feminism's universalizing tendencies. In one of her most widely read text, *Sister Outsider*, she writes a series of essays which articulates very cogently the pivotal role of the 'politics of difference' in creating tensions between mainstream feminists and Black women.[5] Unapologetically, Lorde criticizes the routine failure of mainstream feminists to adequately account for or incorporate differences of race, class, and sexual orientation, in their gender analyses. Today this dynamic is commonly referred to as intersectionality. Lorde does a masterful job in discussing the negative and alienating impact of the absence of an intersectional lens for Black women's relationship with feminism. Additionally, she notes that this failure has had the effect of privileging Euro-American women at the expense of other groups of women. In this context, Lorde makes the following observation about feminism, "[t]here is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist."[6] Extending her argument, one finds that this problem of difference and representation applies internally to Black women of diverse political persuasions. Black Women's Studies scholars also face the challenge of coming to terms with internal political differences and ideological diversity among and between different groups of Black women. I argue, that the BF-RHP can be viewed as privileging one group of Black women vis-à-vis the naming of the intellectual and activist traditions of Black women and the women who created it; in this case, it privileges those women with a preference for Black feminism, at the expense of other women who have expressed a different preference in favor of either Africana womanism, unmodified womanism, or those that favor no label at all.

Patricia Hill-Collins in her article entitled, *"What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond,"* identifies the challenge of accommodating diversity between different groups of Black women as being the root of the current naming debates between Black feminists versus womanists. [7] Interestingly enough, in an article on the critical need to recognize diversity, Patricia Hill- Collins does not overtly reference two rather large groups of Black women, African womanists and/or independent Black women who eschew all of the conventional labels. Ultimately, this naming debate requires the balancing of competing interests and preferences of different Black women, precisely because we are not monolithic. Hill-Collins writes, "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." [8] One of the first steps in this process, it seems to me, is the recognition of the fact that those Black women who intentionally choose not to embrace the label of (Black) feminist are making a significant statement about their identity, their politics, and their exercise of self-determination. [9] The sustained resistance to embracing the term feminist should not be dismissed out of hand or later causally disregarded by the imposition of the label. After all, reasonable people can disagree over political approaches and strategies even if they all share the goal of eradicating the system of sexism. Those Black women whose views do not align with feminism should not have their political commitment to gender equality questioned or erased because of their conscious resistance to labeling themselves as feminist or aligning themselves with feminism.

The BF-RHP involves the conscription of African women activists and intellectuals under the banner of "feminist." Additionally, this revisionist project systematically engages in the arbitrary assignment of the label feminist to potentially any or every African women in our history who has engaged in important social or political action. This process deliberately marginalizes and/or erases the underlying ideological perspectives that informed the shared activism of black women and men. The criteria behind this feminist practice amounts to subjectively lumping together African women as "feminist" solely on the basis of their shared anatomy as a biological group. The scholarship produced by the BF-RHP treats the terms "female" and "feminist" as synonyms. The litmus test for subsuming Black women within the purview of this project is often biologically determined. Black women politically supporting other Black women or advocating for women's rights is all it seems to take for their conscription. These women, as human beings, wanted to be treated fairly and to have their human dignity respected, so of course they promoted and defended equal rights for women; however, this pro-woman position reflected their political self-interest and did not automatically translate into advocacy of feminism. Without a doubt a person can pursue gender equality without using a feminist approach to achieve this political objective. In essence, some believe the mere mention of womanhood by these African women thinkers and activists warrants feminist appropriation resulting in the grafting of African women into the Western feminist genealogy. A major by-product of this project is a steady proliferation of books and articles that follow this practice, thereby distorting the intellectual tradition of African women thinkers and activists.

The explosion in the number of authors located in academia engaged in the renaming process and acts of historical appropriation has not been limited to those who choose to self-identify as black feminist writers. There are plenty of examples of others also following the lead of this revisionist impulse in the writing of non-feminist scholars. For example, Henry Louis Gates, general editor of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black women writers, in the forward to this series, refers to Anna Julia Cooper as a "prototypical Black feminist." [10] Likewise, some Afrocentric scholars have tacitly endorsed this practice. For instance, one of the most commonly used introductory textbooks in the discipline of African American or Africana Studies, subsumes some African women scholar/activists of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century under the rubrics of black feminist or womanist. In fact, in this textbook, Anna Julia Cooper's book, *A Voice From the South*, written in 1892, is referred to as one of the first and most significant publications in the "feminist/womanist" discourse. [11]

The fact that non-feminists have readily engaged in this practice bespeaks the success that feminists have had in making the terms black women and black feminist synonymous. In their writings, black feminists have a tendency to conflate the terms black woman and black feminist. Typically, they alternate usage of the terms which leaves the uninitiated reader likely to conclude that they are one and the same. This practice implies that all of the historical black women intellectual giants of the past era were ideologically feminists. The following example of the practice comes from Patricia Hill Collins' text entitled *Black Feminist Thought*:

> … Black women intellectuals are engaged in the struggle to reconceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism as it applies to African-American women. Central to this enterprise is reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition […] Reclaiming this tradition involves discovering, reinterpreting, and in many cases analyzing for the first time the works of Black women intellectuals… [12]

The Social Construction of Black Feminism

What criteria is used to determine if the women (and some men) who are being labeled as feminists are indeed feminists? Currently many scholars who engage in this project use an overly broad and ambiguous definition of black feminism with boundaries so highly permeable that the term black feminism fails to demarcate useful distinctions. Thus, the term can mean almost anything and nothing specific at the same time.

In an attempt to define black feminism, Patricia Hill-Collins, one of the leading scholars on Black feminist thought, discovered during the course of research for her groundbreaking text that it is a term "widely used rarely defined, black feminist thought encompasses diverse and contradictory meanings." [13] Another highly regarded black feminist and widely published author of feminist theory (as distinct from black feminist theory) [14] is bell hooks. She observes "a central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to…arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is…" [15] In this same paragraph, hooks quotes from an essay entitled *"Towards a Revolutionary Ethics"* by Carmen Vasquez in which the writer denotes her frustrations with the lack of clear definitions of feminism. Vasquez writes, "feminism has come to mean anything you like, honey. There are as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists…" [16] It is the definitional ambiguity of the meaning of black feminism in particular and feminism in general, coupled with the a priori assumptions of white feminism which makes the promiscuous use of the label to subsume historical Black women under the banner of feminism highly problematic. Writers and researchers, whether they are feminists or non-advocates of feminism, must not uncritically acquiesce to the political practice or pressure of renaming historical women as "feminists" without clear and convincing evidence supporting this is how they unequivocally defined themselves or their politics and mere inference alone is an insufficient standard. Paradoxically, many of the historical figures in question under the BF-RHP were not widely known to be self-declared feminists during their lifetimes. Moreover, it is very likely a critical mass of this group of women would disagree with and strenuously object to being misnamed in this fashion, especially given the negative racial politics of feminism and its historical record of not always acting in the best interest of Black women. [17]

As it stands now, if a black woman activist merely mentions the topic of women or advocates for Black women's rights, regardless of her specific philosophical or ideological perspective, she is likely to be labeled a feminist despite the fact that the ideological perspective of these historical figures fit into a range of viewpoints across the ideological spectrum. For example, some of these women were unambiguously Pan-Africanist, black nationalists, Marxists or socialists, etc. This reality is rendered immaterial by the BF-RHP because these historical figures will still have the political identity and label of "feminist" superimposed upon them by writers and academics. In reviewing Patricia Bell Scott's "Selected Bibliography on Black Feminism," Patricia Hill-Collins recorded the following observations:

> [She]classifies all African-American women, regardless of the content of our ideas, as Black feminists. From this perspective, living as Black women provides experiences to stimulate a Black feminist consciousness. Yet indiscriminately labeling all Black women in this way simultaneously conflates the terms *woman* and *feminist* and identifies being of African descent …as being the sole determinant of Black feminist consciousness. [18] (emphasis original).

In no way is Patricia Bell Scott alone in her definitional perspective. Many of the members of the BF-RHP share her rather expansive definition of black feminism. African women, along with African men, have long been staunch advocates for the liberation of African people. To state the obvious, the category African people has both a male and female component, so naturally there will be discussion about African women and how we have experienced oppression in America and our function in changing our collective condition, just as there will be discourse about African men. These discourses are not delinked but intersectional and indivisible. For example, Amy Jacques Garvey engaged in this dynamic process as an important part of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The efforts of Amy Jacques Garvey as the editor of the Women's page of*the Negro World* which was called "*Our Women and What They Think"* has resulted in Jacques-Garvey being classified as a "feminist Black nationalist" [19] and a "feminist Pan-Africanist." The underlying assumption in this rather hegemonic act of appropriation is the idea that feminism reigns as the supreme arbiter over the subject of women and that its claims to African women intellectuals do not simply compete with other schools of thought, but rather supersedes all other ideological allegiances and political commitments these African women intellectuals have overtly declared themselves aligned with politically. Furthermore, the wanton attachment of the term "feminist" before the concepts of Pan-African and black nationalist suggests that feminism is a complementary idea, compatible with these political perspectives. In this particular context, the term feminism is being used loosely as a synonym for the term "pro-woman." In other words, "feminist" is being used as an adjective qualifying the terms black nationalist and Pan-Africanist rather than denoting a political/intellectual perspective that can acceptably be demonstrated that Jacques-Garvey possessed. Some feminist scholarship has gone so far as to characterize the UNIA as a "training ground for black feminists of the 1930's…" [20] It cannot be emphasized enough that one can be an advocate for the end of discrimination and an end to the obstacles and disadvantages that African women face and not be a feminist. Just as being born a Black person and talking about the condition of Black people does not automatically mean a person is doing so from a Pan-African perspective; likewise, being a Black woman who opposes the domination of women does not necessarily make the person a feminist philosophically. The terms feminism and female (or pro-woman) are not one and the same. Feminism represents one approach, but not the only approach to examining the place of women in the world. It is a particular and specific ideological viewpoint, not the all-encompassing and universal voice of all women.

Despite the sheer magnitude and scope of the BF-RHP, it has gone virtually unchallenged by and large, by the community of Africana Studies scholars. We cannot be silent any longer given the serious ramifications of this practice for understanding how we remember and interpret Africana history. One Africana studies scholar who has raised questions about this practice is Clenora Hudson-Weems. She persuasively argues that the imposition of the feminist label serves to de-emphasize and recast the agenda of African women of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The agenda of these women, according to Hudson-Weems, was to address the life-threatening conditions facing Africans as a group, both genders together. Black feminist revisionism shifts the focus as well as the meaning attached to the political activism of these women. The meaning of their actions is altered to fit into a narrow concern which segregates the plight of African women in a manner which delinks and describes their condition as mutually exclusive from the condition of their male counterparts and their community. [21]

The BF-RHP is attempting to forge a new account of the development of feminism. Specifically, one of the objectives of the revisionist project is to incorporate Black women into the mainstream narratives on the struggle against gender oppression. It is seeking to challenge the standard accounts of the women's movement by problematizing the accepted narratives of the history of feminism which often imply Black women were disinterested or less interested in comparison to white women in fighting for women's rights. This is one way some try to explain the relative absence of Black women from the white-dominated women's movement. This is a false assertion, Black women were advocates of equality for women. The major texts on the history of feminism and its political genealogy in at least one aspect properly do not include African women because they often did not choose to join the mainstream movement. This movement elected not to fight racism and sexism together. Consequently, many African women refused to adopt their approach which defined gender as a stand-alone issue. African women were unconvinced that adopting Eurocentric approaches, embodied by feminism, would solve their own gender problems. They have consistently taken issue with the underlying universalist claims promoted by the gender narratives of mainstream feminism. For instance, the intellectual habit of treating the western white gender story as *the* universal and only gender story. This habit of positioning mainstream gender experiences as the normative point of reference along with the pretense that they speak for all women is a practice routinely critiqued by African women across the political spectrum. In light of this history, the problem of gender in Black women's studies within the discipline of Africana studies is first and foremost an epistemological one because, ". . . the conceptual category of gender is in origin, constitution, and expression," argues Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi, very much "bound to Western culture" in fundamental ways.[22] In other words, the dominant social construction of gender was created without reference to or consideration of the unique experiences of Black women. Demonstrating the Eurocentric foundations of the constellation of concepts associated with Western feminism and how the misapplication of their concepts to the study of African women will lead to the distortion and misrepresentation of African women has been the major thrust of the scholarship of Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi.[23] Consequently, one of the major tasks for Black Women's Studies scholars is to re-conceptualize gender from the specific cultural and social imperatives of African people. Oyěwùmi declares, "[g]ender, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder."[24] In other words, it is important not to assume a one size fits all standard or approach when it comes to investigating and interpreting gender problems in a given society. This is another reason a significant number of African women have demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for using feminist-centered analytical approaches to gender in an Africana context.

Another major objective of the BF-RHP is to create and to project the sense of a "long" tradition of Black women's feminist activism dating back to the early nineteenth century. This is historically problematic. I contend that concept/term 'Black feminism' was not in wide circulation in America prior to the mid-twentieth century. It would indeed be extremely rare to find documentation of self-identified Black feminists before this time. It is only after this point that we can find a small minority of Black women who consciously began to align themselves with the politics of feminism and its accompanying ideas. Definitely most Black women were in favor of equal rights for women but the Eurocentric bias and racism of feminism disqualified it in their eyes as a viable platform for opposing the system of sexism and white supremacy simultaneously. African women could not separate the struggle against white domination from the struggle against sexism because they were a part of the same system of oppression and thus indivisible.

Gender and the Politics of Knowledge Production

The patterned imposition of the label "feminist" on the scholar/activists tradition built by African women in concert with African men is a practice strongly continued in a slew of relatively recent published books. Some black feminist revisionists tend to be more forthright about their feminist agenda. There are others, however, who engage in this practice in a more covert manner. An enormously popular two volume historical encyclopedia on Black women in America co-edited by historian Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn contains a plethora of examples of each tendency. One exemplar of the revisionism practice of Black feminists has been penned by Patricia Hill-Collins appears in the historical encyclopedia on Black women. Hill-Collins wrote an essay ostensibly discussing the origins and movement of black feminism in the encyclopedia entitled "Feminism in the Twentieth Century." [25] It is no small matter of semantics or coincidence that the title contains the term "Feminism" rather than "Black feminism." It is consistent with the practice many Black feminists share, that is moving back and forth in identifying themselves and their politics as alternately black feminist and plain feminist unmodified. Another example is exhibited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall when she chooses to refer to Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South*, as the first "book-length feminist analysis of the condition of Black women." [26] Many scholars, who write black feminist scholarship, routinely use the words feminist/black feminist interchangeably in general contexts where they are not specifically discussing racism and distinguishing themselves from white feminists. This, once again, indicates that there is not a significant conceptual demarcation between black and white feminism. Black feminism is not the opposite of white feminism. Instead, there is a symbiotic relationship between the epistemologies of Black and mainstream feminist theories which makes them interdependent to such a degree they are truly co-dependent conceptually; consequently, one can change the name, but the common core remains the same transcending their surface difference.

In the first paragraph of the encyclopedia entry written by Hill-Collins on feminism, she lists the names of a host of Black intellectuals/activists and refers to them as "prominent nineteenth-century black feminists." This list includes Sojourner Truth, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Maria W. Stewart, Harriet Tubman and Lucy C. Laney. Later in the same essay, other black women are represented to the world as "Black feminists." Hill-Collins acknowledges that these black women "did not identify themselves as Black feminists." This admission by Hill-Collins was a preemptive strike issued in anticipation of critiques such as this one. Hill-Collins assumes that the failure of these women to call themselves black feminists is not relevant as evidenced by her immediate turnabout and assertion "…yet [these black women] did construct and shape black feminism as a political movement and black feminist thought as its intellectual voice and vision." [27] The fact that individual Black advocates of feminism were inspired by these historical women is not a sufficient enough reason to legitimize labeling them as exclusively feminists or to retroactively give them "unearned credit" for being the architects (i.e., founding mothers/framers) of the latter-day black feminist movement. Indeed, other groups of Black women with different non-feminist perspectives are just as equally inspired by these same women and their examples too. As such, Black advocates of feminism should not get to exclusively claim these historical women as the intellectual property of feminists which is the message conveyed by branding them as feminist.

Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought, a published anthology edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, has become another popular text with many segments of black women in the academy. In discussing the content of the book, Guy-Sheftall describes the writers included in the anthology as a diverse group of Black women who have had "emancipatory visions" as well as those who have "engaged in acts of resistance." The political choice to use the concept of "feminist" to describe these visions and acts was consciously made by Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Even though, she writes: "[s]elections were chosen not because the authors self-identify as feminists or are being defined by me as feminists; some may even reject this terminology altogether."[28] These types of throwaway statements have become sort of obligatory within the scholarship produced by black academics using feminist filters. Indeed, they appear almost regularly in many of these revisionist works functioning as standard black feminist exculpatory clauses. Black feminists write them with the intent to circumnavigate or deflect criticism of the practice of imposing the label feminist on historical black women scholar/activists. Clearly, many of our intellectual ancestors did not use the term feminism to describe their politics or perspectives. Additionally, what is woefully lacking is textual or other non-speculative evidence that these women would ascribe to, if they could choose, the assumptions, concepts, and methodologies underlying modern (Black) feminism.

Guy-Sheftall's assertion that she is not "defining them as feminist" is interesting given the title of her edited text which purports to include the voices of those women who have contributed to "African American feminist thought." Mere inclusion within the purview of the covers of this book, one could argue, is an act of defining.

In order to address the seemingly prima facie contradictions, Guy-Sheftall evokes bell hook's contention: "We can act [or write] in feminist resistance without ever using the word 'feminism.'" [29] This statement is indicative of the overly expansive net of black feminism and their revisionist history project. The fact remains that the very practice of renaming by virtue of the attachment of that label defines these women as feminists. Guy-Sheftall's assertion that she is not labeling writers in her anthology as feminist is a clear dissimulation in the following ways: first, she identifies African American feminism as the subject of her book; second, she intends to describe a category of activity (i.e. acts of resistance and emancipatory visions) so open-ended and broad that any Black woman or all Black women could fit into the category; third, she labels those things under the purview of this amorphously defined category as feminist; then, finally, she implausibly asserts that the mere inclusion of a writer in her anthology expressly focused on African American Feminist thought should not be interpreted to mean she is claiming or defining the included writers as feminist. The very act of including a writer in this anthology implicitly defines each individual author as a Black feminist. This conclusion is further reinforced by the epilogue to *Words of Fire* written by Johnetta B. Cole, former President of Spelman College. Johnetta Cole writes the following to characterize the significance of Beverly Guy-Sheftall use of the label of feminism in juxtaposition to the Black women she included in her book: "she claims the name [feminism]…this is the extraordinary value of the book. It is the very first collection of readings on the evolution of black feminism in the United States." [30]

How have Black feminists reconciled with the fact they are a discernible minority among Black women and that for the most part, the masses of Black women have, on their own accord, chosen to continue to resist or reject feminism? While Black feminists cannot avoid this reality, they try to minimize and downplay the fact that different groups of black women do not embrace feminism as a political commitment. This creates quite a paradox for those who do embrace black feminism. On the one hand, a few black advocates of feminism claim to represent and speak for all Black women; and on the other hand, these very same Black women continue to reject feminism and have unambiguously demonstrated a healthy skepticism towards the universalism of feminism. Black feminists have been innovative in addressing this paradox through the development of a number of strategies that mask what the gap signals about the credibility of feminism's claim to represent women as a group. One major tactic, among others, has been the birth of the BF-RHP. This project called for the altering of our historical memories by imposing a 'feminist identity' upon any and all Black women through the creation of categories of meaning that are highly flexible and subjective.

As the result of these amorphous boundaries set forth by black feminists not only have African women been seized and redefined, so too has a select number of African men been caught in their net. Scholar/activists such as Alexander Crummell, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Martin R. Delany have at one time or another, within feminist scholarship, been named as examples of black male feminists. [31]

Historian Louis Filler calls attention to the fact that very few black women were prominent in the so-called women's rights movement. Although white women discriminated against Black men and women they unsurprisingly showed a preference for tolerating the presence of Black men more so than Black women in the so-called women's movement. Filler further argues that as a result of this the best known women's rights advocates in 19th century feminist women's movement among blacks, were black men. Given that the terms women's movement and feminist movement are used interchangeably in feminist historiography, Filler is in essence positing that the best known feminists among black people were black men. [32]

Black feminists have been motivated to engage in this revisionist historiographical mission in order to win over more young women to their ranks. First, this project is a backdoor appeal to Black women to set aside their longstanding skepticism. They hope to gain these Black women's submission to a feminist worldview by implying beloved and well-respected historical women were feminists. In essence, in representing female ancestors as feminists, they hope to appeal to the emotions while simultaneously increasing their popular appeal (i.e., generating a kind of bandwagon effect). The BF-RHP implies if you acquiesce to feminism you are walking in the footsteps of your ancestors. Overt appeals have usually not persuaded Black women in substantial numbers to adopt feminist perspectives. Perhaps, according to the logic behind this strategy, if highly regarded Black thinkers such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Well, and even W.E.B. DuBois could claim "feminism" so should you. After all, if these historical giants were feminists, then how can today's young Black women continue to justify their refusal to adopt feminism. As a result, the revisionist project effectively shifts the burden of proof away from those who have accepted feminism onto those who have rejected it in order to establish the credibility of their course of action.

Another motivation for this Project is the desire to be included in the political genealogy of feminism. Incorporating Black women's experiences within the dominant gender narratives is a goal attempting in vain to retroactively have feminism live up to its universal mythology. Yet another factor motivating the BF-RHP is to mask the very contemporary nature of the origins of Black feminism. They have attempted to project the founding back in time by giving the impression that Black feminism began in the nineteenth century rather than the mid twentieth century. The date of origin of Black feminist theories is open to debate and should be interrogated and established. However, Black revisionist scholars believe that if they claim women like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper or Maria Stewart that they can push back their origins and create the impression that this ideology has a "long" tradition, even if they have few adherents left today. However, we cannot underestimate the disproportionate power of this group of Black feminists, despite their relative low numbers in comparison to the masses of Black women. Black advocates of feminism form a critical mass whose place in the academy has facilitated their domination of the production of knowledge on Black women. They are an important political force that cannot be ignored.

The terms of debate and the core concepts set forth by feminists have been born in the minds of European American women more often than not. The definitions, terms of debate, and assumptions prominent in feminist discourses reflect the social and political location of the architects of this paradigm. It is not a crime to act in one's self interest. Yet, it becomes a criminal act to pretend otherwise, for example to claim to be fighting for all women when in fact you are privileging one's own group of women above the rest. The most subversive idea underlying feminist thought is rooted in the cultural arrogance of mainstream women that allows them uninhibitedly to project their cultural biographies and the specificities of their gender experiences as the definitive template for other groups. They misrepresent their needs, wants, and interests as the concerns and imperatives of all other groups of women. The real issue is how their control and domination over their women's movement gets translated into the colonization of information about and control over the production of knowledge about African women and by extension African people. Demystifying this process is the first step in creating a meaningful oppositional discourse to the hegemony of feminist ways of thinking about the social world and human relationships.

> Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantics and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all out of the dictionary that the speaker gets his words!) but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own. [33]

It is the fulfillment of this last objective, that is, the removal of the concept of feminism from the context of Eurocentric feminism, which serves the intentions of mainstream America, and populating it with our own cultural specific 'intentions' which has proven elusive for Black feminists. The agenda to appropriate feminism and to revise it to create a Black version of (white) feminism is the wrong agenda. The problem with feminism is not a simple matter of the 'unintentional' failure of mainstream feminists to address our issues within their movement. The manifest and latent flaws of this approach to reality go much deeper than this overly simplistic diagnosis. Thus, the remedy is more complex than either adding new Black issues to their agenda or creating a black version of the feminist movement.

Changing labels alone does not get to the fundamental task before us as Africana studies scholars which is the need to re-conceptualize and reframe our understanding of the category 'gender.' We need to introduce a new of set of research questions, assumptions, even take a whole new approach to gender based on own social and cultural imperatives. The concept of feminism has in many ways been deeply embedded within the concept of gender to such a degree we have to become more aware of how it can and does function as a Trojan horse for the global intellectual imperialism of western scholars interpretation of the cultural other.

Why should our history remain severed along gender lines? Whose interests does this serve? The primacy of feminist modes of thinking is evidenced by the fact that the very interrogation of the concept often leads people into an "either/or" cul-de-sac. People have so interwoven the concepts feminism/women that they cannot delink the two and in turn, come to think that there is no alternative to the concept of feminism. Many readily agree that feminism is flawed, but simultaneously have bought into the false idea that it is their only option. It is not. Moreover, this line of thinking leads one to falsely conclude that either you are for feminism or you are for abuse; either you are for feminism or you are soft on sexism; either you are for feminism or you will be defined as an apologist for patriarchy. This reductionist logic is unwarranted. Feminism is one approach to pursuing equality. It is not the only one and it certainly does not have a monopoly on caring about "justice," "fairness," or the advancement of women. Furthermore, let's remember all the women are not feminists. Feminists are a subset within the larger category of "women." Feminism should not be conflated with the category of women itself.

In close, why should Black women recognize their interests qua women as separate from black men, particularly those with whom they share kinship and familial connections? Yet, this is a classic feminist starting point in the analysis of gender. We have compelling reasons not to adopt this way of thinking about gender, not the least of which it is an artifact from the founding principle of mainstream feminism, the notion gender can and should be analyzed compartmentalized from race, (i.e., examined as a standalone issue). An intersectional lens should have debunked this approach. White women do not, in fact, separate *their* gender from *their*race. For them, the word women usually means white unless, otherwise specified and only those groups of women who are non-white must specify. Contrary to popular belief, white feminists do not place their gender identity above their racial identity. This is one of the double-standards embedded in feminist discourses. Since white women never seriously entertain what I call the "primordial split" that is the division of their identity into severed and competing component parts (i.e. race vs. gender) they in turn do not engage in the dead end task of debating which is first, race or gender? Their clarity for themselves on this question means it is often left unspoken. Neither did Black women of the nineteenth century create a conceptualization of the categories race/gender as mutually exclusive. Black women had a conceptualization of the Black struggle that simultaneously sought the liberation of the incarcerated womanhood and the fettered manhood of both genders from the full spectrum of domination in whatever form it took.

There was no question of privileging race issues over gender issues or vice versa because they were never severed in the first place. This position is conceptually different from the present day Black feminist notion of the "intersection" of race and gender. The words and deeds of nineteenth century Black women demonstrated that they viewed the race and gender of Black women and men as indivisible. We have a common struggle against oppression, in whatever form it may come, which is most effectively addressed through collective action. Historical Black women stood in solidarity with Black men, viewing them as allies, not adversaries or the enemy within. This view does not mean they romanticized their problems, it just means they looked at black men as individuals rather than as a monolithic group. They did not frame them as 'the other'. Historical Black women recognized the mutuality of our fate as African women and men and our shared condition. Although, the manhood and womanhood of the race may experience specific problems this did not mandate separate movements. These problems are our shared burden as a group as well as our mutual responsibility to address since the ramifications were rarely limited to a specific gender but impacted the quality of life of all African people, regardless of gender. The words of Anna Julia Cooper succinctly reflects this principle still as true today as they were when she wrote them in 1892: "for woman's cause is man's cause: they rise or sink together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free." [34] The Black Feminist Revisionist History Project is a profoundly consequential development that we must problematize because of the overreach embedded in the indiscriminate reclassification of women based on a non-transparent, vague, and subjective criterion. This practice has not only the potential to lead to the routine distortion and misinterpretation of women in our history, but it has the power to totally rewrite our history in ways that silence the reality of Black Women's historical and lived experiences.

Notes

[1] Patricia Hill-Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *Black Scholar* 26, no.1 (1996),16.

[2] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press,1984),122.

[3] The terms Western feminism, American feminism, and white feminism are treated as synonymous in this discussion. The term feminism unmodified refers to one of the aforementioned terms. In the literature of feminism, it is unmodified unless one is speaking about an ethnic version of feminist theory such as black feminism or about a specific theoretical school of thought such as Marxist-feminism, radical feminism, psychoanalytical-feminism, liberal feminism, etc.

[4] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi,ed. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton, NJ:African World Press, 2003), 26-27.

[5] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossings Press, 1984).

[6] Ibid., 116.

[7] Patricia Hill-Collins, "What's in a Name?", 9-10.

[8] Ibid., 9.

[9] Vivian Verdell Gordon, "Black Women, Feminism, and Black Studies," in *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies*, eds. Delores P.Aldridge and Carlene Young (Latham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 166-68.

[10] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (1892; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[11] Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles, California: University of Sankore, 1993), 283.

[12] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

[13] Ibid., 19.

[14] There is a rarely highlighted but important and subtle distinction between black feminists and feminists who are black, according to Sheila Radford-Hill. Radford-Hill points out the fact that "not all black feminists practice and believe in black feminism. Many see black feminism as a vulgar detraction from the goal of female solidarity under the banner of feminism." See Sheila Radford-Hill "Considering Feminism as a Model of Social Change" in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 165; see also bell hooks, Feminism in Black and White" in Marita Golden and Susan Richards Shreve, eds. *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1995), 275.

[15] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 17.

[16] Carmen Vasquez as quoted in bell hook's *From Margin to Center*, 17.

[17] See, e.g., Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapell Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003),366-367;Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 22-23.

[18] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 19.

[19] Karen S. Adler, "Always Leading Our Men in Service and Sacrifice: Amy Jacques Garvey, Feminist Black Nationalist," *Gender & Society* 6, no. 3 (September, 1992), 346-375.

[20] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New York Press, 1995), 11-12. Both Sheftall and Adler (fn. 11), in recasting Amy Jacques Garvey as a feminist, place the term feminist before Amy Jacques Garvey's avowed philosophical position. The labeling of Amy J. Garvey as a "feminist" rather than as a "black feminist" follows the trend of using the terms feminist and black feminist interchangeably reinforcing the idea that there are only minor distinctions between black and white feminism.

[21] Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, Michigan: Bedford Publishers, 1993).

[22] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi, ed., *African Gender Studies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), xiii.

[23] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi, *The Invention of women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[24] Ibid., xv.

[25] Patricia Hill-Collins, "Feminism in the Twentieth Century," in Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley-Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds. *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Volume 1 (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1993), 420.

[26] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New York Press, 1995), 8. Sheftall throughout the book alternates between the generic terms feminist and black feminist to refer to Black women. This consistent practice by Sheftall and Hill-Collins is not an anomaly within this genre of literature; it is normal.

[27] Patricia Hill-Collins, “Feminism in the Twentieth Century,” 420.

[28] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, xiv.

[29] Ibid., xiv-xv.

[30] Ibid., 551.

[31] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 19.

[32] Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery 1830-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 38; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Sharon Harley, eds., *The Afro American Woman: Struggles and Images* (New York: National University Publications, 1978), 19. See also Patricia Bell Scott, "Selected Bibliography on Black Feminism” in Gloria T. Hull et. al. eds. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). This bibliography lists works written by prominent Black men such as Alexander Crummell in a section called “general works of Black Feminism Prior to 1950,” 23; Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 19.

[33] Michael Holquist, ed. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bahktin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293-294.

[34] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, 61.