

MY STORY: 'IT IS LESS ABOUT HOW I BECAME A FEMINIST' THAN 'AIN'T I A WOMANIST/FEMINIST?'

Sojourner Truth was one of the first feminists to speak about her lived experiences at the Second Convention of Women's Rights Movement in Akron, Ohio, in 1852 as she bared her breasts asking attendees: "...Ain't I a woman" (hooks, 1981:160). Although Truth was talking about sexism at that time, over time we have come to understand that feminism is much more than a political movement to end sexist inequality. If we do not, we will be dismissing Black women's experiences that go far beyond sexism to include racism, classism, ableism and other oppressions that structure our human relationships in this capitalist society. I raise the following question in this article, ain't I a womanist/feminist in order to interrogate how I became a feminist and how has feminism shaped my worldview? In answering this question, I engage with what I learned from my ancestors through African indigenous knowledge and womanism, because truth be told, I was born into womanism and this was deeply ingrained into my psyche by the women who surrounded me. Alice Walker (1983) first identified womanism as Black women's experiences, resistance, support, survival and wholeness of the entire Black community. She adds "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (p. xi).

While Western individualism may lead to believe that all my thoughts and feelings are only my own, African cosmology teaches me that I am a product of historical and sociological processes in which my thoughts, feelings and actual being are also shaped by the hopes, dreams and struggles of my ancestors. The social, political, cultural and even psychological and emotional patterns constructing who I am have been passed down to me through generations, and in turn I will pass my patterns to another generation. I did not come to feminism as an outsider, because I am a transnational African Caribbean indigenous womanist who migrated to Canada,

and I share some of the lived experiences of many other African Canadian Black women. These shared experiences grant many of us an insider community knowledge of transnationalism, anti-colonialism, African indigenous knowledges and womanism, knowledges that are central to Black consciousness/feminism (Johncilla, 2006).

I am a feminist in part because I practice and carry memories of African indigenous knowledge and womanism about Black women's leadership experiences in spite of my separation from my African indigenous homes in Africa and Trinidad and Tobago through Trans-Atlantic slavery and globalization. Indeed, I learned the practices of womanism from my ancestors, including my mother, grandmother and othermothers¹ who were leaders within their communities at home. I believe that my experiences with, and of these women prepared me to take up my present womanist approaches to epistemology, pedagogy and research even within a not always hospitable academic space. My ancestors taught me to accept the claim that African people carry memory within their bodies and to resist the amputation of this knowledge. To reject this lesson, I would be to suffer what Stuart Hall (1991) calls "a process of historical amnesia" (p. 20). I have not only come to feminism, womanism and African indigenous knowledge as an adult; I have embodied these liberating practices over time through learning them from women like my mother, my grandmother and othermothers.

The women who have influenced me in my life may not have explicitly identified themselves as traversing the terrains of African indigenous knowledges or feminist and womanist epistemologies, but their values, beliefs and actions of equality were undeniably and consciously grounded in a culture of liberation that included the use of traditional, local and folk knowledges

¹ According to Collins (1990), othermothers are unlike blood mothers in the Black community who share mothering responsibilities.

of resistance, for social, economic and political transformation. My memories of what the women who surrounded me in Trinidad and Tobago did are what Collins (1990) and Lattas (1993) call 'sites of self-empowerment, resistance and transformation.' I remember these memories through my stirred emotions, cognitions and intuitions, which are central to my practices of African indigeneity today.

My mother was a local community philosopher, and my grandmother was a community mid-wife and healer woman with a deep knowledge of folk medicine. My othermothers were the Spiritual Baptist leaders, schoolteachers, local politicians, higglers², managers and community organizers. These are the women who taught me about womanism through their actual everyday practices and through storytelling. The value of their knowledge is legitimated within the conscious liberating concepts of difference in Black women's experiences, and is located in their commitment to motherhood, work, family, institutions, the community and to stopping violence against women. Many of these women were single mothers, poor and housewives. However, within these experiences they claim an Afrocentric womanist consciousness that brought about liberation, change and empowerment.

My mother, grandmother and othermothers had knowledge of local concepts and folk traditions that were handed down to them from previous generations, and that liberated them from colonial and patriarchal oppressions. In passing on this liberated knowledge to me, they prepared me for the task of writing about Black women's leadership, from an anti-colonial perspective of storytelling and through paradigms and practices of African indigenous

² Higglers are women venders, marketers and traders making a living. The word is Jamaican derivative, but the work is common to other African and Caribbean nation states.

knowledges, feminism and womanism; structures that have become the central core of my academic research.

As for African indigenous knowledge, my shared experiences with the women of my community in Trinidad and Tobago taught me about liberated knowledge of Black women's leadership. I learned that storytelling, a womanist practice (Hudson-Weems, 2004; Collins, 1990) and an African indigenous practice (Semali and Kincheloe, 1999; Elabor-Idemudia 2000), informs me that knowledge does not have to be validated only through written text. Validity also comes from oral narratives, memory, history (Collins, 1990; Dei, 2000a; McIsaac, 2000; Smith, 1999), visual and artefact representations. It is the same as saying; I know who I am because of the historical womanist teachings I received from women of my community in Trinidad and Tobago.

Historically, conceptualizing feminism has not been an easy venture for me and as well as other Black women. African women have been liberated in pre-colonial and post-colonial periods, and antiquity through rulers like Yaa Asantewa of Asante in Ghana, Nehanda of Zimbabwe and Queen Nanny of Jamaica, the revolutionary obeah woman and herbal healer of enslavement time. These were historically empowered women already practicing feminist principles, easily identified as womanist epistemologies, given that we have always been competent rulers and warriors.

Furthermore, I believe that there is power in the term womanism while I do not dismiss or put aside the value of feminism and choose either at times. I embrace both, but I see the value in using womanism within the context of my lived experiences and the research I conduct on Black women's leadership. The womanism I speak to is about liberated experiences of

transnationalism, anti-colonialism, African indigenous knowledge and Black consciousness. That makes me a conscious advocate for the equality of women and men in all social, economic and political spheres of life, locally and globally. I am also a womanist located in the halls of academia and believe in the liberation of Black women from all oppressions forced upon us, from the marginalization of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ethnocentrism and other exploitations that complicate our experiences. These multiple locations awarded me a critical voice for speaking and writing, similar to that of other Black feminists in academia like Patricia Hill Collins, Alice Walker, Angela Davis and Carole Boyce Davies from the United States, and of course, my sisters like Roberta Timothy, Angela Robertson, Dionne Brand, Temitope Adefarakan and Notisha Massaquoi, right here in Canada.

In conclusion, did I become a feminist? To answer the question how I became a feminist and how has feminism changed my worldview; time and space are difficult to measure, and I would rather answer the question who influenced me in my womanist epistemology. This I answered above where it is easy to interchangeably use both terms, womanism and feminism, however at times I prefer to use the word womanism like Alice Walker (1983) because I am a Black woman in support of the survival and wholeness of the entire Black community. Furthermore, I am a transnational, African Caribbean indigenous womanist moving to new arenas. Ain't I a feminist?

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