

# **Women of Color Facing Feminism ~ Creating Our Space at Liberation's Table: A Report on the Chicago Foundation for Women's "F" Series**

by

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the findings from The "F" Series, a collaborative program between the Chicago Foundation For Women and the Columbia College Center for the Study of Gender in the Media and Arts, which addressed the place of feminism in the lives of women of color. The author served as a panelist in the multi-generational discussion of African-American women and feminism held in February 2006 at Columbia College, and then reviewed the DVD recordings of each of the panel discussions---The "F" Series, produced and directed by Danny Alpert for See 3 Productions—for this project. The series began with a cross-generational, multi-ethnic discussion of feminism and women of color at the Chicago Foundation for Women in January 2006, with subsequent panel discussions looking at feminism and Asian-American women and Latinas in separate venues. The author uses the work of feminist scholar-activists including bell hooks, Leith Mullings, and Cherríe Moraga to underscore and contextualize the findings provided here. The article concludes that while many women of color *do* feminist work, we still find it difficult to identify ourselves as feminists or view feminism as a viable means for liberation.

*We had to create a space at the table. That was a long struggle...and be ok with the fact that you can deal with women's equality in a substantive way...We split from male-led Chicano organizations and looked to White feminists for guidance...(Alpert).*

**-Estel Lopez, "F" Series panelist**

*This is the real work of women of color feminists: to resist acquiescence to fatality and guilt, to become warriors of conscious and action who resist death in all its myriad manifestations: poverty, cultural assimilation, child abuse, motherless mothering, gentrification, mental illness, welfare cuts, the prison system, racial profiling, immigrant and queer bashing, invasion and imperialism at home and at war.*

**-Cherríe Moraga (Hernández and Rehman: xiv)**

In 2006, the Chicago Foundation for Women convened a series of public forums around the meaning(s) and place of feminism in the lives of women of color in the city of Chicago. The "F" Series offered Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and Latinas the space to voice our identification or lack thereof with feminism, the feminist movement, and feminist epistemologies. Planned by the Chicago Foundation For Women's Leadership Councils and co-sponsored by Columbia College's Center for the Study of Gender in the Media and Arts, the series gave collective voice to those issues most relevant to the experiences of contemporary women of color as well as examined historical tensions around race and class within the second wave of feminism which marginalized and rendered women of color invisible within the earlier struggle for liberation.

Each of the panels covered a wide range of topics including the intersections of race, class, gender, reproductive rights, violence against women, and many of the panelists expressed the need for using public policy as a means to advance the status of women and girls in the United States and abroad. Much of the dialogue also emphasized the important roles that culture, religion, and ethnicity play in our development as women first and as feminists second. In many ways, the personal narrative of each woman elucidated the dialectic between feminist thinking and deeply rooted cultural values, as well as the ways race, gender, and class ascribe the experiences of minority women, and shape political thinking at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

The sentiment of some of the speakers echoes those of many women of color who don't believe feminism is a viable liberation strategy that addresses their specific racial, cultural, or class experiences. Yet, many of the speakers clearly identified themselves as feminists and embraced feminist thinking, while others embraced a feminist ideology, while never calling themselves as such.

This reluctance to call oneself a feminist reflects the historical hesitance of many women of color, namely African-American women and Latinas, to join the feminist movement.

When asked whether or not they were feminists, many recounted personal stories to describe their journey to feminism. For most, becoming a feminist had been a long, contentious battle between traditional values, responsibilities to the race, and the reality of White women's privilege at work within the movement. There was, it seemed, no place for us at liberation's table...

Again, this arduous road towards feminism for women of color is nothing new. It underscores the work of scholar-feminists of color including bell hooks, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Smith. It is not surprising then that the majority of speakers, respondents, and audience participants typically spoke of having this reluctance to identifying as feminists at different points in their lives. More often than not, this feeling was rooted in the memories of racism and classism women of color faced within the feminist movement during the '70s.

Victoria Romero's belief that "the Feminist Movement wasn't made for us..it was made for middle-class White women,"( Alpert) reflects this very same sentiment. African-American feminist-scholar bell hooks reminds us of similar thinking by women of color that kept many from aligning themselves with White feminists during the second wave of feminism.

*As many black women/women of color saw White women from privileged classes benefiting economically more than other groups from reformist gains, from gender being tacked on to racial affirmative action, it simply reaffirmed their fear that feminism was really about increasing white power ( hooks 42 ).*

hooks readily admits that feminist theoretical frameworks have shifted to include issues of race, but suggests, as does Romero, that the work needed to develop a feminist agenda that includes women of color and our issues is far from complete.

*Overall feminist thinking and feminist theory has benefited from all critical interventions on the issue of race. The only problematic arena has been that of translating theory into practice. While individual white women have incorporated an analysis of race into much feminist scholarship, these insights have not had as much impact on the day to day relations between white women and women of color...Racism and sexism combined create harmful barriers between women. So far, feminist strategies to change this have not been very useful (hooks 58-59).*

But what is feminism really? And who really identifies with feminism today? Indeed one's understanding of feminism is shaped by individual experiences, cultural traditions, and political ideology. Thus the pantheon of feminist epistemologies is as diverse as we

are as women. There is Marxist, Hip Hop, Liberal feminism and Womanism, among many. Each of these theories places women at the center of discourses on liberation and equality. Yet while feminist scholars have provided us with numerous theoretical frameworks to contextualize our experiences as women, none provide us with the tools for actually achieving liberation. That journey truly begins within. For women of color, the journey to feminism is often a solitary one that forces us to think honestly and critically about our communities, families, and cultural traditions, and the spaces we occupy within. Speaking about her experiences as a Latina and what it takes to gain a sense of agency, Estel Lopez's had the following to say:

*Nobody gives you power. Sometimes you struggle for it or fight for it. You get up everyday and fight for power in the work place, family, and social situations... We have to be honest about what's wrong in our culture and families. As hard and as lonely as it is sometimes, you have to say 'that's not right' (Alpert).*

The experience of struggle was at the core of many of the speakers' experiences. For some, the day-to-day struggle to get an education, find a job, and raise a family left no space for participating within an organized feminist movement. This is not to suggest that their work, understanding of their experiences, and contributions to society were not acts of feminism, in and of themselves. They were. But for some women like writer and historian Janis Kearney, feminism has been more about *doing* feminism, rather than calling herself a feminist.

*Yes, I am a feminist, but it's still hard for me to call myself a feminist. I'm from Arkansas, if I would have come home and called myself a feminist, my father would have said, "femi who?" My mother was the quiet, gentle leader of my family. She taught me that girls could do anything. [Although] she took a back seat to my father, she always let us know that we were capable to do anything...and not only that we can do whatever we want, but that we deserve the right to do what we wanted ( Alpert).*

Kearney's experiences in rural Arkansas reveal the subtle, yet radical ways African-American mothers have historically encouraged their daughters to be independent, self-sufficient, and feminist ( albeit indirectly, in many cases). Kearney readily admits that she never uses the term feminism in her narrative, *Cotton Fields of Dreams*, yet the concept of feminist ideology is "threaded throughout" because it covers many of the concerns we as women have about our lives today. Furthermore, her understanding of feminism is rooted in her mother's belief in women's rights that consequently provided the foundation for her feminist thinking.

Like Kearney, many of the women who attended the "F" Series said that they found their way to feminism in response to cultural/religious traditions and or the treatment of

women within their own families. In many ways, the way women are treated within our own families determines our understanding of womanhood and our place within the world. For some women like Rahnee Patrick, of Access Living, looking to the past has girded her with the understanding of women's issues her great-grandmother did not have the tools to address.

*My great-grandmother was illiterate, and from Thailand. She was a landowner, but couldn't read. The Women's Movement is about addressing hierarchy and patriarchy. The Women's Movement brought language and philosophy—tools to address the belief that women are objects and property (Alpert).*

For Patrick, looking back has been both a source of motivation and impetus for liberation. Yet sometimes, coming to the realization that feminism can address some of the issues facing women within our family and or cultural/ethnic background is complicated by nationalism, traditional values, and plain old identity politics. In these instances, navigating ourselves towards a feminist ideology that embraces all aspects of our experiences is far trickier than not.

Chris Smith, an African-American lesbian remembered trying to bridge her family's legacies of race work and nationalism with her identity before coming out. Ultimately, Smith rejected the term "Womanism" to describe herself because "it feels like a paired down word for [African-American women] because feminism has been associated with lesbianism" (Alpert). Here Smith refers the reluctance of some heterosexual African-American women to align themselves with the feminist movement out of fear that they might be labeled as a lesbian. For Smith, feminism must be rooted in "liberation, choice, [and] and self-agency" (Alpert). In other words, the decision to become a stay-at-home mother can be an act of feminism, but when such role is "ascribed to her culturally, then that's not feminism" (Alpert).

Smith's position mirrors those of us trying to maintain a delicate balancing act between race consciousness and feminist thinking. In working towards feminist goals are we selling out the race? By continuing to hold up the banner of racial injustice do we forsake the struggles of our sisters? In trying to find the appropriate political voice, many of us still find ourselves stuck between the rock of racial injustice and the hard places of gender inequality. More often than not, we are by ourselves.

Estel Lopez remembered the loneliness and angst she experienced as a college student trying to find a political ideology that included liberation for women. Coming from a family of ten children that was "poor economically, but rich in culture and love," she remembers that her journey to organizing, activism, and feminism "was pretty lonely."

*There wasn't a whole lot of support for doing things different. My parents would say, "That's not what women do. We didn't raise you to be like this." My brothers were concerned. We have to criticize [our culture, family], look internally and say I'm not gonna raise my daughter that way. I won't accept the guilt that my sisters place upon me, or friends on me. That's not my guilt. It's a difficult internal struggle when you can say it's ok that me and my sister are never going to agree about certain things. We have to define those places in the culture that don't support the equality of women (Alpert).*

Lopez's acts of defiance and determination are at the heart of radical feminism and the root of women's power. Thus the power of feminism lies not only in the liberation of women, but also in its transformative ability to change the way others see us, and ultimately how we see ourselves. In moving towards a discourse that acknowledges and values our voices, experiences, and contributions, we begin a dramatic paradigm shift from our thinking about gender and the division of labor.

In *On Our Own Terms Race, Class, and Gender in the Lives of African-American Women*, anthropologist Leith Mullings asserts that the pervasive thinking about feminine behavior rests upon a warped illusion of the experiences of women of color and working class women. She writes:

*Throughout most of the history of the United States normative notions of what a woman ought to be have reflected what upper-class women were able to be. Upper-class women, unlike all other women in the society, have no need to work and can therefore present themselves as ideal wives, mothers, and representatives of "high culture" (Rapp 1978,299). These women, who "become symbols of domesticity and of public service," influence our views of what feminine behavior should be. The ideology of the division of labor, then, is often far removed from the reality of the experience of minority and other working women, yet it remains the cultural ideal, often buttressed by the canons of religion and rationalized as "natural" by biologically and genetically based explanations of science (Mullings 25).*

Mullings reminds us of the important, yet often ignored role that class plays in feminist discourse. It should not be surprising then that the issue of class underscored much of the dialogue at each of the “F” series panel discussions. For many, it is most important that class not be subordinated to the issue of race. Ana Romera, of the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women’s Network, suggests that class is the topic feminists don’t want to talk about, yet

*Unfortunately, for women of color it[class inequity] is a reality every day. Not everything is about racism. It is also about class and lack of opportunity. This is not only about Latinas. It is about a culture that is situated in a structure that is completely unequal (Alpert).*

This unequal balance of power and opportunity Romera refers to was carried straight into the living rooms of red-blooded Americans with the Hurricane Katrina devastation in 2005. For the first time in their lives, many Americans saw first hand the damaging effects of socio-economic inequity on fellow Americans. In many ways, the Katrina disaster forced us to see those who had been rendered invisible with new eyes. Chris Smith described the Katrina survivors as “beyond poor and hyper-poor who had fallen through the cracks. They were already displaced and invisible [before Katrina]” (Alpert). The panelists and members from the audience remembered experiences of shock, disbelief, and helplessness after the hurricane and grappled to answer the question, “Does Black Feminism have anything to say about what we do in the aftermath of Katrina that isn’t already addressed by liberalism or some other stance?”

The Black Feminist movement and discourse can and should be used to address the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina because of its devastating impact on women, children, families, and communities within the new Katrina Diaspora. We know that Black Feminism, or Womanism, concerns itself not only with the liberation of women, but that of black males and black families as well. But *feminism* should say something about this tragedy because at its core, the fallout from Katrina is about social justice. If feminism is an ideology rooted in liberation it must be able to address social justice issues including homelessness, poverty, violence, unemployment, poor education, and the lack of quality health care because each disproportionately impacts women. If there is one overall message each of us should take away from The “F” Series it is the need for feminism to focus on social justice issues and target public policy changes that serve the greater good. In looking forward to a feminist epistemology rooted in social justice and advocacy, many of the “F” Series participants voiced their dreams of a movement that recognized and valued the experiences of all women—straight women, lesbians, and those with physical disabilities. For some, this means the possibility of shifting the focus from women’s rights to human rights.

Near the end of the discussion amongst the Latina panelists, Carmen Abrego, a school organizer, challenged the Chicago Foundation for Women to take the “F” Series out into the community:

*This is a nice space here in the ivory tower. But the women I work with, I grew up with, respect, and love are in Humboldt Park, Albany Park, and Pilsen. Bring it to the community and I'd be open to opening the school [to host the series]. If you keep it here, only a certain amount of women with privilege can attend (Alpert).*

Abrego reminds us that while we have made great gains in our attempt to craft a feminist framework that embraces all of our differences, we still have a long way to go before each of us has our very own seat at Liberation's table.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While many women of color felt marginalized by second wave feminists, they used their experiences on the margins of the movement to inform their scholarship and organized efforts to end the oppression of women and girls within their communities, as well as call attention to the way race, class, and privilege worked within the women's movement of the 70s.

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