

De Facto Feminist: Essays Straight Outta Oakland

An excerpt

A fellow comic in the Bay Area used to open every set reciting the outrageous black names he'd heard while teaching at Berkeley High School. I so identify with young people carving out their destinies with these hybridized names, echoing distant Africa, Frenchification, and urban preciousness. The 1960s were the last period when blacks, on a large scale, changed their names from Anglo-Saxon - *what was your slave name?* - to African-influenced surnames and first names. To hear another generation in search of identity mocked, over and over, infuriated me. When I hear those names- *Ednitra Quintricious Bunquisha Shaniqua Jamarius Larquell Tasheanna Krisshaya Trayvon Shivon Adneeshia* –and know they've become a national punch line, I feel insulted, branded, ridiculed, further marginalized, made more invisible. And it's not as if these names don't perplex black people too. As I heard someone say, "You just taking all these strange names to confuse white people." Dave Chappelle defended the phenomenon in a San Francisco comedy club to a crowd of coders, Gen X-ers and millennials. Chappelle said these names are an act of rebellion to racism by the women naming their babies. I got him. The names function as a comeback, a rebuttal to little black Sambo, to the black memorabilia going for exorbitant prices for outsized clay lips painted bright red, to the white college kids having black days with watermelon and ersatz food stamps. With his gee whiz/I'm a stoner, almost-shuffling demeanor, Chappelle nailed it. These children, amid the hostility, superiority and racism of teachers, media makers and prospective and current employers, form part of what I call de facto feminism.

De facto feminism is like de facto segregation which remains the way our nation is organized. De facto segregation is the practical reality of separation of members of different races, not by law (de jure), government action or statute, but in practice by various social and economic factors. Blacks live in Bed-Stuy and East St. Louis, Mexicans in the barrio, whites in gated communities.

Place the synonyms for de facto in front of *feminist*: absolutely, actual, actually, as a matter of fact, authentic, bona fide, certain, demonstrable, existent, existing in fact, factual, genuine, in reality, positively, real, substantive, true, unquestionable, valid, veritable. What do you have? Black women. En masse.

20th c. Feminism: defensive, lean-in elite, scarce, historical, white-ish, precious, theoretical, lawful, contempt for men but not their \$\$\$

De facto feminism: offensive, classless, proliferative, ahistorical, black and then some, inside/outside the law, do-you with/without men

BLACK WOMEN - DE FACTO FEMINISTS.

Black women are de facto feminists. They can't fake it, hide it or disappear into marriage. They don't do it for a season, dodge it, or veil it in a career. They can't be faux feminists insulated by class privilege. De facto feminists stand between peace and war every day in Detroit, Oakland, Harlem, Miami, Chicago, St. Louis, Dallas, Philly, Baltimore, LA – the Gaza Strips of the US– without glorification, often vilified as big fat mama...hefty cinch sack... wide-assed tub of lard. ..Ubangi bitch. They straddle fences, take flak from both sides, get called accomodationists, build straw bridges and cross them undaunted, raise their villages, and for that they have developed a following like ducklings.

“AIN’T I A WOMAN?”

- *Sojourner Truth, 1851, Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio*

Isabella Baumfree, born a slave in 1797 in upstate New York, was auctioned off at ten for \$100 alongside a herd of sheep, but freed herself by escaping in 1829, going through excruciating hardships and court battles, some of which she won, and becoming a renowned speaker and agitator for women’s and black rights. She changed her own name to Sojourner Truth in 1843. Her “Ain’t I a Woman” speech was given impromptu, no speechwriter or publicist holding her hand, although, because of her illiteracy, helpers wrote down her words. Thank goodness.

De facto feminists are modern day Sojourners, but they can’t always operate openly. In many housing projects throughout this land, the Candy Lady reigns. An entrepreneur, she shops at Costco, Big Lots and Dollar Tree - alongside her East Indian, Chinese and Korean counterparts - for packaged groceries, toiletries, candy, sweets, sodas, liquor, in bulk. She goes back to the projects, carries the inventory upstairs and sells it to her neighbors. On the straight and narrow, she purchases goods at retail, pays taxes at the register. On the precipice, she operates minus a license, doesn’t report profits on federal and state taxes, sells 24/7/365, sells cigarettes and liquor to adults and minors, and barbers for cash, food stamps and contraband. Ain’t she a feminist?

A short list of off-the-books occupations practiced relentlessly by urban and working poor includes kitchen beautician, childcare worker, housekeeper, tutor, elder companion, pet sitter, house sitter, tax-return preparer, Candy Lady, domestic, errand runner, driver, caterer/cook, caregiver, flea marketer, dressmaker, prostitute, drug dealer, drug packager, street vendor, software and movie pirate, taxicab hack, shoplifter, astrologer, psychic, tarot reader, gardener,

lawn mower, party DJ, typist and writer. There are other names for them. Outlaws. Outliers. Rebels. Revolutionaries. Citizens. Patriots. Tax cheats. Black markets flourish in times of war, like we're in now. I've done my share; I know whereof I speak. How many of these are performed habitually by women? Many. Ain't they a feminist?

“The Internal Revenue Service estimated that the losses from unreported wages have grown from about \$385 billion in 2006 to about \$500 billion last year. State governments lose another \$50 billion to the overall underground economy. That means the people who play by the rules are getting a raw deal.” –Money Morning, <http://moneymorning.com/2013/04/29/what-americas-2-trillion-underground-economy-says-about-jobs/>

I've watched black women hit their mid to late-twenties, look around and see no Prince Charming. They conclude he's not on his way. They decide to have a baby and sally forth into the Land of Single Parenting. They have the village on their side. They don't listen to a hoary Dr. Laura, [<http://www.dr Laurablog.com/category/adoption/>] who tells many distressed listeners to put their unborn up for adoption. We don't do that, I've shouted her voice down on my car radio. Baby mommas well before the trend. And ain't they feminists?

My mother, Marguerite Juanita Hart, put up with unchecked racism, sexism and lastly ageism her entire working life as a printer/typographer for federal and state governments. She trained young whites who were often promoted over her, then turned around and lorded it over her. I took her middle name as my last to honor this unrecognized and valiant part of her. One good effect in her long bout with Alzheimer's was the loss of those bitter workplace memories. Weren't she a feminist?

TRYING TO MAKE A DOLLAR OUT OF 15 CENTS

A whole class of workers constitutes women who braid hair, part of the underground economy in the black community. Overwhelmingly black and youthful, they mostly work from home, a cadre of postmodern kitchen beauticians who make a way out of no way to raise children, make money, be stylish and create community. I've paid increasing amounts for their services because they do a good job. They often combine this income with public aid or Section-8 subsidies to make it in this society.

For the past twelve years Sakeena has “allowed” her first child’s father to live in her Section-8 apartment with her and her other two kids, sort of a Section-8 largesse. Women with children and Section 8 act as quasi-landlords with their off-the-books tenants. In New Jersey, I lived in a six-unit building with several foxy single mothers who attracted and “housed” members of the New York Giants football team during the season. Over the decade I lived there, a rotating cast of ballers paid their ladies’ way and no small amount of dentistry, clothes and food (and thrilled my son and his Pop Warner teammates). This blur of legality, morality and practicality at the heart of de facto activity has been a feature of African-American life since the first Africans arrived on these shores - and a part of immigrant life. Making it in America means going from the margin to the mainstream, not so easy in one generation. The stigma that black people wear on their skin forces them to be what others would term illegal, immoral but not impractical. The dividing line between feminism and black independence is necessity. Valencia has never been to jail, not once, though she’s run numerous scams. One perennial fleece involves the U.S. mail, 100 recipes for five bucks, and a P.O. Box. She has yet to send out one recipe but collects those green dollars religiously. All the while, she made sure her exceptionally bright girls got top educations,

terminal degrees, and became respectable professionals. Is this Mario Puzo's country or what? Valencia started her "career" early. She'd spoon all the fruit from the Jell-O before her siblings got to it, the same siblings who now have college degrees and professional jobs, which she's never had. She learned to be cunning but insisted her daughters be straight and narrow. Feminist, eh?

Shelley at nineteen had a brick shithouse figure, a five-octave voice and sweetness to spare. She also had a disinclination to sell her body for a recording contract. She languished in the bush leagues of jazz vocalists for years before the call came. But not everyone has the stomach to sleep their way to the top, as Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" makes clear. Shelley's had her successes, but she didn't sell out. Maybe her mother told her, as Marguerite told me: "Never sell your soul. Your body. Or your country." Oh my, ain't she a feminist?

Oral Lee Brown grew up one of 12 children in the Mississippi Delta, moving to Oakland at 18. She went to school at night and worked in insurance before becoming a realtor. When she promised a class of first graders deep in the flatlands that, if they kept a "C" average through high school, she would send them to college, she had no idea where the funds were. But she had been moved to this great vow by the story of one girl who couldn't make it to school because of a troubled home life. Eighteen children went all the way through college, two were killed in gang activities and two got into drugs. Ms. Brown's foundation continues to incentivize hundreds of at-risk Oakland students. This making a way out of no way, nurturing those who've been forgotten or discarded are hallmarks of a de facto feminist.

<http://www.womensconference.org/oral-lee-brown/>. Ain't she a feminist?

ROXANE, CAN WE TALK?

Even a fresh voice like Roxane Gay becomes an apologist if she only deigns to be complicit in the last century's scheme of things. When she says misperceptions about Haiti as dangerous and poverty-stricken make it hard to write about, I like that. When she says there are both falsities and truths behind the Haitian stereotypes, I warm to her. Giving blow jobs gratis – part of her bad fem history - might not be prescriptive for women who need the money to make the rent, but a new wave of feminists might see women of color setting policy and leading, being arbiters versus being left behind. The 21st century may define for itself who and what a feminist is. New contradictions, caused by more intense oppression, immigration and higher barriers to workplace freedom and social equality, will lead to dystopia or revolt.

<http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/May-2014/Roxane-Gay/>

Arwilda, an army wife, living off-base in Seattle in 1954, calls the local police when her husband, the only black staff sergeant on base, ordered her to wash the supper dishes. His manner frightened her. The police, so her daughter told me, laughed at Arwilda and told her husband he was fully within his rights, i.e. women wash dishes, men order them to. Weren't she a feminist in the 1950s with her fourth-grade education, Ph.D. from the school of hard knocks, speaking truth to power - husband power, military power, and police power -in her own kitchen?

All of them, Arwilda, Sakeena, Valencia, Shelley and my mother, are far more feminist than the broadcasters/weather-casters who've memorized feminist principles and theory from prep school through the Ivy League all to bare cleavage and toned limbs to sexist news directors and producers who trade tapes of them for private showing (one of the dirty little secrets of the

broadcast industry). Are they feminists? It's hard to answer in the affirmative when one mistakes being a frontispiece for being on the front lines. Ah, it works in reverse - what applies to the goose applies to the gander. Titles and categories devolve into discrete units that obliterate and turn people into "others" without their consent.

I adjudicate otherness daily, e.g. when I called the police because my neighbor was beating his girlfriend, when male students try to intimidate me into changing a grade (female students rarely use this approach), when male drivers expect me to give up my right-of-way. In little and big ways, women are challenged to give in or give up. To stand up can be isolating, frightening, seen as threatening, and finally lethal. When I used an IUD for a year and a half, I routinely saw blood clots, big as mice, in my bathwater. When I later met someone who casually said she'd had fifteen abortions, I was aghast. How could she? I've continued to meet younger women who have, indeed, used Planned Parenthood as a post conception disposal chute. Setting aside the argument that Margaret Sanger founded the organization as eugenics/genocidal scheme

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/27/us/27race.html?sq=to%20court%20blacks,%20foes%20of%20abortion&st=cse&adxnml=1&scp=1&adxnmlx=1312626120-SuELxigypPf+xAK5HJLHcw&_r=0

I condemned the doers – young desperate women, their partners and Planned Parenthood facilitators - until I recalled those fuchsia globs, week after week, floating around my body. I hadn't wanted another baby inside an unhappy union. I had been financially strapped. I hadn't dared to have another baby when I was overwhelmed with the care of one. For years I chalked up my interminable birth control hunt (pills, creams, diaphragm, IUD, herbs like gentian root) to the perils of modern medicine. *We're all guinea pigs*, I'd shout to the heavens, as one or another

method failed or displeased me or a partner. But these women ending pregnancy in this stumblebum way splintered my rationalizations and self-defense. Had I been so different? Those clots represented my fertility, if not literally, then figuratively. Some women freeze their eggs. Others hatch or dispose of them. Some let nature take its course. Some stubborn ones of us **will** the unseen out of our systems. And some let modern medicine be the overseer. How can I judge the woman with fifteen abortions until I can count how many I've had?

“I SELL THE SHADOW TO SUPPORT THE SUBSTANCE” -SOJOURNER TRUTH

First and second-wave suffragettes are due full credit for the tremendous advances in women's liberation. Surely Sojourner devoted her life to the struggle for freedom enabled by women and abolitionists struggling at the same moment in history. She sold pictures of herself, not in chains or with scars of enslavement on her back as other ex-slaves were doing, but in traditional portrait pose, knitting, fully clothed, strong. She wrote herstory. In protest movements, as in wars, the people on the bottom don't write the history. The literate and highly literate do that, historians, writers and editors. Movements occur. Records are kept. Schools of thought develop.

Championing and advancing the cause of the downtrodden, e.g. women under the yoke of sexism and enslaved Africans, has its noble side yet even the illustrious can be faulted with taking undue credit or showboating. The tight hats of pride, self-congratulation and exclusion in the feminist movement were worn in the abolitionist movement too.

Many abolitionists acted on behalf of the enslaved who lacked agency. Antebellum diarists recorded the thoughts and responses of those forbidden family, community, literacy, citizenship and freedom of movement. Historian John Blassingame's landmark book Slave Testimony (LSU Press, 1977) instigated what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. called “the revolution in historiography.”

Letters written by slaves and former slaves date from 1800 as Carter G. Woodson displayed in The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860. That's 177 years (!!!) before Blassingame began the process of setting the record straight – a record he found impressive but marred by disregard and questionable ethics (“whites edited narratives because their interest in slavery had been aroused by sensational trials involving kidnapped or fugitive blacks”).