Words of FIRE

An Anthology of
African-American Feminist Thought

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Michele Wallace (1952–)

Michele Wallace, born in Harlem and the daughter of feminist artist Faith Ringgold, was a founding member of the National Black Feminist Organization (1974). She is best known for the controversial feminist polemic she wrote in her twenties—*Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978)—which is a critique of the male-dominant civil rights and misogynistic Black Power movements, and a scathing exposé of sexual politics within the African American community. She also debunked the myth of black women as "superwomen" who have no need for feminism. *Black Macho* generated a storm of criticism within the black community, including among black feminists such as June Jordan and Gloria Joseph. In her introduction to the new edition of *Black Macho*, entitled "How I Saw It Then, How I See It Now" (London: Verso, 1990) Wallace provides her own critique of the book, which twelve years earlier sparked a major debate within the black community. "Anger in Isolation" appeared in the *Village Voice* four years before *Macho* and explains why she became a feminist and how difficult it was for a young black woman in the early years. Wallace, a prolific cultural critic, is presently a member of the faculty at CUNY where she teaches women's studies and film studies. Her recent publications include *Invisibility Blues* (1990) and *Black Popular Culture* (1992), edited by Gina Dent, the proceedings of a conference at The Studio Museum in Harlem, December 8-10, 1991, which Wallace convened.

Michele Wallace

Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood

When I was in the third grade I wanted to be president. I can still remember the stricken look on my teacher's face when I announced it in class. By the time I was in the fourth grade I had decided to be the president's wife instead. It never occurred to me that I could be neither because I was black. Growing up in a dreamy state of mind not uncommon to the offspring of the black middle class, I was convinced that hatred was an insubstantial emotion and would certainly vanish before it could affect me. I had the world to choose from in planning a life.

On rainy days my sister and I used to tie the short end of a scarf around our scrawny braids and let the rest of its silken mass trail to our waists. We'd pretend it was hair and that we were some lovely heroine we'd seen in the movies. There was a time when I would have called that wanting to be white, yet the real point of the game was being feminine. Being feminine *meant* being white to us.

One day when I was thirteen, on my bus ride home from school I caught a brief but enchanting glimpse of a beautiful creature—slender, honey brown, and she wore her hair natural. Very few people did then, which made her that much more striking. *This* was a look I could imitate with some success. The next day I went to school with my hair in an Afro.

On my way out of my building people stared and some complimented me, but others, the older permanent fixtures in the lobby, gaped at me in horror. Walking the streets of Harlem was even more difficult. The men on the corners who had been only moderately attentive before, now began to whoop and holler as I came into view. Becoming exasperated after a while, I asked someone why. 'They think you're a whore, sugar.' I fixed my hair and was back to normal by the next morning. Letting the world in on the secret of my native naps appealed to my proclivity for rebellion, but having people think I was not a 'nice girl' was The War already and I was not prepared for it. I pictured myself in a police station trying to

explain how I'd been raped. 'Come on, baby, you look like you know your way around,' sneered an imaginary policeman.

In 1968 when I was sixteen and the term black consciousness was becoming popular, I started wearing my hair natural again. This time I ignored my 'elders.' I was too busy reshaping my life. Blackness, I reasoned, meant that I could finally be myself. Besides recognizing my history of slavery and my African roots, I began a general housecleaning. All my old values, gathered from 'playing house' in nursery school to *Glamour* magazine's beauty tips, were discarded.

No more makeup, high heels, stockings, garter belts, girdles. I wore T-shirts and dungarees, or loose African print dresses, sandals on my feet. My dust-covered motto, 'Be a nice well-rounded colored girl so that you can get yourself a nice colored doctor husband,' I threw out on the grounds that it was another remnant of my once 'whitified' self. My mind clear now, I was starting to think about being someone again, not some*thing*—the presidency was still a dark horse but maybe I could be a writer. I dared not even say it aloud: my life was my own again. I thanked Malcolm and LeRoi—wasn't it their prescription that I was following?

It took me three years to fully understand that Stokely was serious when he'd said my position in the movement was 'prone,' three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began 'the black man . . .' did not include me. I learned. I mingled more and more with a black crowd, attended the conferences and rallies and parties and talked with some of the most loquacious of my brothers in blackness, and as I pieced together the ideal that was being presented for me to emulate, I discovered my newfound freedoms being stripped from me, one after another. No, I wasn't to wear makeup, but yes, I had to wear long skirts that I could barely walk in. No, I wasn't to go to the beauty parlor, but yes, I was to spend hours cornrolling my hair. No, I wasn't to flirt with or take shit off white men, but yes, I was to sleep with and take unending shit off black men. No, I wasn't to watch television or read *Vogue* or *Ladies' Home Journal*, but yes, I should keep my mouth shut. I would still have to iron, sew, cook, and have babies.

Only sixteen, I decided there were a lot of things I didn't know about black male/female relationships. I made an attempt to fill myself in by reading—*Soul on Ice, Native Son, Black Rage*—and by joining the National Black Theatre. In the theatre's brand of a consciousness-raising session I was told of the awful ways in which black women, me included, had tried to destroy the black man's masculinity; how we had castrated him; worked when he didn't work; made money when he made none; spent our nights and days in church praying to a jive white boy named Jesus while he collapsed into alcoholism, drug addiction, and various forms of despair; how we'd always been too loud and domineering, too outspoken.

We had much to make up for by being gentle in the face of our own humiliation, by being soft-spoken (ideally to the point where our voices could not be heard at all), by being beautiful (whatever that was), by being submissive—how often that word was shoved at me in poems and in songs as something to strive for.

At the same time one of the brothers who was a member of the theatre was also a paraprofessional in the school where my mother then taught. My mother asked him what he liked about the theatre. Not knowing that I was her daughter, he answered without hesitation that you could get all the pussy you wanted. NBT was a central institution in the black cultural movement. Much time was spent reaching for the 'godlike' in one another, the things beyond the 'flesh' and beyond all the 'whitewashing.' And what it boiled down to was that now the brother could get more pussy. If that was his revolution, what was mine?

So I was again obsessed with my appearance, worried about the rain again—the black woman's nightmare—for fear that my huge, full Afro would shrivel up to my head. (Despite blackness, black men still didn't like short hair.) My age was one thing I had going for me. 'Older black women are too hard,' my brothers informed me as they looked me up and down.

The message of the black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a black woman, that any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean I'd be denied even the one role still left open to me as 'my man's woman,' keeper of house, children, and incense burners. I grew increasingly desperate about slipping up—they, black men, were threatening me with being deserted, with being *alone*. Like any 'normal' woman, I eagerly grabbed at my own enslavement.

After all, I'd heard the horror stories of educated black women who had to marry ditchdiggers and get their behinds kicked every night. I had thought the black movement would offer me much better. In 1968 I had wanted to become an intelligent human being. I had wanted to be serious and scholarly for the first time in my life, to write and perhaps get the chance Stokely and Baldwin and Imamu Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) had gotten to change the world—that was how I defined not wanting to be white. But by 1969, I simply wanted a man.

When I chose to go to Howard University in 1969, it was because it was all black. I envisioned a super-black utopia where for the first time in life I would be completely surrounded by people who totally understood me. The problem in New York had been that there were too many white people.

Thirty pounds overweight, my hair in the ultimate Afro—washed and left to dry without combing—my skin blue-black from a summer in the sun, Howard's students, the future polite society of NAACP cocktail parties, did not exactly greet me with open arms. I sought out a new clique

each day and found a home in none. Finally I found a place of revelation, if not of happiness, with other misfits in the girls' dorm on Friday and Saturday nights.

These misfits, all dark without exception, all with Afros that were too nappy, chose to stay in and watch television or listen to records rather than take advantage of the score of one-night stands they could probably achieve before being taunted into running home to their parents as 'fallen women.' They came to Howard to get husbands; if you slept around, or if it got out that you had slept with someone you weren't practically engaged to, then there would be very little possibility of a husband for you at Howard.

Such restrictions are not unique in this world, but at Howard, the scene of student takeovers just the previous year, of riots and much revolutionary talk about casting aside Western values, archaic, Victorian morals seemed curiously 'unblack.' Baffled by my new environment, I did something I've never done before—I spent most of my time with women, often turning down the inevitable humiliation or, worse, boredom of a date (a growing possibility as I shed the extra pounds) even when it was offered to me. Most of the women were from small southern and midwestern communities. They thought me definitely straitjacket material with my well-polished set of 'sophisticated' New York views on premarital sex and atheism. I learned to listen more than I spoke.

But no one talked about why we stayed in on Friday and Saturday nights on a campus that was well known for its parties and nightlife. No one talked about why we drank so much or why our hunger for Big Macs was insatiable. We talked about men—all kinds, black and white, Joe Namath, Richard Roundtree, the class president who earned quite a reputation for driving coeds out on the highway and offering them a quick screw or a long walk home. 'But girl, ain't he fine?' We talked about movie stars and singing groups into the wee hours of the morning. Guzzling gin, cheating at poker, choking on cigarettes that dangled precariously from the corners of our mouths, we'd signify. 'If we could only be woman (white) enough' was the general feeling of most of us as we trotted off to bed.

Meanwhile the males on the campus had successfully buried the old standards of light, curly-haired young men with straight noses. They sported large, unruly Afros, dashikis, and flaring nostrils. Their coal-black eyes seemed to say, 'The nights *and* days belong to me,' as we'd pass one another on the campus green, a fashionable, thin colorless little creature always on their arm.

Enough was enough. I left Howard for City College after one term, and the significance of all I'd seen there had not entirely escaped me, because I remember becoming a feminist about then. No one had been doing very well when I had left New York but now it seemed even worse—the 'new blackness' was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters.

I discovered my voice, and when brothers talked to me, I talked back. This had its hazards. Almost got my eye blackened several times. My social life was like guerrilla warfare. Here was the logic behind our grandmothers' old saying, 'A nigga man ain't shit.' It was shorthand for 'The black man has learned to hate himself and to hate you even more. Be careful. He will hurt you.'

I am reminded of a conversation I had with a brother up at City College one mild spring day. We were standing on a corner in front of the South Campus gates; he was telling me what the role of the black woman was. When a pause came in his monologue, I asked him what the role of the black man was. He membled something about, 'Simply to be a man.' When I suggested that might not be enough, he went completely ape. He turned purple. He started screaming. 'The black man doesn't have to do anything. He's a man he's a man he's a man!'

Whenever I raised the question of a black woman's humanity in conversation with a black man, I got a similar reaction. Black men, at least the ones I knew, seemed totally confounded when it came to treating black women like people. Trying to be what we were told to be by the brothers of the 'nation'—sweet and smiling—a young black woman I knew had warmly greeted a brother in passing on Riverside Drive. He responded by raping her. When she asked the brothers what she should do, they told her not to go to the police and to have the baby though she was only seventeen.

Young black female friends of mine were dropping out of school because their boyfriends had convinced them that it was 'not correct' and 'counter-revolutionary' to strive to do anything but have babies and clean house. 'Help the brother get his thing together,' they were told. Other black women submitted to polygamous situations where sometimes they were called upon to sleep with the friends of their 'husband.' This later duty was explained to me once by a 'priest' of the New York Yoruban Temple. 'If your brother has to go to the bathroom and there is no toilet in his house then wouldn't you let him use your toilet?' For toilet read black woman.

The sisters got along by keeping their mouths shut, by refusing to see what was daily growing more difficult to ignore—a lot of brothers were doing double time—uptown with the sisters and downtown with the white woman whom they always vigorously claimed to hate. Some of the bolder brothers were quite frank about it. 'The white woman lets me be a man.'

The most popular justification black women had for not becoming feminists was their hatred of white women. They often repeated this for approving black male ears. (Obviously the brother had an interest in keeping black and white women apart—'Women will chatter.') But what I figured out was that the same black man who trembled with hatred for white men found the white woman irresistible because she was not a human being but a possession in his eyes—the higher-priced spread of woman he saw on

television. 'I know that the white man made the white woman the symbol of freedom and the black woman the symbol of slavery' (*Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver).

When I first became a feminist, my black friends used to cast pitying eyes upon me and say, 'That's whitey's thing.' I used to laugh it off, thinking, yes there are some slight problems, a few things white women don't completely understand, but we can work them out. In *Ebony, Jet,* and *Encore*, and even in *The New York Times*, various black writers cautioned black women to be wary of smiling white feminists. The women's movement enlists the support of black women only to lend credibility to an essentially middle-class, irrelevant movement, they asserted. Time has shown that there was more truth to these claims than their shrillness indicated. Today when many white feminists think of black women, they too often think of faceless masses of welfare mothers and rape victims to flesh out their statistical studies of woman's plight.

One unusually awkward moment for me as a black feminist was when I found out that white feminists often don't view black men as men but as fellow victims. I've got no pressing quarrel with the notion that white men have been the worst offenders, but that isn't very helpful for a black woman from day to day. White women don't check out a white man's bank account or stockholdings before they accuse him of being sexist—they confront white men with and without jobs, with and without membership in a male consciousness-raising group. Yet when it comes to the black man, it's hands off.

A black friend of mine was fired by a black news service because she was pregnant. When she proposed doing an article on this for *Ms*, an editor there turned down the proposal with these words: 'We've got a special policy for the black man.' For a while I thought that was just the conservative feminist position until I overheard a certified radical feminist explaining why she dated only black men and other nonwhite men: 'They're less of a threat to women; they're less oppressive.'

Being a black woman means frequent spells of impotent, self-consuming rage. Such a spell came upon me when I recently attended a panel discussion at a women artists' conference. One of the panel members, a museum director and a white feminist, had come with a young black man in a sweatshirt, Pro-Keds, and rag tied around the kind of gigantic Afro you don't see much anymore. When asked about her commitment to black women artists, she responded with, 'Well, what about Puerto Rican women artists, and Mexican women artists, and Indian women artists? . . .' But she doesn't exhibit Hispanic women any more than she does black women (do I have to say anything about Indian women?), which is seldom indeed, though her museum is located in an area that is predominantly black and Puerto Rican. Yet she was confident in the position she took because the

living proof of her liberalism and good intentions sat in the front row, black and unsmiling, six foot something and militant-*looking*.

In the spring of 1973, Doris Wright, a black feminist writer, called a meeting to discuss 'Black Women and Their Relationship to the Women's Movement.' The result was the National Black Feminist Organization, and I was fully delighted until, true to Women's Movement form, we got bogged down in an array of ideological disputes, the primary one being lesbianism versus heterosexuality. Dominated by the myths and facts of what white feminists had done and not done before us, it was nearly impossible to come to any agreement about our position on anything; and action was unthinkable.

Many of the prime movers in the organization seemed to be representing other interest groups and whatever commitment they might have had to black women's issues appeared to take a back seat to that. Women who had initiative and spirit usually attended one meeting, were turned off by the hopelessness of ever getting anything accomplished, and never returned again. Each meeting brought almost all new faces. Overhearing an aspiring political candidate say only half-jokingly at NBFO's first conference, 'I'm gonna get me some votes out of these niggas,' convinced me that black feminists were not ready to form a movement in which I could, with clear conscience, participate.

I started a black women's consciousness-raising group around the same time. When I heard one of my friends, whom I considered the closest thing to a feminist in the room, saying at one of our sessions, 'I feel sorry for any woman who tries to take my husband away from me because she's just going to have a man who has to pay alimony and child support,' even though she was not married to the man in question, I felt a great sinking somewhere in the chest area. Here was a woman who had insisted (at least to me) upon her right to bear a child outside of marriage, trying to convince a few black women, who were mostly single and very worried about it, that she was really married—unlike them. In fact, one of the first women to leave the group was a recent graduate of Sarah Lawrence, her excuse being, 'I want to place myself in situations where I will meet more men.' The group eventually disintegrated. We had no strength to give to one another. Is that possible? At any rate, that's the way it seemed, and perhaps it was the same on a larger scale with NBFO.

Despite a sizable number of black feminists who have contributed much to the leadership of the women's movement, there is still no black women's movement, and it appears there won't be for some time to come. It is conceivable that the level of consciousness feminism would demand in black women wouldn't lead to any sort of separatist movement, anyway—despite our distinctive problems. Perhaps a multicultural women's movement is somewhere in the future.

But for now, black feminists, of necessity it seems, exist as individuals—some well known, like Eleanor Holmes Norton, Florynce Kennedy, Faith Ringgold, Shirley Chisholm, Alice Walker, and some unknown, like me. We exist as women who are black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.

(1975)