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Black Power fists, the Bible and the apron: the contradictions of our lives

Mariam Williams | Nov. 4, 2013 At the Intersection

My body is the Lord's temple

Don't mess with me! God's property!

--Trin-i-tee 5:7, "My Body," [1] lyrics by Travon M. Potts

My Christian girlfriends and I would feel validated and encouraged whenever we heard the female trio Trin-i-tee 5:7 (pronounced "trinity five seven") sing this pledge to sexual purity until marriage. The song was released during our sophomore year in college. The first time she heard the song, one of my roommates, a brown-skinned, petite woman with jet-black hair worn in a big, curly afro that blew in the wind, sat in our suite living room, raised her Black Power fist high like she was standing to receive a medal with Tommie Smith and John Carlos in the 1968 Olympics and shouted, "Yeh!"

This image of Christian womanhood, purity and Black Power flashed through my mind after a recent overload of information about Black Power and Black Arts Movements in the 1960s and 1970s. I've been poring over books and articles to gather sources for a project in my feminism history class that will explore the literary arts after these official Black Freedom Movement eras, and I haven't been finding what I expected.

Not having any formal education in Black Arts Movement history, I had built most of my knowledge about it on slogans and popular images. "Black is Beautiful." Black people dressed in dashikis or in shirts with images of Africa emblazoned on them reading their poetry to a like-minded audience. Women wearing their hair the same way my roommate did. Writing, visual arts, dance and theater that paid tribute to Africa and honored all things black. Unity, black love, etc.

So the first author I read who addressed sexism in the Black Arts Movement jolted me out of my fantasy. The surprise wore off after the third or fourth author confirmed that indeed, the movement was much more pro-black *man* than pro-black, but then something else startled me. I read a chapter about how black women writers defined womanhood [2] and, by extension, manhood, in poetry of the Black Arts Movement, and I saw the same pattern of traditional gender roles emerge there as I've seen and heard taught in Christian circles.

Women co-star as wives, homemakers, lovers, mothers and specimens of beauty. They have a supporting role. Author Ajuan Maria Mance actually uses the word "helpmate," the same word often used to describe Eve's role for Adam. Men star as leaders in the home, workers (for the revolution) outside of it, and admirers and validators of women's beauty. Mance cites works in which black women elevate black men to demigod status. I thought of Peter's instructions to wives to submit to their husbands and follow the example of "Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord" (1 Peter 3:6). Ironic for a movement that also rejected Christianity as a white man's/Eurocentric faith.

It's also ironic that someone who lives at the intersection didn't know all this already. I read scholarly work

about African-American and women's liberation movements and remember my friend raising a Black Power fist for purity and I think, "My, what a great mess of stuff we black '80s babies must be." Our parents -- mine a few years older than many of my friends' folks -- grew into adulthood when the history I'm now studying was happening. And whether they embraced what they absorbed or rejected it, they taught it, tacitly, to us. The houses I grew up in didn't follow traditional gender norms, but in early adulthood, I found myself surrounded by black Christian women who could have written some of the poems Mance analyzed.

One more surprise came out of this reading: While I felt disgust with the sexism expressed in racial and other freedom movements and felt pity for the women calling their partners gods, I wasn't angry. I thought I would conclude this column with a, "Geez, can black women get a break?" rant, but I found it challenging to evaluate what I had read as right or wrong. I was too busy laughing with pleasure at discovering more about all that has shaped me and my friends as African-Americans, Christians, women, Generation Xers and, in my case, as a feminist. I'm going to keep fighting racism and sexism through my writing, but I'm also going to continue to love the contradictions and ironies of our lives. The Black Power fists, the Bible and the apron. The three-dimensional, non-stereotypical, fullness of us.

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com [3]. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw [4].]

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