

# The Women's Review of Books

XVII, No.1

October 1999

74035

US \$4.00/Canada \$5.00

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## Down with feminism

by Angela Ards

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**When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist**, by Joan Morgan. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 240 pp., \$23.00 hardcover.

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I READ JOAN MORGAN'S *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost* while attending the Black Women in the Academy II conference this past June, because both ask the same question—Why is there no black feminist movement?—and come up with the same answer: lack of a real-world feminism that functions outside the ivory tower. The reason? The scholars present—among them Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Farah Griffin and Beverly Guy-Sheftall—suggested that racial oppression specific to black men has come to represent racism against all black people. So, for instance, when then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas condemned the Anita Hill sexual harassment hearings as “a high-tech lynching,” two-thirds of black Americans supported him, despite Hill’s credible testimony and Thomas’ conservative views.

Black women’s particular racial oppression, on the other hand, has little popular resonance. So, for instance, when Anita Hill was perversely interrogated by the all-white-male Senate committee, or when Lani Guinier and Joycelyn Elders were left out to dry by the Clinton Administration, no one protested, “That was nothing but a high-

tech rape.” To mobilize the majority of black women, who are presumably more versed in Terry McMillan’s fiction than bell hooks’ feminist theory, say the scholars, there is a need to infuse popular discourse with images that connect the black female experience to a collective African American history.

With less ado and a lot more style, Joan Morgan’s witty debut accomplishes what the academics envision. Written in the sister-friendly tones and ebonics-spiced prose characteristic of the popular magazines where Morgan has been a staff writer and contributor, from *The Village Voice* to *Essence* and *VIBE*, *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost* reaches the ‘round-the-way-girl whose lack of a college education may make bell hooks inaccessible. Morgan also connects with “gainfully degreed” women like herself who, though familiar with feminist foremothers, “would rather trick away our last twenty-five dollars on that new nineties black girl fiction...than some of those good, but let’s face it, laboriously academic black feminist texts.”

STYLE AND ACCESSIBILITY aside, Morgan seems to suggest that the real reason everyday black women

have not joined their academic counterparts in a present-day movement is that black feminism has not adequately addressed the bloody gender wars raging in male-female relationships. Ironically, in the early seventies, many women of color shied away from "the f-word," the title of the first essay in this collection, because white women, it was argued—who did not call their men "brothers" and "comrades"—had not imagined a feminism that would liberate men as well. For the hip-hop generation, who grew up listening to and loving the testosterone-based rhythms of hip-hop culture, the question of young black men and their liberation, from racism as well as patriarchy, is at the heart of a feminist aesthetic. "Any feminism that fails to acknowledge that black folks in nineties America are living and trying to love in a war zone is useless to our struggle against sexism," writes Morgan. Hence the throngs of hip-hop feminists who supported the Million Man March, while black baby-boomer feminists mobilized against it.

The significance of the one group in this country most likely to murder each other—literally take each other out over things as trifling as colors or stepping on somebody's sneakers—was not lost on us. In fact, it left us in tears.... [W]hile the utter idiocy inherent in a nineties black leader suggesting women stay home and make sandwiches for their men didn't escape me, it did not nullify the march's positivity either. It's called being able to see the forest and the trees. (p.52)

Granted, it is because of an earlier generation's activism that the hip-hop generation can dare to delve deeper than traditional feminism's black-and-white tenets and into these shades of gray. Morgan exploits the privilege and plunges in: maybe it's not gender equality women really want, but equity, she suggests, questioning a key feminist cornerstone:

Can you be a good feminist and admit out loud that there are things you kinda dig about patriarchy?... Suppose you don't want to pay for your own dinner, hold the door open, fix things, move furniture, or get intimate with whatever's under the hood of a car?... Is it foul to say that imagining a world where you could paint your big brown lips in the most decadent of shades, pile your phat ass into your

fave micromini, slip your freshly manicured toes into four-inch fuck-me sandals and have not one single solitary man objectify—I mean roam his eyes longingly over all the intended places—is, like, a total drag for you? (p.57)

If feminism is truly about gender equality, then it must be completely fair to the brothers, argues Morgan. *Chickenheads'* most provocative contribution to feminist thought is an essay on male reproductive rights, "babymother." Rather than force an unwilling father-to-be to pay child support—which is rarely collected and reinforces the idea that fatherhood is solely a financial obligation—Morgan supports legislation that would allow men to give up parental rights during a child's first six months, just as a woman would when she puts a baby up for adoption. "If we don't allow a father's desire for parenthood to impinge on an unwilling mother's desire for an abortion, how then, both legally and morally, can we ignore an unwilling father's objections to parenthood?" It is an interesting question that deserves more discussion than it gets here, especially on the question of male parental accountability, but theoretical analysis is where this collection falls short.

THE TIGHTEST ESSAYS in *Chickenheads* are "strongblackwomen" and "strongblackwomen -n- endangeredblackmen ... this is not a love story." But the former, which details the racist and sexist images that have historically oppressed black men and women, fueling the gender wars between them, is a mere paraphrasing (hip, witty, engaging paraphrasing but paraphrasing nonetheless) of Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter*. The second essay, a lengthy elaboration on the cultural adage that women raise their daughters and love their sons, owes much to the twin peaks of the current black-book wave: relationship fiction and self-help guides. This sampling of voices, though characteristic of hip-hop, often leaves Morgan at cross purposes with herself.

The title *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost* combines a controversial statement Malcolm X made about American violence when JFK was assassinated with a derogatory term from hip-hop culture used to describe a



woman who uses sex as a ticket to the kept life. In other words, chickenheads, women whose good looks and aggressive wiles currently distract the few eligible bachelors, will one day get their just desserts because beauty fades. It's a rather catty comment unbecoming a feminist, that Morgan later saves by arguing that hip-hop feminists could learn a thing or two from chickenheads about exercising erotic power to battle sexism.

We have the luxury of choosing both our battles and our artillery.... We're not afraid of lawsuits, boycotts, organized protests, or giving the deserving offender a good cussing out. But we also recognize that there are times when winning requires a lighter touch. And sometimes a short skirt and a bat of the eyes is not only easier but infinitely more effective. (pp. 221-222)

It's not a bad idea. Audre Lorde suggests as much in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." A feminine, spiritual energy that women have been taught to hold suspect because it has been abused and vilified in Western society, producing pornography and the obscene, the erotic, says Lorde, "offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.... Of course, women so empowered are dangerous.... For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society."

By erotic, Lorde meant the capacity to share joy with another, in any endeavor. But what Morgan calls erotic is restricted to the merely sexual. Which is why, I think, *Chickenheads* reads as oddly male-identified. A central tenet of these essays is the very good point that women often play a complicitous role in sexism. Take the hundreds of women who, with G-string in hand, flock to the rap-video auditions to press their breasts against a camera lens; or the groupies who'd do anything to be near the power and the glory of a boy's life. But, despite the cogent context she provides for misogynist rap lyrics that are just "full-blown clinical depression masquerading as machismo," Morgan doesn't explain the larger forces that make women feel these are their options, or the reality that women can earn more stripping than in a 9 to 5, or that there are more roles for aspiring black actresses in booty-baring videos than television or film.

A masculinist feminism is bound to have its contradictions. Some Morgan admits right off—for example, that she got her "start as a writer because she caught the sexual attention of a man who could make [her] one." Others are more subtle. Impressed by her courage in defending herself and her sisters, an initially hostile male friend thrust the term "feminist" upon her, and then defined it his way: "You got a bigger dick than most niggas I know"; it was a compliment. The essay "from fly-girls to bitches and hos," written as a love letter in which Morgan personifies hip-hop culture as a "homeboy" whose misdirected anger has her "scrunching for reasons to stay," begins to read like the relationships described in books on misogynists and their enablers. And how can you be down with feminism and wield epithets like "chickenhead" to condescend to other women?

But it's the contradictions that make this book honest and, in the consummate compliment of hip-hop culture, "real." Morgan is uninterested in PC-rhetoric but rather in the truth as best as she can tell it. With no pretenses of "encompassing the entire spectrum of black female identity," she wrote *Chickenheads* for a generation lacking its own for colored girls who've considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf.... Ntozake Shange's choreopoem that became the black-woman manifesto of the mid-seventies. Morgan's fresh, funky, irreverent, post-Civil Rights, post-feminist voice represents us well. ♦♦