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Bowing To No One: Black Feminism in Frances E.W. Harper's "Vashti"& in Janelle
Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N."

In the ongoing discussion of women's rights and feminism, one topic that keeps being brought up is the wage gap. However, such a statistic only pertains to white women, completely erasing and ignoring the unique struggles Black women face. It is common to hear that women make seventy-seven cents for every dollar a man makes. What is not normally mentioned is that white women are the ones being underpaid twenty-three cents. For Black women it is an entirely different narrative. The American Association of University Women in their 2014 article "How Does Race Affect the Gender Wage Gap", state that Black women make 64% of what white men make. It is because of this racial and gender discrimination that Black feminism has emerged. Some of the strongest examples of Black feminism are seen throughout American history in poetry and song, specifically, the poem "Vashti" by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Song "Q.U.E.E.N." by Janelle Monáe. Through their uplifting messages and female central narratives, "Q.U.E.E.N." and "Vashti" are prime examples of Black feminism that call upon Black women to free themselves from others' expectations.

Looking through a Black feminist lens I will explain how Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." and Harper's "Vashti" can serve as sources of empowerment for Black women. I uphold the

argument that experiencing these works and listening to the messages that they carry has had an uplifting and empowering effect on Black women. It is my argument, and the argument of other writers, that the ideas of Black feminism are a driving force in American society that have the power to be a liberating force for Black women.

One highly debated topic in the conversation of Black feminism is whether or not Black feminism is still needed, or even alive. Writers P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods discuss this in their article "Upgrade and Upstage: Injunctions Against Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, 'Black Feminism,' and Hip Hop Studies at the Ledge (A Response to Forster)". They hold the belief that " 'Black feminism' is a structural impossibility, and as such, an onto-epistemic contradiction—hence our use of the quotation marks around the phrase" (358-359). Conversely, Rina Arya argues "it is the distinctive position of dual oppression of racism and sexism that places Black feminism in a distinct position in history and in personal identity" (569). Writer Robin Means Coleman finds a median between these arguments by claiming that Black feminism is needed but comes with challenges: "The first challenge is making Black women a key part of our research whenever appropriate. The second challenge is for us to ask ourselves if our feminism includes a libratory message for those whose tastes and cultural investments may run counter to our own" (38). As for whether or not Black feminism is still alive, in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Professor and Black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins argues that it is alive and that we can see it through art. Collins writes "African American women have hammered out a multifaceted Black women's standpoint. Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists constitute another group from which Black women intellectuals have emerged" (17). Writers such as Professor Emily J. Lordi build off this argument and contest that Janelle Monáe is one of these Black women intellectuals that has emerged as a result of the continuing

Black feminist movement. In her article “Calling All Stars”: Janelle Monáe’s Black Feminist Futures”, she explains the effect other Black women have had on Monáe. “But the most powerful shadow figure in Monáe’s pantheon of pioneering black women might be Lauryn Hill...she raps about *marching to the streets* on ‘Q.U.E.E.N.’ in a cadence that revives Hill’s *march through these streets like Soweto*” (1). Hashim Pipkin furthers Hills’s and Lordis’s argument by stating, “Janelle Monáe’s ‘Q.U.E.E.N.’ is in keeping with that same commitment to conversation with the black past and future” (1). While there are many conflicting voices talking about the importance of Black feminism, it is unreasonable to disregard the deep historical roots it holds, along with the positive effect it has had on Black American women. Thus Monáe and Harper's empowering works are examples of and contribute to Black feminism.

Through their repetition of the word “Queen,” both Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Janelle Monáe present the notion that a queen is any woman with power, ultimately suggesting that all Black women should view themselves as queens. This aspiration to have queenly power can be seen when Monáe sings the main chorus of her song “Yeah I wanna be, wanna be (queen)/ Am I a freak for dancing around?/ (queen)Am I a freak for getting down? (queen),” (Monáe). This can also be seen in Harper's poem when she writes: “That Vashti lay aside her crown/ Thy Queen no more to be” (59-60). What Monáe and Harper suggest here is that power comes from making one's own choices. By laying aside her crown and freeing herself from her role as queen Vashti gains the power to live however she chooses. And although she sings about wanting to be a queen, Janelle is clearly not aspiring to become Kate Middleton. For both Harper and Monáe, being a queen is more than the title, being a queen has developed into being a woman with power. By showing these powerful women, Harper and Monáe are able to illustrate the empowerment that comes from freeing oneself from others expectations.

Harper and Monáe explore the idea of rebellion in their respective works to call upon women to rise up and face their oppressors. They ultimately suggest that all women can do this. At the start of her song, Monáe sings “They call us dirty ‘cause we break all your rules now/ And we just came to act a fool, Is that alright (girl that’s all right)/ They be like ooh, let them eat cake/ but we eat wings and throw the bones on the ground” (Monáe). In “Vashti” Harper writes “Go tell the King, She proudly said/ That I am Persia’s Queen/ and by his crowds of merry men/ I never will be seen”(21-24). Monáe and Harper are making bold statements with their perspectives in this instance. Monáe states that the majority is attempting to police the minority by saying that their behavior is wrong. When she references the saying “let them eat cake,” she states that the majority is acting like the French bourgeoisie during the late 1700’s by completely ignoring the demands and needs of the minorities. Monáe continues this rebellion by rejecting the majority's suggestion that they “eat cake”. She proclaims that she and her friends will eat a food of their choice (in this case wings) and then “throw the bones on the ground” as a way of making a commotion. Monáe’s rebellion is one of rejection. This is the exact same for Vashti, whose rebellion was centered in her refusal to be compliant to her husband's demands. Vashti could have gone along with the King's demands and then attempt to talk to him privately afterwards about how she felt objectified, she even could have simply talked poorly about her husband in confidence with just her ladies in waiting. But nothing would have been a greater rebellion against him than publicly denying one of his commands. What Monáe and Vashti did, while both being bold acts, were as simple as saying no. They did not need special training or to have been born a certain way to do so, Harper and Monáe show that any woman can do this. Any woman can free herself from the expectations of others.

By showing women who confidently disregard the shame others attempt to put on them, Harper and Monáe communicate to women that rising above shame is a step towards liberation. This liberation shines through in the last two lines of Harper's poem. "A woman who would bow to grief/ but would not bow to shame" (67-68) & when Monáe sings "Even if it makes others uncomfortable, I will love who I am" (Monáe). When a person is banished in addition to having to leave one's home, there is also shame that comes along with it. However, this is in no way the case with Vashti. Vashti, after speaking out against her husband in front of his court and the general public, has to leave Persia. There is no getting around that. But despite this, she rejects the shame the king and his men try to put on her. Because she rises above this shame giving up her queenship and leaving her home of Persia is not a shameful banishment, but liberation from the patriarchal rule she lived under. Monáe's statement is much more subtle; she concedes that she won't be able to get everyone to love her or understand her way of life, but the approval of others is not what matters. What matters is that, despite what others think and say about her, she won't stop from fully embracing who she is, even if others are disturbed by it. By showing women who became liberated by rejecting shame others put on them, Harper and Vashti are adding to a much bigger message that women can live by their own expectations.

Via references to multiple historical queens, Harper and Monáe establish a set of role models for women to gain empowerment from. The first queen referenced is Queen Vashti herself who comes from the book of Esther in the Bible. The other references occur in "Q.U.E.E.N", Janelle Monáe closes her song with a rap verse that includes the lines "My crown too heavy like the queen Nefertiti" (Monáe) & "I'm gonna keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman" (Monáe). There are two links between the women references, one is that they held power the other was that they were women of color. Both Harper and Monáe specifically

referenced powerful Black women who are normally underrepresented throughout history.

Monáe also references both Queen Nefertiti and Harriet Tubman in the same refrain, equating them to each other. While Harriet Tubman was never a monarch like Vashti or Nefertiti she still held power. She led hundreds of slaves to freedom the same way Nefertiti lead the people of Egypt and Vashti ruled over Persia. This comparison between the women asserts the notion that you do not need to have royal birth to be a queen. By making examples out of these strong historic and literary figures, Harper and Monáe show that Black feminism has existed throughout history and continues.

While the overarching feminist movement makes a point of including everyone, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the challenges Black women face are different than the ones faced by the average white woman. Janelle Monáe and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper use their poetry and music to create a space to specifically address Black women and promote Black feminism. Such spaces have been and continue to be vital in American society. Harper's Poem "Vashti" was published in 1895 and Monáe's song "Q.U.E.E.N." was posted on YouTube in 2013. Despite being released over 110 years apart, both works contain the same message that Black women should free themselves from others expectations. And when received by the intended Black female audience, the messages have an overwhelmingly uplifting and empowering effect. Works that have an effect like these are essential because those facing disadvantage (especially those who's disadvantages commonly go unexamined and unfixed by the majority that has the ability to do so) need sources of support and encouragement. Janelle Monáe puts it best herself in a 2013 online interview with the New Zealand music magazine Coup De Main. When asked about the importance of feminism she says, "We're not all the same, so I think it's just important to encourage the world around us, and encourage ourselves to love

women and nurture them and not trying to oppress them to treat them less” (1). It is through Harper and Monáe’s Black feminist message that Black women are able to learn to free themselves from the expectations of others. It is also through this message that others can learn to stop committing acts that oppress Black women, thus creating a more productive, accepting, and safer global community.

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