

# the Humanist

## The “Return” of the Welfare Queens: Feminism, Secularism, and Anti-Racism

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*“The percentage of white feminists who are concerned about racism is still a minority of the movement, and even within this minority those who are personally sensitive and completely serious about formulating an activist challenge to racism are fewer still.”*

—Barbara Smith, [Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology](#) (2000).

In the American imagination, black women are the poster children for disreputable, irresponsible motherhood and Latina “illegals” are a close second. From birth to adolescence, every girl of color must navigate a political climate in which Ronald Reagan’s racist welfare queen caricature casts long shadows. Ending its “boycott” of feature stories on black women, the [Los Angeles Times](#) recently served up some red meat for welfare queen watchers. The front page featured an extensive profile of twenty-seven-year-old Natalie Cole, a jobless, unmarried, unskilled black mother with four kids. Entitled “Caught in the Cycle of Poverty,” the article trots out an expert from Harvard who sagely proclaims that “poverty is bad for kids,” offering no further analysis on how the richest, most militarized nation on the planet pimps out its children. Instead, we are regaled with Cole’s hot mess of personal failure and pathology. Coming from a long line of young single mothers, by the time Cole turned seventeen she was already raising two children. Now she can’t be bothered to create a résumé or use birth control to avoid having a fifth child. The prayer, “*God in heaven, hear my prayer, keep me in thy loving care,*” is taped to her bedroom wall. Needless to say, she will not be getting her own Oxygen, TLC, or Lifetime reality show à la GOP teen mom Bristol Palin any time soon.

For me, the article was especially timely, tragic, and enraging because I recently found out that one of my most inquisitive students is pregnant at sixteen. Several of my [Women’s Leadership Project](#) alum, who worked incredibly hard to become the first in their families to go to college,

speak of friends who have had children shortly after graduating from high school. As budding feminists they are overly familiar with the “validation” pregnancy supposedly provides working class young women of color inundated with media propaganda that hyper-sexualizes black and Latina bodies and demonizes abortion.

In this South Los Angeles school community, only a small fraction of the student body goes on to college and many youth are in foster care, often having to raise themselves. Small evangelical storefront churches grossly outnumber living wage job centers, God and Jesus are touted as some of the biggest “cultural” influences, and high teen pregnancy rates are a symptom of the expendability of “other people’s children” (to quote education activist [Lisa Delpit](#)). Thirty years ago, scoring a living wage job with benefits was still a possibility for a South L.A. teenager with only a high school diploma. Now, having a college degree is the bare minimum for getting a decent paying job. However, the regime of mass incarceration has made the barriers to college-going even higher for youth of color. One in six black men has been incarcerated and, in some instances, whites [with criminal records](#) elicit more favorable responses from employers than do black or Latino applicants with no records. Mainstream media focus on the staggering unemployment rates of men of color has eclipsed attention to the economic downturn’s equally devastating impact on black women. Deepening segregation, diminishing job prospects due to the gutting of public sector employment (23 percent of black women are employed in public sector jobs), and mental health crises have pushed more women of color into the church pews or alternative spirituality, with a vengeance.

So what does the intersection of nontheism and feminism mean within the context of the New Jim Crow? And what might secularist feminism mean for women of color when the vast majority of them still view feminism as a “white” thing, chronically disengaged from critical issues of economic justice? These were some of the issues I cared about coming into the first-ever [Women in Secularism](#) conference put on by the Center for Inquiry and held in Washington, DC, this past May. The event was organized by DC CFI director Melody Hensley, who did an excellent job of bringing together a cross-section of writers, activists, and academics to discuss the politics of sexism, theocracy, women’s rights, and secular organizing. I was pleased to finally meet atheist feminists like novelist/blogger Alyson Miers ([Charlinder’s Walk](#)), Atlanta radio host [Charone Pagett](#), and writer [Soraya Chemaly](#) in person. Nonetheless, the overwhelmingly white (and female) audience highlighted the quantum leap that remains in making humanism, secularism, and atheism culturally relevant to communities of color.

One of the highlights of the conference was hearing [Wafa Sultan](#), a physician, internationally renowned activist, and Los Angeles resident. Sultan spoke movingly about her experiences with misogynist violence and repression in Syria, detailing her niece’s tragic suicide after enduring an abusive forced marriage. As in the Bible, woman-hating is embedded in the very language and doctrine of the Koran (she alluded to most of the occupants of Islamic hell as being female). Sultan insisted that if Americans can lob bombs and send drones to Middle Eastern countries, they should certainly be allowed to develop secular schools there; an item that is clearly not high on America’s militarist agenda. While powerfully condemning Islam, she sidestepped the issue of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East. There was no mention of how Western occupation has historically aggravated Muslim fundamentalism rather than spur secular movements and women’s rights in countries like Iran and Iraq. She poignantly compared living under Islam to

hell, then proceeded to criticize American women for “complaining” about their civil rights (and ostensibly cozier existences). Her dismissal was jarring in a nation in the throes of white Christian fascist/Tea Party/American Taliban backlash—which apes the very fundamentalist traditions white nationalists demonize in the “primitive” Middle East—against women’s rights, LGBT equality, undocumented immigrant rights, and economic justice. Perhaps sensing the cognitive dissonance her scold elicited, she circled back and expressed solidarity with American women at the end of her talk.

Sultan, [Greta Christina](#), [Annie Laurie Gaylor](#), and [Elisabeth Cornwell](#) from the Richard Dawkins Foundation discussed the benefits and drawbacks of religion on a panel that delved into everything from anthropology 101 to organizing strategies. Discussing the need to organize across political interests, Christina gave props to the Secular Student Alliance, referencing the appeal of LGBT advocacy to younger activists seeking to coalition-build. On the subject of why male nonbelievers greatly outnumber women nonbelievers in most societies, Cornwell stressed the gender-specific needs of women in terms of caregiving and childrearing. She argued that women are effectively compelled to seek the social and community protections provided by organized religion. Christina argued that men didn’t need the comforts of religion because they already enjoyed gender, race, and class privileges in a stratified society. Hence, women who break away from social and cultural conventions risk greater ostracism and moral stigma than do men (such as being labeled a slut, fallen woman, or bad mother).

I spoke on a panel about the intersection of feminism and nontheism with fellow bloggers and writers [Rebecca Watson](#), [Jennifer McCreight](#) and [Ophelia Benson](#). Having received a slew of Internet hate mail and rape threats, Watson called out male atheists who love to rail against Islamic patriarchy and female genital circumcision whilst paternalistically denying sexism in the New Atheist movement. McCreight challenged the audience to push back against sexist exclusion of the views of women activists and writers who speak out on women’s rights and the politics of diversity. She also slammed male conference organizers and attendees who sexually harass with impunity, but declined to identify specific offenders.

The general hesitance to out perpetrators highlights how gender power differentials promote a culture of silence that normalizes sexist treatment of women. Some organizations like CFI and American Atheists have responded by highlighting or revising their own sexual harassment policies. However, even the most stringent sexual harassment policies aren’t going to redress a patriarchal culture in which men feel entitled to ogle, proposition, and touch precisely because “women’s issues” are deemed to be separate, marginal, and so on—not what *real* secularism is all about. So the panel underscored why calls for simple “diversity” in the secular movement are inadequate. Radical intersectionality demands that the movement go beyond the canned mantra of religion versus science, toward an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist vision of secular social justice.

In her 2007 book, [Women in the Church of God in Christ](#), Anthea Butler discusses how “church mothers” sought sanctification as a form of social agency within sexist Black Church hierarchies. An alternative to ordination, sanctification allowed black women to “negotiate for and obtain power both within the denomination and without it ... Church members pursued sanctification through ... fasting, prayer, scripture study, and other disciplines, creating moral and spiritual

authority.” In short, church mothers in COGIC created meaningful spaces to compensate for their exclusion from official channels of power and authority in racially segregated communities. According to a recent [survey](#) by the *Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation, African-American women have the highest religious affiliation amongst all racial and gender subgroups. They are the most “churched” group in the country, the most openly devout, and the most deeply invested in church-going rituals. For many black women, being a Christian is an essential part of selfhood. It shapes their connection to family, community, politics, and intimate relationships. It also reflects the legacy of black female hypersexualization. Black women negotiated *morality* in a context in which their enslaved bodies were constructed as the criminal, sexual racial other set against the backdrop of white innocence, reason, and Western civilization—in other words, no Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty models of femininity existed for little black girls forced to give birth to the master’s babies at thirteen.

On the panel, I framed this history vis-à-vis the explosion of fetal homicide, race-selection abortion, and other anti-family planning laws that disproportionately criminalize women of color as pathological breeders. Despite being less than 9 percent of the U.S. population, black women are the largest segment of the skyrocketing female prison population. Black children are six times more likely to have a parent or guardian in prison. And colorism plays a role in black female sentencing and incarceration rates as well. According to a recent [study](#) done in North Carolina prisons, dark-skinned black women were more likely to receive and serve longer sentences than lighter-skinned black women. The War on Drugs, draconian Three Strikes laws, suspension and expulsion policies that fuel the school-to-prison pipeline, and the gutting of the social welfare safety net have deepened black and Latino criminalization.

But these are not secular issues that are privileged in traditional humanist feminist discourse. As the labor activist [Siobhan Brooks](#) notes in her 2002 essay, “Black Feminism in Everyday Life,”

(my mother) did not relate to white feminism because the poverty of women like her was never an agenda for them. I think the white mainstream feminist movement rarely considered issues of class regarding motherhood ... Growing up I knew better than to get pregnant because of my mother’s warnings about how I would end up on welfare, like most of our female neighbors who were single mothers. Many hadn’t completed their education. My mother did not hold these views because she claimed to be feminist; she held these views because she knew firsthand the interlocking systems of racism, poverty, and sexism.

For the future of Natalie Cole and all those “other people’s children,” humanist feminism has got to stand up and face this radical challenge.

**Sikivu Hutchinson** is the author of [Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars](#) and the forthcoming [Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels](#).