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Living life at the intersection of blackness, feminism, womanhood, Christianity

Mariam Williams | Sep. 23, 2013 At the Intersection

I carried the title of this column over from a description I used on an Indiegogo campaign over the summer to help me fund a trip to Voices of Our National Arts Foundation Inc. (VONA), an expensive but worthy summer writing workshop for writers of color. Indiegogo strongly recommended using photos in the description to promote the campaign, but that presented challenges: The memoir I wanted to workshop didn't exist as a book and therefore had no cover art; VONA's logo didn't say anything about me and my memoir; and I didn't have the skills to come up with something that would illustrate a book about -- wait, what is my life about?

My memoir has a working title of *The Truth about Panties: and other revelations about Christianity, singles & sex*. I had described it as *Bitch is the New Black* [1] meets *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance* [2] with some *How to Be a Woman* [3] thrown in. I've also called it "a layering of the personal with the political" and a journey through the "personal, spiritual and sexual discoveries [I make] in my search for love, purpose, godliness and acceptance in liberal and holy worlds."

In other words, my life is about existing in many spaces at once, holding multiple identities and not quite serving as a model example of any of them.

The labels I see showing up most in the stories I choose to recount in my memoir and that continue to show up in my life are "black," "woman," "Christian" and "feminist" -- sometimes I add "single" and "Southern" -- and they have a history of co-existing in tension. I'm currently taking a class titled "History of U.S. Feminisms," and in our last reading assignment, this identity tension stood in sharp relief. We read from the book *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* [4], by Deborah Gray White. In the book's first chapter, White chronicles the rise of black women's club organizations, each founded to solve the black race's problems by uplifting its women. The opening passage describes a high-class black woman exuding 19th-century femininity as she rouses a church full of women with a call to work for the betterment of black people.

Throughout the chapter, their faith in themselves as women and their forthright statements of equality with men stood out to me, as did their Christian principles and how easily they drifted into Phariseeic world views and judgment. I lost count of how many times the words "morality," "purity" and "piety" appeared in black women leaders' speeches and writings and among the words of men who supported them. The women's clubs fought poverty, fed orphans and started kindergartens and systems of education to try to reach every child, all the while emphasizing the importance of maintaining a model home and begging white women not to judge them by the lowest people among them: the poor, uneducated, uncultured, loose and wayward.

I could feel my anger rising as I heard some of the same arguments I hear today, more than a century later, that blame black women -- and particularly single black mothers -- for all the ills facing under-resourced black communities, and I could feel myself getting more annoyed knowing the black women making these remarks ended up in higher classes because they were mixed-race or could pass for white. It was as though women who had been raised white were pushing women of color to aspire to parity with white patriarchal standards, and the

compassion of Christ had been forgotten. These women were simply lucky to be fair-skinned. Who were they to judge?

And yet, I see myself in these early black feminist leaders. I've found myself in limbo in how to live out a faith that emphasizes Christ's work for social justice without watering down its call to personal morality and self-improvement through a relationship with him. I often forget "Yet for the grace of God, there go I" and say, "Why don't you just get your life together?"

I believe in my equality with men, even as I put high demands on the cleanliness of my home and the seasoning of my food when I have company coming over. I take joy in the traditions of my historically black church on segregated Sunday mornings but work to end the institutionalized racism that allows housing segregation to continue in my city.

I live my life "at the intersection" of blackness, feminism, womanhood and Christianity. Welcome to my corner.

[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 [5]. Mariam is writing a full-length memoir about her life "At the Intersection" and is seeking representation. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw [6].]

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