

Black Feminism and Intersectionality

By [Sharon Smith](#)

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“The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought.”

—Black feminist and scholar Barbara Smith, 1983²

Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in her insightful 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”³ The concept of intersectionality is not an abstract notion but a description of the way multiple oppressions are experienced. Indeed, Crenshaw uses the following analogy, referring to a traffic intersection, or crossroad, to concretize the concept:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. . . . But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.⁴

Crenshaw argues that Black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either “racism” or “sexism”—but as a combination of both racism *and* sexism. Yet the legal system has generally defined sexism as based upon an unspoken reference to the injustices confronted by *all* (including white) women, while defining racism to refer to those faced by *all* (including male) Blacks and other people of color. This framework frequently renders Black women legally “invisible” and without legal recourse.

Crenshaw describes several employment discrimination-based lawsuits to illustrate how Black women’s complaints often fall between the cracks precisely because they are discriminated against *both* as women and as Blacks. The ruling in one such case, *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, filed by five Black women in 1976, demonstrates this point vividly.

The General Motors Corporation had never hired a Black woman for its workforce before 1964—the year the Civil Rights Act passed through Congress. All of the Black women hired after 1970 lost their jobs fairly quickly, however, in mass layoffs during the 1973–75 recession. Such a sweeping loss of jobs among Black women led the plaintiffs to argue that seniority-based layoffs, guided by the principle “last hired-first fired,” discriminated against Black women workers at General Motors, extending past discriminatory practices by the company.

Yet the court refused to allow the plaintiffs to combine sex-based and race-based discrimination into a single category of discrimination:

The plaintiffs allege that they are suing on behalf of black women, and that therefore this lawsuit attempts to combine two causes of action into a new special sub-category, namely, a combination of racial and sex-based discrimination. . . . The plaintiffs are clearly entitled to a remedy if they have been discriminated against. However, they should not be allowed to combine statutory remedies to create a new “super-remedy” which would give them relief beyond what the drafters of the relevant statutes intended. Thus, this lawsuit must be examined to see if it

states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both.⁵

In its decision, the court soundly rejected the creation of “a new classification of ‘black women’ who would have greater standing than, for example, a black male. The prospect of the creation of new classes of protected minorities, governed only by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination, clearly raises the prospect of opening the hackneyed Pandora’s box.”⁶

Crenshaw observes of this ruling that “providing legal relief only when Black women show that their claims are based on race or on sex is analogous to calling an ambulance for the victim only after the driver responsible for the injuries is identified.”⁷

Sojourner Truth

After Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality in 1989, it was widely adopted because it managed to encompass in a single word the simultaneous experience of the multiple oppressions faced by Black women. But the concept was not a new one. Since the times of slavery, Black women have eloquently described the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender—referring to this concept as “interlocking oppressions,” “simultaneous oppressions,” “double jeopardy,” “triple jeopardy” or any number of descriptive terms.⁸

Like most other Black feminists, Crenshaw emphasizes the importance of Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech delivered to the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?⁹

Truth’s words vividly contrast the character of oppression faced by white and Black women. While white middle-class women have traditionally been treated as delicate and overly emotional—destined to subordinate themselves to white men—Black women have been denigrated and subject to the racist abuse that is a foundational element of US society. Yet, as Crenshaw notes, “When Sojourner Truth rose to speak, many white women urged that she be silenced, fearing that she would divert attention from women’s suffrage to emancipation,” invoking a clear illustration of the degree of racism within the suffrage movement.¹⁰

Crenshaw draws a parallel between Truth’s experience with the white suffrage movement and Black women’s experience with modern feminism, arguing, “When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect *women’s* experiences and *women’s* aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask, “Ain’t *we* women?”

Intersectionality as a synthesis of oppressions

Thus, Crenshaw’s political aims reach further than addressing flaws in the legal system. She argues that Black women are frequently absent from analyses of either gender oppression or racism, since the former focuses primarily on the experiences of white women and the latter on Black men. She seeks to challenge both feminist and antiracist theory and practice that neglect to “accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender,” arguing that “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.”¹¹

Crenshaw argues that a key aspect of intersectionality lies in its recognition that multiple oppressions are not each suffered separately but rather as a single, synthesized experience. This has enormous significance at the very practical level of movement building.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, published in 1990, Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins extends and updates the social contradictions raised by Sojourner Truth, while crediting collective struggles waged historically with establishing a “collective wisdom” among Black women:

If women are allegedly passive and fragile, then why are Black women treated as “mules” and assigned heavy cleaning chores? If good mothers are supposed to stay at home with their children, then why are US Black women

What is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality refers to the complex web of different forms of oppression--such as sexism, racism, and classism--experienced simultaneously by marginalized individuals and groups in a society in such a way as to constitute *super-oppression*; that is, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (to borrow a well-known phrase from the Greek philosopher Aristotle).

Note: The theory behind intersectionality was first articulated by the African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article published in 1989 in the journal *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." She had written it as a criticism of white feminists who, quite often, remained naively insensitive to the racism that black women experienced in United States--a problem that continues to plague them to this day because of their *colorblind racism*.



on public assistance forced to find jobs and leave their children in day care? If women's highest calling is to become mothers, then why are Black teen mothers pressured to use Norplant and Depo Provera? In the absence of a viable Black feminism that investigates how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class foster these contradictions,

the angle of vision created by being deemed devalued workers and failed mothers could easily be turned inward, leading to internalized oppression. But the legacy of struggle among US Black women suggests that a collectively shared Black women's oppositional knowledge has long existed. This collective wisdom in turn has spurred US Black women to generate a more specialized knowledge, namely, Black feminist thought as critical social theory.¹²

Like Crenshaw, Collins uses the concept of intersectionality to analyze how “oppressions [such as ‘race and gender’ or ‘sexuality and nation’] work together in producing injustice.” But Collins adds the concept “matrix of dominations” to this formulation: “In contrast, the matrix of dominations refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression.”¹³

Elsewhere, Collins acknowledges the crucial component of social class among Black women in shaping political perceptions. In “The Contours of an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” she argues that “[w]hile a Black woman's standpoint and its accompanying epistemology stem from Black women's consciousness of race and gender oppression, they are not simply the result of combining Afrocentric and female values—*standpoints are rooted in real material conditions structured by social class.*”¹⁴ [Emphasis added.]

Fighting sexism in a profoundly racist society

Because of the historic role of slavery and racial segregation in the United States, the development of a unified women's movement requires recognizing the manifold implications of this continuing racial divide. While all women are oppressed as women, no movement can claim to speak for *all* women unless it speaks for women who also face the consequences of racism—which place women of color disproportionately in the ranks of the working class and the poor. Race and class therefore must be central to the project of women's liberation if it is to be meaningful to

those women who are most oppressed by the system.

Indeed, one of the key weaknesses of the predominantly white US feminist movement has been its lack of attention to racism, with enormous repercussions. Failure to confront racism ends up reproducing the racist status quo.

The widely accepted narrative of the modern feminist movement is that it initially involved white women beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, who were later joined by women of color following in their footsteps. But this narrative is factually incorrect.



Decades before the rise of the modern women's liberation movement, Black women were organizing against their systematic rape at the hands of white racist men. Women civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks, were part of a vocal grassroots movement to defend Black women subject to racist sexual assaults—in an intersection of oppression unique to Black women historically in the United States.

Danielle L. McGuire, author of *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*¹⁵ argues that

throughout the twentieth century...Black women regularly denounced their sexual misuse. By deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy, whether in the church, the courtroom, or in congressional hearings, African American women loudly resisted what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the “thingification” of their humanity. Decades before radical feminists in the women's movement urged rape survivors to “speak out,” African American women's public protests galvanized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity.¹⁶

The invention of the Black “matriarchy”

In the 1960s, the contrast between white middle-class and Black women's oppression could not have been more

obvious. The same “experts” who prescribed a life of happy homemaking for white suburban women, as documented in Betty Friedan’s enormously popular *The Feminine Mystique*, reprimanded Black women for their failure to conform to this model.¹⁷ Because Black mothers have traditionally worked outside the home in much larger numbers than their white counterparts, they were blamed for a range of social ills on the basis of their relative economic independence.

Socialist-feminist Stephanie Coontz describes “Freudians and social scientists” who “insisted that Black men had been doubly emasculated—first by slavery and later by the economic independence of their women.” Many in the African-American media also accepted this analysis. A 1960 *Ebony* magazine article stated plainly that the traditional independence of the Black woman meant that she was “more in conflict with her innate biological role than the white woman.”¹⁸

This theme emerged full throttle in 1965, when the US Department of Labor issued a report entitled, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” The report, authored by future Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, describes a “Black matriarchy” at the center of a “tangle of pathology” afflicting Black families, leading to a cycle of poverty. “A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife,” in which Black women consistently earn more than their men, argues Moynihan.

The report states, “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole.” The report explains why this is the case:

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.¹⁹

This example demonstrates why gender discrimination cannot be effectively understood without factoring in the role of racism. And Black feminists since that time have made a priority of examining the interlocking relationship between gender, race, and class that many white feminists tended to ignore at the time. In so doing, they demonstrated that women of color are not merely “doubly oppressed” by both sexism and racism. Black women’s experience of sexism is shaped equally by racism and class inequality and is therefore *different* in certain respects from the experience of white, middle-class women.

“Two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal”

The 1950s and 1960s was also a period of intensive racial polarization in the United States, as the massive Civil Rights Movement struggled to end both Jim Crow segregation throughout the South and de facto racial segregation in the North. Interracial marriage was still banned in sixteen states in 1967 when the Supreme Court finally ruled such bans unconstitutional in the *Loving v. Virginia* decision.

Urban rebellions swept the country in the mid- to late-sixties, touched off by police brutality and other forms of racial discrimination in poverty-stricken Black ghettos. In 1967, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, also known as the Kerner Commission, was established to investigate the root causes of urban rebellions. In 1968, the Commission issued a report that included scathing indictment of racism and segregation in US society. The report concludes:

Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.... Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.²⁰

The Kerner Commission emphasized that much of the problem was rooted in “[p]ervasive discrimination and segregation in employment, education and housing, which have resulted in the continuing exclusion of great numbers of Negroes from the benefits of economic progress.” The Commission concluded that the degree of housing segregation was such that “to create an unsegregated population distribution, an average of over 86 percent of all Negroes would have to change their place of residence within the city.”²¹

In response to the extreme degree of racism and sexism they faced in the 1960s, Black women and other women of color began organizing against their oppression, forming a multitude of organizations. In 1968, for example, Black women from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed the Third World Women’s Alliance. In 1973, a group of notable Black feminists, including Florynce Kennedy, Alice Walker, and Barbara Smith, formed the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). In 1974, Barbara Smith joined with a group of other Black lesbian feminists to found the Boston-based Combahee River Collective as a self-consciously radical alternative to the NBFO. The Combahee River Collective was named to commemorate the successful Underground Railroad Combahee River Raid of 1863, planned and led by Harriet Tubman, which freed 750 slaves.

The Combahee River Collective’s defining statement, issued in 1977, described its vision for Black feminism as opposing *all* forms of oppression—including sexuality, gender identity, class, disability, and age oppression—later embedded in the concept of intersectionality.

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The

“Human beings are sufficiently altruistic, intelligent, and rational to preclude oppression solely for the sake of oppression. In other words, at the root of **all forms of oppression (classism, disablism, ethnicism, racism, sexism, etc.) is **exploitation** for purposes that range from material aggrandizement to scapegoating to empire-building.**

OPPRESSION

PATRIARCHY
“Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.... Clearly we cannot dismantle a system as long as we engage in collective denial about its impact on our lives. Patriarchy requires male dominance by any means necessary, hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence.”
—BELL HOOKS (WRITER, TEACHER, FEMINIST INTELLECTUAL, AND ACTIVIST)

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synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.²²

They added, “We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.”²³

The consequences of ignoring class and racial differences between women

As noted above, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, gave voice to the anguish of white middle-class homemakers who were trapped in their suburban homes, doomed to lives revolving around fulfilling their families' every need. The book immediately struck a chord with millions of women who desperately sought to escape the stultifying world of household drudgery.

Friedan's book, however, ignored the importance of the very real class and racial differences that exist between women. She made a conscious decision to target this particular audience of white middle-class women. As Coontz notes, "[T]he content of *The Feminine Mystique* and the marketing strategy that Friedan and her publishers devised for it ignored Black women's positive examples of Friedan's argument." Friedan surely knew better. She had traveled in left-wing labor circles during the 1930s and 1940s but decided in the mid-1950s (at the height of the anticommunist witch hunts of the McCarthy era) to reinvent herself as an apolitical suburban wife.²⁴

Few Black women or working-class women of any race would have been able to afford Friedan's proposal that women hire domestic workers to perform their daily household chores while they were at work. Thus, "Black women who did read the book seldom responded as enthusiastically as did her white readers."²⁵

The Meaning of Oppression in a Capitalist Democracy

The oppressed have to work twice as hard, to get half as far. The reverse is true for the oppressors: they can work half as hard, to get twice as far.



Friedan praises those stay-at-home moms who had shown the courage to break from their traditional roles to seek well-paying careers, writing sympathetically that these women “had problems of course, tough ones—juggling their pregnancies, finding nurses and housekeepers, having to give up good assignments when their husbands were transferred.”³¹ Yet she doesn’t deem it worthy to comment on the lives of the nursemaids and the housekeepers these career women hire, who also work all day but then return home to face housework and child care responsibilities of their own.

Soon after *The Feminine Mystique* was published, left-wing civil rights activist and women’s historian Gerda Lerner wrote to Friedan, praising the book but also expressing “one reservation:” Friedan had addressed the book “solely to the problems of middle class, college-educated women.” Lerner notes that “working women, especially Negro women, labor not only under the disadvantages imposed by the feminine mystique, but under the more pressing disadvantages of economic discrimination.”²⁶

It is also worth noting that Friedan introduces a profoundly anti-gay theme in *The Feminine Mystique* that would reverberate in her organizing efforts into the 1970s. She argues that “the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky smog over the American scene” has its roots in the feminine mystique, which can produce “the kind of mother-son devotion that can produce latent or overt homosexuality.... The boy smothered by such parasitical mother-love is kept from growing up, not only sexually, but in all ways.”²⁷

Reproducing the myth of the Black rapist

But racism was not limited to the more conservative wing of the women’s movement. Susan Brownmiller, author of *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, published in 1975, describes the root of women’s oppression in the crudest of biological terms, based on men’s physical ability to rape: “When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it.... Man’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function.” On this basis, Brownmiller concludes that men use rape to enforce their power over women: “[I]t is nothing more and nothing less than a conscious process by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”²⁸

This theoretical framework, based purely on the supposed biological differences between men and women, allowed Brownmiller to justify reactionary assumptions in the name of combating women’s oppression. She reaches openly racist conclusions in her account of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till. Fourteen-year-old Till, visiting family in Jim Crow Mississippi that summer, committed the “crime” of whistling at a married white woman named Carolyn Bryant, in a teenage prank. Till was tortured and shot before his young body was dumped in the Tallahatchie River.

Despite Till’s lynching, Brownmiller describes Till and his killer as sharing power over a “white woman,” using stereotypes that Black activist and scholar Angela Davis called “the resuscitation of the old racist myth of the Black rapist.”²⁹

Brownmiller’s own words illustrate Davis’s insight:

Rarely has one single case exposed so clearly as Till’s the underlying group male antagonisms over access to women, for what began in Bryant’s store should not be misconstrued as an innocent flirtation.... Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference, they could get a white woman and Carolyn Bryant was the nearest convenient object. In concrete terms, the accessibility of all white women was on review.³⁰

Brownmiller also wrote,

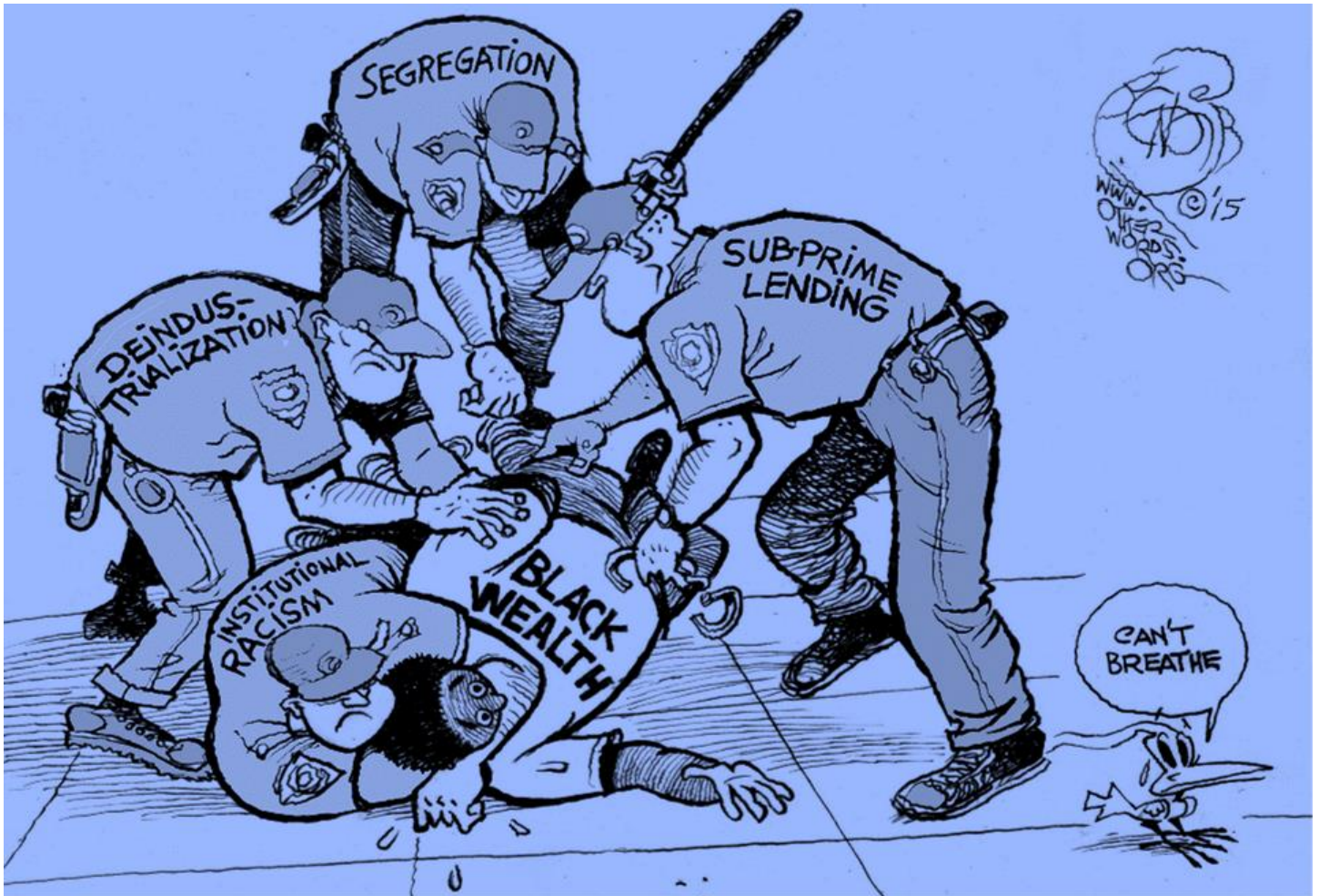
And what of the wolf whistle, Till’s ‘gesture of adolescent bravado?’... The whistle was no small tweet of hubba-hubba or melodious approval for a well turned ankle.... It was a deliberate insult just short of physical assault, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, had in mind to possess her.³¹

The acclaimed novelist, poet, and activist Alice Walker responded in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1975, “Emmett Till was not a rapist. He was not even a man. He was a child who did not understand that whistling at a white woman could cost him his life.”³² Davis described the contradictions inherent in Brownmiller’s analysis of rape: “In choosing to take sides with white women, regardless of the circumstances, Brownmiller herself capitulates to racism. Her failure to alert white women about the urgency of combining a fierce challenge to racism with the necessary battle against sexism is an important plus for the forces of racism today.”³³

In 1976, *Time* magazine named Susan Brownmiller one of its “women of the year,” praising her book as “the most rigorous and provocative piece of scholarship that has yet emerged from the feminist movement.”³⁴ The objections to Brownmiller’s overtly racist standpoint from accomplished Black women such as Davis and Walker went largely unnoticed by the political mainstream.

Fighting sexism and racism in the 1970s

It must be acknowledged that many women of color who identified as feminists in the 1970s and 1980s were strongly critical of mainstream feminism’s refusal to challenge racism and other forms of oppression. Barbara Smith, for example, argued for the inclusion of all the oppressed in a 1979 speech, in a clear challenge to white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists:



The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. *Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.*³⁵

But during the 1960s and 1970s, many Black women and other women of color also felt sidelined and alienated by the lack of attention to women's liberation inside nationalist and other antiracist movements. The Combahee River Collective, for example, was made up of women who were veterans of the Black Panther Party and other antiracist organizations. In this political context, Black feminists established a tradition that rejects prioritizing women's oppression over racism, and vice versa. This tradition assumes the connection between racism and poverty in capitalist society, thereby rejecting middle-class strategies for women's liberation that disregard the centrality of class in poor and working-class women's lives.

Black feminists such as Angela Davis contested the theory and practice of white feminists who failed to address the centrality of racism. Davis's groundbreaking book, *Women, Race and Class*, for example, examines the history of Black women in the United States from a Marxist perspective beginning with the system of slavery and continuing through to modern capitalism. Her book also examines the ways in which the issues of reproductive rights and rape, in particular, represent profoundly different experiences for Black and white women because of racism. Each of these is examined below.

• *Reproductive rights and racist sterilization abuse*

Mainstream feminists of the 1960s and 1970s regarded the issue of reproductive rights as exclusively the winning of legal abortion, without acknowledging the racist policies that have historically prevented women of color from bearing and raising as many children as they wanted.

Davis argues that the history of the birth control movement and its racist sterilization programs necessarily make the issue of reproductive rights far more complicated for Black women and other women of color, who have historically been the targets of this abuse. Davis traces the path of twentieth-century birth-control pioneer Margaret Sanger from her early days as a socialist to her conversion to the eugenics movement, an openly racist approach to population control based on the slogan, "[More] children from the fit, less from the unfit."

Those "unfit" to bear children, according to the eugenicists, included the mentally and physically disabled, prisoners, and the non-white poor. As Davis noted, "By 1932, the Eugenics Society could boast that at least twenty-six states had passed compulsory sterilization laws, and that thousands of 'unfit' persons had been surgically prevented from reproducing."

**"THE EMOTIONAL, SEXUAL,
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
STEREOTYPING OF FEMALES
BEGINS WHEN THE DOCTOR
SAYS, 'IT'S A GIRL.'"**

—*Shirley Chisholm* (U.S. Congress
Woman, 1969-1983) "Unbought and Unbossed"

"I want history to remember me... not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America." —*Shirley Chisholm* (1924-2005)



In launching the "Negro Project" in 1939, Sanger's American Birth Control League argued, "[T]he mass of Negroes, particularly in the South, still breed carelessly and disastrously." In a personal letter, Sanger confided, "We do not want word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to their more rebellious members."³⁶

Racist population-control policies left large numbers of Black women, Latinas, and Native American women

sterilized against their will or without their knowledge. In 1974, an Alabama court found that between 100,000 and 150,000 poor Black teenagers were sterilized each year in Alabama.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an epidemic of sterilization abuse and other forms of coercion aimed at Black, Native American, and Latina women—alongside a sharp rise in struggles against this mistreatment. A 1970s study showed that 25 percent of Native American women had been sterilized, and that Black and Latina married women had been sterilized in much greater proportions than married women in the population at large. By 1968, one-third of women of childbearing age in Puerto Rico—still a US colony—had been permanently sterilized.³⁷

Yet mainstream white feminists not only ignored these struggles but also added to the problem. Many embraced the goals of population control with all its racist implications as an ostensibly “liberal” cause.

In 1972, for example, a time when Native Americans and other women of color were struggling against coercive adoption policies that targeted their communities, *Ms. Magazine* asked its predominantly white and middle-class readership, “What do you do if you’re a conscientious citizen, concerned about the population explosion and ecological problems, love children, want to see what one of your own would look like, and want more than one?” *Ms.* offered as a solution: “Have One, Adopt One.”³⁸ The children on offer for adoption were overwhelmingly Native American, Black, Latino, and Asian.

To be sure, the legalization of abortion in the US Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision was of paramount importance to all women and the direct result of grassroots struggle. Because of both the economic and social consequences of racism, the lives of Black women, Latinas, and other women of color were most at risk when abortion was illegal. Before abortion was made legal in New York City in 1970, for example, Black women made up 50 percent of all women who died after an illegal abortion, while Puerto Rican women were 44 percent.³⁹

The legalization of abortion in 1973 is usually regarded as the most important success of the modern women’s movement. That victory however was accompanied at the end of that decade by the far less heralded but *equally important victories against sterilization abuse*, the result of grassroots struggles waged primarily by women of color. In 1978, the federal government conceded to demands by Native American, Black, and Latina activists by finally establishing regulations for sterilization. These included required waiting periods and authorization forms in the same language spoken by the woman agreeing to be sterilized.⁴⁰

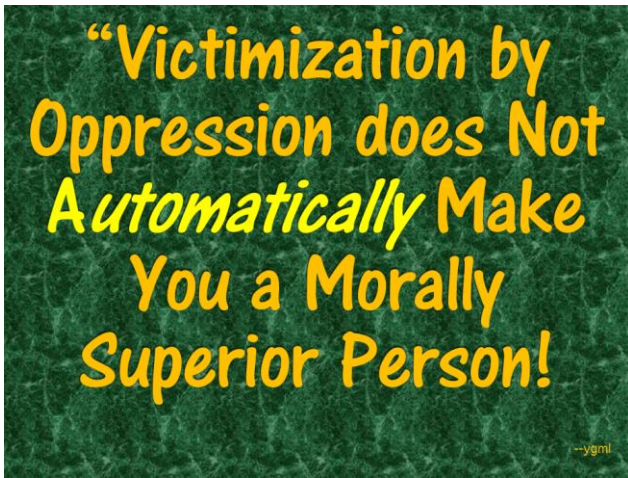
Davis notes that women of color “were far more familiar than their white sisters with the murderously clumsy scalpels of inept abortionists seeking profit in illegality,”⁴¹ yet were virtually absent from abortion rights campaigns. She concludes, “[T]he abortion rights activists of the early 1970s should have examined the history of their movement. Had they done so, they might have understood why so many of their Black sisters adopted a posture of suspicion toward their cause.”⁴²

• *The racial component of rape*

Rape is one of the most damaging manifestations of women’s oppression the world over. But rape also has had a toxic racial component in the United States since the time of slavery, as a key weapon in maintaining the system of white supremacy. Davis argues that rape is “an essential dimension of the social relations between slave master and slave,” involving the routine rape of Black slave women by their white masters.⁴³

She describes rape as “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist and, in the process, to demoralize their men.”⁴⁴ The institutionalized rape of Black women survived the abolition of slavery and took on its modern form: “Group rape, perpetuated by the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations of the post–Civil War period, became an uncamouflaged political weapon in the drive to thwart the movement for Black equality.”⁴⁵

Black Marxist-feminist Gloria Joseph makes the following insightful observation of the shared experience of racism among Black women and men: “The slave experience for Blacks in the United States made an ironic contribution to



male-female equality. Laboring in the fields or in the homes, men and women were equally dehumanized and brutalized." In modern society, she concludes, "The rape of Black women and the lynching and castration of Black men are equally heinous in their nature."⁴⁶

The caricature of the virtuous white Southern belle under constant prey by Black male rapists had its opposite in the promiscuous Black woman seeking the sexual attention of white men. As Davis argues, "The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous.... Viewed as 'loose women' and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy."⁴⁷ As

Lerner likewise describes, "The myth of the Black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad Black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of Black men and women."⁴⁸

Brownmiller was not alone in failing to challenge racist assumptions about rape, with the consequence of reproducing them. Davis strongly criticizes 1970s-era white feminists for neglecting to integrate an analysis of racism with the theory and practice of combating rape: "During the contemporary anti-rape movement, few feminist theorists seriously analyzed the special circumstances surrounding the Black woman as rape victim. The historical knot binding Black women—systematically abused and violated by white men—to Black men—maimed and murdered because of the racist manipulation of the rape charge—has just begun to be acknowledged to any significant extent."⁴⁹

Left-wing Black feminism as a politics of inclusion

This article has attempted to show how Black feminists since the time of slavery have developed a distinct political tradition based upon a systematic analysis of the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and class. Since the 1970s, Black feminists and other feminists of color in the United States have built upon this analysis and developed an approach that provides a strategy for combating all forms of oppression within a common struggle.

Black feminists—along with Latinas and other women of color—of the 1960s era, who were critical of both the predominantly white feminist movement for its racism *and* of nationalist and other antiracist movements for their sexism, often formed separate organizations that could address the particular oppressions they faced. And when they rightfully asserted the racial and class differences between women, they did so because these differences were largely ignored and neglected by much of the women's movement at that time, thereby rendering Black women and other women of color invisible in theory and in practice.

The end goal was not, however, permanent racial separation for most left-wing Black and other feminists of color, as it has come to be understood since. Barbara Smith conceived of an *inclusive* approach to combat multiple oppressions, beginning with coalition building around particular struggles. As she observed in 1983, "The most progressive sectors of the women's movement, including radical white women, have taken [issues of racism], and many more, quite seriously."⁵⁰ Asian American feminist Merle Woo argues explicitly: "Today...I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands." But, she adds, "not all white women are racist, and not all Asian-American men are sexist. And there are visible changes. Real, tangible, positive changes."⁵¹

The aim of intersectionality within the Black feminist tradition has been toward building a stronger movement for women's liberation that represents the interests of *all* women. Barbara Smith described her own vision of feminism in 1984: "I have often wished I could spread the word that a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic and heterosexist oppression, not to mention one which opposes imperialism, anti-Semitism, the

oppressions visited upon the physically disabled, the old and the young, at the same time that it challenges militarism and imminent nuclear destruction is the very opposite of narrow.”⁵²

This approach to fighting oppression does not merely complement but also strengthens Marxist theory and practice—which seeks to unite not only all those who are exploited but also all those who are oppressed by capitalism into a single movement that fights for the liberation of all humanity. The Black feminist approach described above enhances Lenin’s famous phrase from *What is to be Done?*: “Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other.”⁵³

PATRIARCHY

- Unequal pay for the same work
- Sexual harassment and violence
- Demearing / dehumanizing media depictions
- Objectification of personhood
- Arrogant claims over ownership of time / labor
- Persistent violations of human rights / civil rights
- Celebration of the culture of rape and misogyny
- Claims over ownership of the female body
- Arbitrary assignment of gender roles
- Male domination of the workplace
- Male domination of the political system
- Male domination of the economic system

"The enemy of feminism isn't men. It's patriarchy, and patriarchy is not men. It is a system, and women can support the system of patriarchy just as men can support the fight for gender equality."
—Justine Musk (Canadian Author)

The Combahee River Collective, which was perhaps the most self-consciously left-wing organization of Black feminists in the 1970s, acknowledged its adherence to socialism and anti-imperialism, while rightfully also arguing for greater attention to oppression:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.... Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.⁵⁴

At the same time, intersectionality cannot *replace* Marxism—and Black feminists have never attempted to do so. Intersectionality is a concept for understanding oppression, not exploitation. Even the commonly used term “classism” describes an aspect of class

oppression—snobbery and elitism—not exploitation. Most Black feminists acknowledge the systemic roots of racism and sexism but place far less emphasis than Marxists on the *connection* between the system of exploitation and oppression.

Marxism is necessary because it provides a framework for understanding the relationship between oppression and exploitation (i.e., oppression as a byproduct of the system of class exploitation), and also identifies the strategy for creating the material and social conditions that will make it possible to end both oppression and exploitation. Marxism’s critics have disparaged this framework as an aspect of Marx’s “economic reductionism.”

But, as Marxist-feminist Martha Gimenez responds, “To argue, then, that class is fundamental is not to ‘reduce’ gender or racial oppression to class, but to acknowledge that the underlying basic and ‘nameless’ power at the root of what happens in social interactions grounded in ‘intersectionality’ is class power.”⁵⁵ The working class holds the potential to lead a struggle in the interests of all those who suffer injustice and oppression. This is because both

exploitation and oppression are rooted in capitalism. Exploitation is the method by which the ruling class robs workers of surplus value; the various forms of oppression play a primary role in maintaining the rule of a tiny minority over the vast majority. In each case, the enemy is one and the same.

The class struggle helps to educate workers—sometimes very rapidly—challenging reactionary ideas and prejudices that keep workers divided. When workers go on strike, confronting capital and its agents of repression (the police), the class nature of society becomes suddenly clarified. Racist, sexist, or homophobic ideas cultivated over a lifetime can disappear within a matter of days in a mass strike wave. The sight of hundreds of police lined up to protect the boss's property or to usher in a bunch of scabs speaks volumes about the class nature of the state within capitalism.

The process of struggle also exposes another truth hidden beneath layers of ruling-class ideology: as the producers of the goods and services that keep capitalism running, workers have the ability to shut down the system through a mass strike. And workers not only have the power to shut down the system, but also to replace it with a socialist society, based upon collective ownership of the means of production. Although other groups in society suffer oppression, only the working class possesses this objective power.

These are the basic reasons why Marx argues that capitalism created its own gravediggers in the working class. But when Marx defines the working class as the agent for revolutionary change, he is describing its historical potential, rather than a foregone conclusion. This is the key to understanding Lenin's words, cited above. The whole Leninist conception of the vanguard party rests on understanding that a battle of ideas must be fought *inside* the working class movement. A section of workers won to a socialist alternative and organized into a revolutionary party, can win other workers away from ruling-class ideologies and provide an alternative worldview. For Lenin, the notion of political consciousness entails workers' willingness to champion the interests of all the oppressed in society, as an integral part of the struggle for socialism.

As an additive to Marxist theory, intersectionality leads the way toward a much higher level of understanding of the character of oppression than that developed by classical Marxists, enabling the further development of the ways in which *solidarity* can be built between all those who suffer oppression and exploitation under capitalism to forge a unified movement.

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