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Erasure and Exclusion: Who is a Radical Black Queer Feminist?

Introduction

There are a variety of feminist theories and perspectives that posit themselves as inclusive and dedicated to liberating marginalized people. Of these frameworks, Black feminism emerged as a distinct feminist ideology warranted by historical anti-Blackness within Western feminism since "'Black feminism is, on every level, organic to Black experience'" (Alexander-Floyd and Simien). This ideology is also separate from womanist standards of thought. A comprehensive radical Black queer feminist politic necessitates principled critiques of inequitable power dynamics and a focus toward eradicating transmisogynoir in order for Black feminism to truly liberate people harmed by sexism, anti-Black racism, and classism.

The goal of this thesis is to analyze elements of a few feminist theories and frameworks in an effort to critique the ways in which they fall short of achieving their desired iteration of equity. By highlighting these underlying contradictions I hope to encourage people to embody a truly inclusive politic and assess the power dynamics of structural oppression in society using the lens of that politic. To achieve this goal, I will introduce white feminism, womanism, intersectionality, Black feminism, and radical Black queer feminism before reviewing the outlined components of each theory or perspective. I will provide examples of some drawbacks of these frameworks and end with critiques of these theories. I chose this format in order to conduct in-depth analyses of these unique ideologies based on information I gathered from numerous books and articles.

Background

What is white feminism?

In its most basic form, feminism is the idea that there should be gender equality. This notion of feminism appears in Western countries in the form of white feminism, also known as Western, mainstream, or reactionary feminism. White feminism is a form of feminism that defines equality in a binary sense as being between men and women and manifests by prioritizing aspects of women's identities that align with hegemonic society: cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, and white (Kendall). While white feminism claims to be a way to advance the rights of all women, it fails to accomplish this goal because it is rooted in exclusionary practices and historically tied to white supremacy.

Throughout history, white feminists have continously abandoned women of color. Anti-slavery organizations failed to address the conditions of enslaved Black women. Following the abolition of slavery, many white feminists opposed integration of schools and women's conventions, advocated for the continued voter disenfranchisement of Black women or Black people as a whole, supported the eugenicist movement, and committed acts of anti-Black racist violence against Black people.

For example, following the segregated march for women's suffrage, Black women were treated as "expendable entities" and, as they were subjected to violence by the KKK after the 19th Amendment was passed, white suffragettes once again failed to advocate for Black women's safety (Davis). Many white feminists declined to participate in civil rights demonstrations during the mid-1900s and instead joined white supremacists in violent actions to hurt or kill Black people and uphold segregation.

Feminists advocated for more rights for women during the women's movement that began in the late 1960s. White feminists focused on gaining mainstream support, obtaining access to social and economic power that white men possessed, and making strides toward financial security. Amidst the

push for access to contraception and safe abortion in the 1980s, white feminists popularized the notion that people with low socioeconomic status must limit the number of children they have to avoid draining social services. In addition to stereotypes about women of color being ineffective mothers, this quickly morphed into a call for Black, Latina, and immigrant women to restrict the size of their families, which echoed eugenicist sentiments and alienated many women from the feminist movement (Washington).

While white women used family planning services to climb the corporate ladder and work towards achieving financial equality with white men, women of color continued to be overwhelmingly represented in domestic labor roles and were often employed to maintain white households; most white women began entering the workforce during the late 1900s but the majority women of color never had the financial privilege to be housewives in the first place (Davis). Instead, white women were able to obtain financial comfort at the expense of people of color and sought to suppress radical demands for class solidarity as a mechanism to pursue class mobility and protect their economic gains (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*).

More recently, people have utilized websites and social media to become informed about and discuss feminist thought. Since aspects of people's identities have become more politicized and salient partially due to information being easily accessible online, feminism has been comodified by corporations and used as part of one's personal brand by individuals. For example, Lego introduced construction sets for girls in 2012, claiming this was done to be more inclusive and provide an alternative to their stereotypically feminine toys. While this was praised by many media outlets as a feminist action, Lego is simply a company trying to increase their profits by selling building blocks in order to appeal to a new demographic. The corporation capitalizes on reducing feminism to consumer choice rather than collective action to improve people's material conditions (Gill). By portraying these playsets as acceptable

to be purchased for girls, which is visible via the pink packaging, the company appears progressive while subtly reinforcing gender norms that encouraging girls to play with toys other than dolls is somehow groundbreaking.

As a result of the commodification and branding of feminism, white feminists have been chastised more frequently for their narrow ideology through various news and social media platforms. For example, Mikki Kendall created the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen on Twitter in response to white feminist sites ignoring their contributors' racism and highlighted that white feminists' demand for solidarity focuses on the concerns and comfort of middle class white women (Kendall). In reality, white feminists only express solidarity with other white feminists. An example of this occurs in discussions of pay disparities where white feminists demand equal pay by highlighting that the average woman is paid cents for every dollar a man makes. This single-issue approach solely focuses on gender, ignoring the reality that women of color are compensated even less than white women, thus disregarding the role one's race has in the salary one receives.

Since white feminism fails to challenge racism, it is "easily grafted onto white supremacy and useful for arguing for equality for white women within a white supremacist context" (Daniels 9). White women are less likely to critique white feminism than people of color because they benefit from white feminism, which ostracizes and silences critics (hooks, *Feminist Theory*). As white women continue to weaponize feminism to avoid taking accountability, they continue to insist that their brand of feminism is for everyone, even as they assert themselves as the authorities of feminism, demand women of color wait their turn, and fail to assess how issues affect marginalized groups differently.

<u>What is Intersectional Feminism?</u>

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, originated as a heuristic to analyze the legal discrimination of Black women and emerged from the fields of Black feminist theory and critical legal studies. It is a theoretical framework to analyze structural sociopolitical formations and contest power, which can be used to reshape "modes of resistance beyond allegedly universal, single-axis approaches'' (Crenshaw et al). Despite some overlap between Black feminist and intersectional theories, intersectionality does not solely focus on the unique forms of oppression facing Black people in the way that Black feminism does. By using this theory, intersectional feminists investigate "how intersecting power relations influence social relations … as well as individual experiences in everyday life" (Collins and Birge 14). Intersectional feminists use this framework to assess the relationship between structures of power and interrelated categories of ethnicity, age, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, religion, and immigration status, which mutually construct each other (Crenshaw "Mapping the Margins"; Collins and Birge).

This framework uses a "both/and" relational perspective to assess the interconnections of various categories to focus on social inequality, social context, complexity, social justice, and intersecting power relations (Collins and Birge 34). These core tenets of intersectionality were formed during heightened social activism in the late 1900s, especially as feminists of color advocated for liberation that was not only centered around patriarchy, which was a single-issue problem for white feminists. Instead, intersectionality uses a version of identity politics espoused by the Combahee River Collective which states that identity politics are positional in relation to power, privilege, and oppression and that one's lived experiences inform one's political consciousness (Combahee River Collective). This form of identity politics shared by intersectional feminists is necessary to "theorize the power relations of violence against women of color to highlight the structural, political, and representational dynamics of power"

(Collins and Birge 78). As a result, intersectionality encourages the development of coalitions to resist structural domination in an effort to redistribute power.

This framework is most useful for analyzing structural power dynamics and political actions that happen in response. It is different, however, from other perspectives that are discussed simply due to its purpose as a tool. This is not necessarily a drawback as this theory leaves the process of actions to pursue as an intersectional feminist open-ended, thus allowing for varouis causes to champion. For example, this framework helped to generate the field of critical race theory in academia (Nash 123). However, due to its origins and existence as an academic tool, sometimes there is a disconnect between intersectional theorizing and its practical application. Despite this, intersectionality can be a valuable contribution in the pursuit of liberation for Black people, especially as a legal tool in unearthing inequity. For example, Crenshaw used this tool to highlight how court rulings against Black women plantiffs who brought forth claims of sex and racial discrimination failed to truly comprehend the plaintiffs' circumstances because courts failed to consider "the possibility of compound discrimination" ("Demarginalizing the Intersection" 148).

<u>What is womanism?</u>

Womanism emerged in the US to create a space in response to the exclusion of Black women from the feminist movement. Popularized by Alice Walker, womanism is derived from the word "womanish," which is a Southern expression describing how girls acted in outrageous, courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions long limiting white women (Collins, "What's in a Name?" 10). Other foremothers of this perspective define it as a term for Africana feminism, Black nationalist women, and feminists of color (Maparyan "Womanism"). According to womanist scholar Layli Maparyan, "womanism is a social change perspective" originating in the daily experiences of Black women and

women of color in order to end "all forms of oppression for all people" (*The Womanist Reader* xxx). Although it is rooted in positionality of class, race, and gender, womanism does not emphasize combatting sexism and incorporates environmental and spiritual approaches to improve people's lives holistically.

This perspective is intentionally not an ideology but a "system of analysis" focused on anti-oppression, grassroots connections, spirituality, African cosmologies, and investment in community well-being for everyone (Maparyan, *The Womanist Reader* xxiii). Womanists are encouraged to recall their ancestors' wisdom and rely on their communal authority (Maparyan "Womanism"). Since womanism intentionally has guiding practices but not an ideology in order to allow for the fluidity of thought, it can be a complementary method to feminism in solving societal problems. Womanism is designed for interaction among Black women focused on equity and pluralism that allows for group integration while retaining one's cultural distinctiveness (Collins "What's in a Name?").

Womanism critiques white feminists for claiming to be focused on racial integration to appear inclusive while actually being invested in maintaining the racial hierarchy with whites in the dominant position. This perspective acknowledges that white women are part of the problem and that womanists do not need to work with them to achieve their goals, instead focusing on building relationships between Black women and men.

What is Black Feminism?

While there are many strains of Black feminism and although scholars, activists, and Black feminists define this ideology differently, Black feminism is a Black intellectual tradition that analyzes the self, community, and society (Collins *Black Feminist Thought*). This ideology asserts that Black women experience life differently than other groups because of interconnected and inseparable aspects of their

identities, notably classist subjugation and misogynoir (a term coined by Moya Bailey), which is the combination of anti-Black racism and sexism (Bailey). Much of Black feminist praxis focuses on the unique lived experiences of Black women, but there are Black feminists of all genders and input is not limited to contribution from Black women. The words "Black feminist" intentionally challenges misogynoir of (white) feminism and Black nationalism, pushes Black women to confront their internalized misogynoir, and challenges the common racist misconception that Black women lack feminist consciousness (Collins "What's in a Name?").

Black feminist ideology is a dialectic of oppression and activism that creates a political context for praxis and Black feminists' intellectual works. While Black feminism exists to resist practices and ideologies that justify oppression, it is also a critical social theory that broadly supports social justice to accommodate the needs of Black women. Factors that stimulated this critical social theory include (1) white supremacists' social control of sociopolitical Black community spaces, (2) Black civil society, including culture, language, family structure, self-definition, and Black womanhood, (3) the exploitation of Black women's labor, especially as domestic workers in white households, (4) political oppression and disenfranchisement of Black women, (5) the stereotypical depictions of Black women as lazy, promiscuous, deviant, welfare queens, and mammies to justify their subjugation, and (6) the contradictions between Black womanhood and American womanhood. While women in the US are portrayed as fragile and submissive housewives, Black women have been and continue to be treated as mules, criticized for working outside of the home, and shamed for their parenting style. Economic, political, and ideological realms function as systems of social control to maintain the subordination of Black women (Collins *Black Feminist Thought*).

As gender studies departments emerged in the late 1900s, Black feminists, led by Combahee River Collective co-founder Barbara Smith, sought to include their ideological tradition in academia to combat the suppression and omission of Black women's ideas from feminist theory. Black feminist theory was given secondary status in relation to other frameworks within scholarly discourse as Black feminist ideas that challenge dominant narratives are suppressed. Additionally, the historical contributions of Black feminists in academia has been disregarded across disciplines despite the range of topics discussed as part of Black feminist theory. The symbolic inclusion of Black feminist works typically results in changing authors' ideas, which is visible in academia as instructors decontextualize authors' works or misconstrue their words in an effort to extrapolate ideas. This leads to the depoliticization of Black feminist theory.

Reclaiming Black feminist intellectual traditions includes discovering, reinterpreting, and initial analyzation of works from Black women intellectuals. All Black women who contribute to the discipline are considered Black feminist intellectuals, especially since much of the works that advance this intellectual tradition happens through collective group consciousness (Collins *Black Feminist Thought*). Yet, the existence and legitimacy of Black feminist thought was and is consistently challenged, especially in academia (Nash). In an effort to counter the toll of erasure they experience, many Black feminists participate in community groups or organize protests as a means to connect with other likeminded individuals.

Radical Black Queer Feminism

The most inclusive iteration of Black feminism is Black radical queer feminism, which is radical in the sense that it challenges all forms of hegemony. This framework emerged from intracommunity critiques of Black feminism and womanism and seeks to include those abandoned by these frameworks. Due to womanism's intentional lack of ideological tenets and the fact that Black feminists' praxis exists

along a spectrum of beliefs, this ideology seeks to differentiate itself by advocating for a more leftist stance. Even as self-described radical Black queer feminists choose to label themselves as such, the label doesn't mean much if their praxis does not support their ideological view.

One of the first radical Black queer feminist organizations was the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbian feminist socialists formed in 1974 that splintered from the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization amidst disappointment that the latter group was not progressive enough. Members of the Collective felt that mainstream feminist groups, the Black liberation movement, and the National Black Feminist Organization failed to contend with many substantive issue such as labor rights and reproductive autonomy for Black women, and additionally with the unique experiences of Black lesbians (Taylor 44). The Combahee River Collective Statement was published in response, which advocated for prioritizing the needs of the most marginalized, addressing interlocking forms of oppression, mandating an anti-capitalist lens in order to alleviate economic burdens, and utilizing an anti-imperialist worldview to resist state violence to liberate Black people across the globe. In addition, the Collective's members embodied their praxis through grassroots community organizing and consciousness-raising groups in an effort to improve Black people's everyday lives (Taylor 69). While the Collective's statement was and still is groundbreaking, it failed to adequately incorporate the needs of Black gender expansive people.

Black feminist politics must be anti-racist and anti-sexist to free people of all genders oppressed by racism and patriarchy; this must be an explicit commitment that does not only focus on Black cisgender women but includes gender expanisve people since they are also subjected to similar marginalization and gendered violence (Richie). Often, white feminism excludes people of color and prioritizes patriarchy as the only enemy, which alienates those doubly experiencing misogyny and racism.

Radical Black queer feminism seeks to combat both since racist and sexist oppression are “often experienced simultaneously” and inseparable (Combahee River Collective 3).

In addition to combating misogynoir, radical Black queer feminism is collectivist and necessitates an anti-capitalist stance in order to address classism and poverty (Combahee River Collective). Anti-capitalism is also a requirement to redistribute economic power and change the material conditions of low-income Black women and gender expansive people, especially those who are Black transgender women, as they have the highest rates of poverty (Willis). In addition to these tenets, this theory requires one to embody a politic oriented against a range of oppressions as radical Black queer feminists continue the legacy of “generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work” in their struggle for liberation (Combahee River Collective 1). Many radical Black queer feminists practice these tenets through their involvement in grassroots organizing or helping establish mutual aid community networks to redistribute resources.

Black Radical Queer Feminist Critique of Black Feminism and Womanism

Due to womanism being a social change perspective composed of guiding practices focused on developing intracommunal ties, there is a contradiction in who womanism is for. Womanism has ties to Black nationalism and, similar to this movement, fails to prioritize sexism as a salient issue as this perspective “minimizes in-group variation by assuming a stable and homogenous racial group identity” (Alexander-Floyd and Simien). Womanism’s failure to grapple with the multiplicity of experiences within the Black community can exclude or silence women and gender expansive people who are harmed by gendered violence. As Black feminists have noted, it is impossible to separate or reduce experiences to solely race or gender issues since they are interconnected (Taylor 2). By disregarding forms of oppression

that affect Black people beyond racism and classism, womanism does not adequately accomplish its goal to holistically end "all forms of oppression for all people" (Maparyan *The Womanist Reader* xxx).

Ending subjugation for everyone necessitates gender inclusive praxis because although patriarchy is often discussed as only harming women, people outside of the gender binary also experience patriarchal domination. Radical Black queer feminism uses a framework that challenges hegemonic gender rules to analyze how, in addition to misogynoir, Black gender expansive people are further oppressed by transphobia or transmisogyny. Black feminists committed to transgender liberation must reject biological essentialism, which is the idea that the binary sex assigned at birth, male or female, is the same as gender and is based on chromosomes, genitalia, and hormones. Despite Black feminism being presented as an inclusive ideology, many Black feminist authors and individuals still only focus on paths to freedom for Black cisgender women. This is visible in their work, at conferences, and through the use of gendered phrases and biologically essentialist terms such as "womyn" (hooks, *From Margin to Center* 12). Such a limited focus is embodied in the lingering assumption that all Black feminists are Black women (Smythe).

Such actions create an environment that enforces the gender binary and further marginalizes and excludes gender expansive people from Black feminism. This is ironic since Blackness and Black women have been alienated from and ungendered by binary gender categories which were constructed along racial lines (Haley 40). Scholar Kai M. Green notes that

> At the heart of black feminist praxis is a push to make the lives of disappeared black women matter. In order to make that argument, black feminists showed us how the category of woman failed to account for the unique experience of black women. This critique both challenged and clung to the category itself (80).

In addition to the subservient roles Black women have historically been subjected to, Black women continue to be disregarded and pathologized which allows others to justify the various ways in which

Black women are dominated because they do not adhere to the rigid standards of white womanhood. Black feminists continue to critique the ways in which Black women are othered by the category of "woman" to bring "the real material conditions and grievances that affect Black cisgender women" to the foreground (Bey and Green 439). Yet they perpetuate the same exclusionary practices towards those who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual.

The values of radical Black queer feminism can be practiced to be more inclusive of all genders by recognizing that "while Black feminism leans into Black womanhood, it has also opened a space to question gender itself" (Snorton and Carruthers). A push for Black feminist praxis to explore the lived experiences of Black people subjugated by misognyoir, not just cisgender women, would force many Black feminists to confront their cisgender privilege and recognize that the marginalization of Blackness exists on a spectrum (Smythe). Black cisgender women can still be oppressors; experiencing misogynoir does not prevent one from being transphobic. Since Black feminism necessitates self-critique, this reflection must be embodied to enact radical Black feminist theory into practice. Therefore, Black feminists must change their language and recognize that

> The call to de-center anatomy does not have to necessarily de-center Black women from Black feminist analysis, but it can help to de-naturalize assumptions surrounding the category of Black womanhood and sharpen our analysis of how Black womanhood is relationally crafted (Ellison).

It is necessary to consider how the existence of gender expansive people substantially alters the intended conversations about relationality and shared experiences since Black feminists are not a monolith. Black gender expansive people cannot be an afterthought. Their inclusion must be deliberate and they need to be valued as full members of the Black feminist community (Cohen).

Conclusion

Not all iterations of feminism advocate for people equally. Power is often wielded inequitably even in Black feminist or womanist spaces despite their focus on improving the conditions of Black women. Black feminists who are not radical may support Black people who are discarded in society but their advocacy often ends with seeking change and incorporation through descriptive representation, which can fail to adequately provide immediate support. A radical Black queer feminist praxis helps to analyze politics and political action in nontraditional ways in an effort to bring about lasting change in people's daily lives. Black feminism must be for all Black people and center the lived experiences of Black gender expansive people, not just Black women.

This does not mean that Black gender expansive people have a monolithic experience or the same experiences of transmisogynoir. Nor does it mean that there cannot be spaces only for Black women to discuss their shared experiences or that Black feminists cannot engage in coalitions in pursuit of justice for non-Black people. Instead of a limited scope that only focuses on some members of society, it is necessary to recognize that liberating Black transgender women and gender expansive people leads to liberation for all Black people because it requires abolishing systems that harm the most marginalized groups.

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