



# Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

## Research Briefs

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### Intersectionality: A Genealogy Of Black Feminist Freedom Visioning

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Intersectionality as a methodological, analytical, and liberatory tool has sharpened our naming of multiple forms of marginalization. While Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1993) is rightfully credited with coining Intersectionality through addressing Black women's employment experiences and other Women of Color's experiences with domestic violence, it is imperative that we recognize the long history of this articulation of marginalization. Within the Black feminist tradition, Black women have named the liminal space of being called to action on behalf of racial or gender liberation while our liberation is relegated as adjunct to others' (Combahee River Collective, 1977). My aim in this brief is to name and celebrate the genealogy of Black feminist resistance by highlighting activist Florynce Kennedy and Crenshaw's use of a Black feminist framework to approach the law as well as meditate on futures that can be animated from articulating a simultaneity of marginality that provides a more nuanced understanding of experiences of interlocking domination.

#### THE POWER WITHIN LIMINALITY

At the interstices of race and gender, Black women have consistently contended with, theorized about, and organized around experiences that have been elided as Black men and white women confined race and gender to separate and distinct categories (Crenshaw, 1993; Randolph, 2009). Voicing our invisibility within resistance movements cannot be overdetermined nor is it sufficient to point to singular figures of Black feminism to convey the undoubted presence of Black women's labor in efforts to destabilize oppression (Randolph, 2009). However, it is precisely the practice of pedestalizing one figure while obscuring the many that places the countless names of Black feminists that laid the foundation for our ability to employ Intersectionality in obscurity.

Second wave feminism is predominantly associated with white women even though Black feminists were engaged in shared organizing spaces where they challenged white women to expand framing of gender inequality to account for issues of racialized discrimination (Lubiano, 2002; Randolph, 2009). However, mainstream narratives of second wave feminism reduce Black women's activism and articulation of oppression to an addendum to the "official" or "authorized" account of mainstream feminism. For example, lawyer and activist, Florynce "Flo" Kennedy is left out of the narrative of Women's Rights activism and her involvement with the mostly white feminist group National Organization for Women (NOW) to tether the dismantling of patriarchy to the end of white supremacy and imperialism (Randolph, 2009). When credited for her organizing

she is noted as a prominent figure for her efforts to illuminate Black women's marginality within feminist and Black liberation spaces (Randolph, 2009).

Unafraid of her demands, Kennedy grounded her feminism in the Black radical tradition with a critique of empire and racism (Randolph, 2009). Kennedy infused NOW with Black radicalism as she counseled NOW's New York chapter president, Ti-Grace Atkinson, on speeches made to mostly white women to commit to antiracism, invited white feminists to Black liberation gatherings to learn radical critiques of empire, and consistently emphasized the necessity of a multilayered analysis of power (Randolph, 2009). Kennedy argued that her commitment to and understanding of dismantling all forms of subjugation in her political perspective was because she could "understand feminism [and sexism] better because of the discrimination against Black people" (Randolph, 2009, p. 225). Through the erasure of Kennedy's contributions, Black radicalism's significant influence on feminist actions is obscured. Kennedy's visioning of actions towards liberation with the fall of white supremacy, imperialism, gender inequality and other forms of subjugation, points to Black feminist expressions of freedom visioning and making that predate the official phrasing of "Intersectionality."

Organizing at the same time as Kennedy, the Combahee River Collective emerged after an exodus from the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1974 to more effectively address sexuality and economic stratification (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Their statement and actions are integral to Black feminist visions of liberation in prioritizing critiques of multiple forms of domination. The collective defined their political stance as,

[...] actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and [their] particular task [as] the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking (p. 1).

The statement locates their work and analysis within the long tradition of formally recognized Black feminism by citing figures such as Harriet Tubman to referencing their personal experiences of limiting gender roles and everyday gender violence. Through their attention to theoretical and personal articulations of marginality, the collective became a space that focused on external organizing such as sharing literature and supporting survivors of domestic violence as well as recognizing the transformative power in sharing with other Black women to voice experiences that once made them

feel conflicted. The collective used approached to liberations with the consistent understanding that all forms of domination need to end for all people to be liberated.

## A LANGUAGE OF TRANSFORMATION

Crenshaw's articulation of Intersectionality in 1989 provided a Black feminist approach to antidiscrimination cases that effectively rendered Black women's simultaneity of racial and gender oppression invisible under the law. Antidiscrimination language considered race and gender as distinct categories which meant Black women's cases were deemed illegible in the language of the law that would not concede to describing oppression through two interlocking identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's foundational explication of the legal obstructions to Black women's ability to disrupt subjugation at the intersections of race and gender illuminate the use of Intersectionality as an analytical and liberatory tool. In its very genesis as a formal phrase, Intersectionality was of practical use in shifting the tide within the law to make legible Black women's racialized and gendered reality. Further, Patricia Hill Collins (2014) came to reify the importance of Intersectionality's capacity to rebuke internalization of negative stereotypes. Collins (2014) writes,

in the absence of a viable Black feminism that investigates how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class foster these contradictions, the angles of vision created by being deemed devalued workers and failed mothers could easily be turned inward, leading to internalized oppression (p. 328).

In naming the importance of a Black feminist language that identifies interlocking systemic oppression, Collins alludes to the Combahee River Collective's revelation that to simply share space with other Black feminists is transformative. In this sense, we can understand that Intersectionality as practiced through a Black feminist critique of domination simultaneously serves as a theoretical, methodological, and practical tool where the well-being of Black women is as important as the dismantling of domination.

Intersectionality allows us to name the material and discursive landscape that produces differential experiences of marginality along various dimensions of oppression. While Black women have been subject to a secondary role in liberatory spaces, the language of Intersectionality creates the possibility of accurately naming this subjugation. Intersectionality must be understood as a dynamic analysis of power that is attendant to context (Cho et al.,

2013). As Intersectionality has traveled across diverse disciplines, it has been deployed in ways that speak to the generative possibilities in naming and disrupting oppression.

### WHAT MORE CAN WE NAME?

Where some may approach Intersectionality as an additive analysis of multiple social identities (in this paradigm I would see myself as Black, queer, fat, femme), I argue that Intersectionality gives me the power to name my simultaneity as a Black fat queer femme that is not predicated as a Venn diagram of social identities, but as a singular circle with all identities contributing to how I move through space. Not all my identities will be at the forefront within every interaction, however, there isn't a time where my Blackness is erased with my sexuality operating under the pretense that it is a de-racialized experience. Below, Figure 1: A Move Towards Simultaneity,

illustrates how I approach Intersectionality. While the Venn Diagram on the left displays how I view people traditionally accounting for multiple forms of domination, the circle on the right accounts for my identities as a synchronous experience.

With my articulation of Intersectionality as an understanding of our simultaneity of being, I want to push back on the misuse of the tool where individuals use it as a means of engaging in "oppression Olympics." Intersectionality has been critiqued for imposing a hierarchy wherein those with multiple marginalized identities are given primacy in our collective fight for justice. This misuse or misconception regarding the utility of Intersectionality fails to recognize that we stand to gain a deeper analysis of systemic oppression from naming the interstices of marginality. In other words,

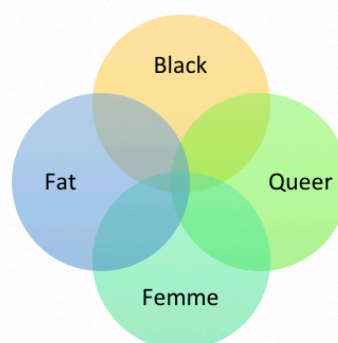


Figure 1: A Move Towards Simultaneity

as I reckon with the reality of how I move through the world as a Black Queer Fat Femme, Intersectionality asks me to recognize the nuanced realities of others' marginality.

As we continue to push towards liberation, how can we make sure that our liberation is consistently tethered to the liberation of us all? How can we push ourselves to use Intersectionality to not only name our own nuanced oppression but our privileges in the oppression of others? We have new worlds to build in the wake of dismantling oppression. With Intersectionality as our ideological guide, we may at least mentally prepare for that reality.

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