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Black Feminist Thought: Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge

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AFN 128

Black Women in the Caribbean, Americas

**Week 9: Black Feminist Thought: Black women's
emerging power as agents of knowledge.**

Prof. Remi Alapo

Spring 2023.

AFRICAN / BLACK WOMEN AND THE DIASPORA: STRUGGLES IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the black 21st woman's struggle to reclaim herself from her experiences from the oppression of Structural Oppression.
- To discover the new standards of womanhood set after the years of the Atlantic slavery.
- To examine ways in which Black women can be empowered and also be known as an Agent of Knowledge.

Read Article:
Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination

From Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 221–238

Review: p. 1, 7 and 8

Additional Resources: Course Text Review

READ

- Davis, Ch. 1: The Legacy of Slavery – Standards for a New Womanhood.
- Hooks, Ch. 1: Sexism and the Black Female the Slave Experience.



**SIMPLY PUT, FEMINISM
IS A MOVEMENT TO END
SEXISM, SEXIST
EXPLOITATION AND
OPPRESSION. I LIKED
THIS DEFINITION
BECAUSE IT DOES NOT
IMPLY THAT MEN WERE
THE ENEMY.**

.....
BELL HOOKS



Black feminist thought – para 1

- Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge.
- By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression.
- Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that oppression.
- Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people.

Angela Davis

and intersectional feminism



Why Knowledge is vital as part of social relations of domination and oppression para 2

- Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance.
- By objectifying African-American women and recasting our experiences to serve the interests of elite white men, much of the Eurocentric masculinist worldview fosters Black women's subordination.

2 significant contributions of Black Feminist Thought [para 3]

- Afrocentric feminist thought offers two significant contributions toward furthering our understanding of the important connections among knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.

1] Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression:

– Embracing a paradigm of race, class, and genders interlocking systems of oppression:

» Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social
» relations of domination and resistance.

- 2] Black feminist thought addresses ongoing theories, methods, justification of debates in feminist theory and in the sociology of knowledge concerning ways of assessing "truth":
 - » Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering.
 - » But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications.

Question 1

Why does the topic of Intersectionality matter in Black Feminist discussions today?

Reconceptualizing Race, Class, and Gender as Interlocking Systems of Oppression

- Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift that rejects additive approaches to oppression.
- Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being a part of one overarching structure of domination.
- Views relations of domination for Black women for any given sociohistorical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect [p.1].

“Intersectionality”

- Each of these socio-economic historical contexts is inter related to each other.
- How a person's various social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege.

Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989

- The word itself was first used by scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.
- While still a law student interested in critical race theory, Crenshaw started questioning the way the law treated cases that centred issues of sexism and racism.
- To Crenshaw, studying them in isolation of each other was a significant conceptual limitation of the courts and ignored a very simple fact of life – that black women were both black and women and, therefore, subject to discrimination on the basis of both their race and gender.

Question 2

What are some examples of how “intersectionality” of race, class and gender continue to affect black women in communities in the Americas today?



Video: intersectionality

VIDEO LINK

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc>

“Intersectionality in Black Feminism”

- Despite coining the term, Crenshaw is the first to admit that she’s not the first to articulate its true meaning, citing women like 19th century Black Liberation Activist Anna J. Cooper all the way through to living legend and prominent political activist, philosopher and author Angela Davis.
- As Crenshaw built on these foundations, modern feminists build on hers – today, intersectionality encompasses more than just the intersections of race and gender.
- It’s now widely used to illustrate the interplay between any kind of discrimination, whether it’s based on gender, race, age, class, socio-economic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity.

Video: Intersectionality



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5H80Nhmn20>

Intersectionality of Feminism



Ref: Sign art by Julie Devine, Photography by Marc Nozell via Flickr: <https://iwda.org.au/>

“Courts seem to think that race discrimination was what happened to all black people across gender and sex discrimination was what happened to all women, and if that is your framework, of course, what happens to black women and other women of colour is going to be difficult to see.” – Kimberlé Crenshaw

How is “intersectionality in black feminism” used to illustrate the interplay between any kind of discrimination, whether it’s based on gender, race, age, class, socioeconomic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion, or ethnicity?.

- One of the cases Crenshaw turned to to illustrate this point was the 1976 case of *Degraffenreid v General Motors*.
- The case centred around five black women suing General Motors for a policy that they viewed as discriminately targeting Black women.
- Essentially, the women argued they were faced with the double discrimination of being both black and female, but the legal system refused to recognise this.

Question 3

Why Does Intersectionality matter in Black Feminism today?

“

**IF YOU SEE INEQUALITY AS
A “THEM” PROBLEM OR
“UNFORTUNATE OTHER”
PROBLEM, THAT IS A PROBLEM.**

Kimberlé Crenshaw,

Lawyer, civil rights advocate and intersectional feminist



Photo: Mohamed Badame, CC-BY-SA-4.0

The purpose of intersectional feminism

- The purpose of intersectional feminism is to recognise how different aspects of a person's identity might interact to change the way they experience the world – and the barriers they might face as a result.
- It allows us to view the world outside of our own experience and better understand how different forms of marginalization can deepen and amplify each other to create unique vulnerabilities, ones that cannot be addressed through one-size-fits-all solutions.
- Recognising this can allow us to be more critical of how we view the systems of power we are trying to change and be more targeted in the ways we seek to further gender equality.

The Matrix of Domination

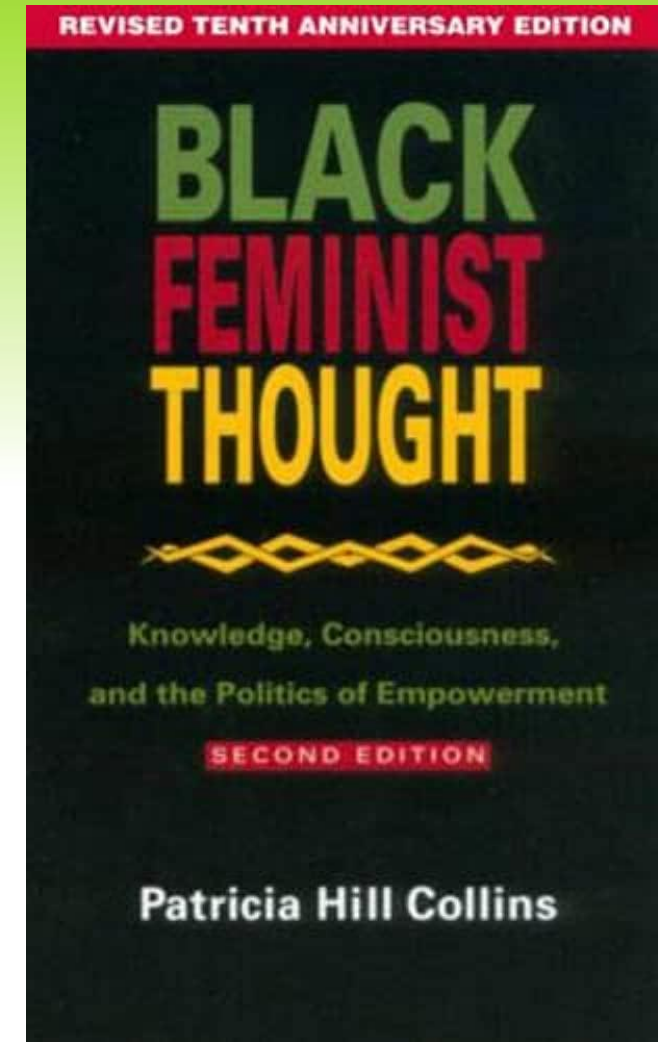
- Afrocentric feminist notions of family reflect this reconceptualization process.
- Black women's experiences as bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers reveal that the mythical norm of a heterosexual, married couple, nuclear family with a nonworking spouse and a husband earning a "family wage" is far from being natural, universal and preferred but instead is deeply embedded in specific race and class formations.
- Placing African-American women in the center of analysis not only reveals much-needed information about Black women's experiences but also questions Eurocentric masculinist perspectives on family.

“Black Feminist Thought” by Patricia Hill Collins

In her book “Black Feminist Thought”, Patricia Hill Collins describes the four interrelated ways that power is organized in a society.

The analysis of power informs us of how structural disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal power shapes human action.

These four types of power structure are put in place to maintain the status quo.



Four Types of Structural Power

1. **The Structural Domain of Power:** organizes oppression in society.
2. **The Disciplinary Domain of Power:** Manages oppression.
3. **The Hegemonic Domain of Power:** System of ideas developed by the dominant group that justifies their practices.
4. **The Interpersonal Domain of Power:** How individual consciousness perpetuates in the subordination of others.

The Structural Domain of Power

This type of power in the matrix of domination organizes oppression in society.

Collins argues that the organization of interlocking, large scale social institutions reproduce the subordination of Black Women.

For example, residential segregation prevents most black women in the US to have access to certain educational and job opportunities.

Different Types, Multiple Levels of oppression and Resistance to domination or oppression

In addition to being structured along axes such as race, gender, and social class, the matrix of domination is structured on several levels.

People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions.

Black feminist thought emphasizes all three levels as sites of domination and as potential sites of resistance [p.4].

Civil and Voting Rights



Photo: US Library of Congress

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**NOBODY'S FREE UNTIL
EVERYBODY'S FREE.**

Fannie Lou Hamer

Civil rights leader and women's rights activist

Question 3

How can we empower black women caught in the structural domain of power?



“

“Me Too, in a lot of ways, is about agency. It’s not about giving up your agency, it’s about claiming it.”

”

(USA)

TARANA BURKE

Founder of the #MeToo movement

Conclusion

Living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought because within Black women's communities thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions.

African-American women who adhere to the idea that claims about Black women must be substantiated by Black women's sense of our own experiences and who anchor our knowledge claims in an Afrocentric feminist epistemology have produced a rich tradition of Black feminist thought.

Collins argues that this can be done through:

1] transforming social institutions.

2] generating ideas that inspire disbelief in racist and sexist ideologies.

3] develop a new consciousness of what black womanhood means.

- Traditionally such women were blues singers, poets, autobiographers, storytellers, and orators validated by everyday Black women as experts on a Black women's standpoint.
- Only a few unusual African-American feminist scholars have been able to defy Eurocentric masculinist epistemologies and explicitly embrace an Afrocentric feminist epistemology.

- Zora Neal Hurston is an exception for prior to 1950, few African-American women earned advanced degrees and most of those who did complied with Eurocentric masculinist epistemologies.
- Although these women worked on behalf of Black women, they did so within the confines of pervasive race and gender oppression.
- An ongoing tension exists for Black women as agents of knowledge, a tension rooted in the sometimes conflicting demands of Afrocentricity and feminism.
- Those Black women who are feminists are critical of how Black culture and many of its traditions oppress women.

Review:

Knowledge, Consciousness, Politics of Empowerment

- 1] What is Black Feminist Thought and How can black women caught in the domains of structural power be empowered in today's society as agents of knowledge?
- 2] The topic of why Intersectionality matters in Black Feminist discussions today. For example, how does the "intersectionality" of race, class and gender continue to affect black women in communities in the Americas today?
- 3] Ongoing tension that exists for Black women as agents of knowledge, a tension rooted in the sometimes conflicting demands of Afrocentricity and feminism.

Interactive Group Discussion: “Black Women as Agents of Knowledge”

Provide a discussion / examples from the following:

- Personal observations: of others lived experiences.
- Individual experiences: of your own experiences.
- Learning Resources: p. 7 - 8 of article.
- Research on: from “Africa to the Atlantic World”.

References

Patricia Hill Collins. “**Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination**” in Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 221–238

Davis, Ch. 1: The Legacy of Slavery – Standards for a New Womanhood.

Hooks, Ch. 1: Sexism and the Black Female the Slave Experience.

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/252.html>

Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality - <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

BHM: How Angela Davis transformed intersectional feminism <https://manualredeye.com/94050/projects/black-history-month/bhm-how-angela-davis-transformed-intersectional-feminism/>

UN Generation Equality: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/6/feature-which-generation-equality-hero-are-you>

Office Hours

After class: Tuesday / Thursday

5:15pm - 5:45pm

M205

Any questions or feedback?

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