

The relevance of black feminist scholarship: a Caribbean perspective

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Women's studies has offered one major challenge to the allegedly hegemonic ideas of elite white men. Ironically, feminist theory has also suppressed Black women's ideas. Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a unique feminist consciousness about the intersection of race and class in structuring gender, historically we have not been full participants in white feminist organizations (Patricia Hill Collins, 1990: 7).

Introduction

In this article, I speak from a Caribbean feminist location to examine some of the core contributions black feminist scholarship has made to feminist epistemology, and to simultaneously call attention to its near-erasure. I document some of the main conceptual tools and analytical devices black feminist theorising brings to the process of creating knowledge, not only about black women's lives, but with relevance to all women's lives.¹ In the process of stocktaking, of synthesising some of these contributions, I reflect on the politics of knowledge production and what is perhaps the under-explored applicability of black feminist theoretical analyses to comprehending the lives of Caribbean and African women. This article is long overdue, and many of the questions I raise I cannot answer here, and in fact do not have answers for. Rather, I hope this piece will start a conversation about the relevance of black feminist theory to women across nationalities, ethnicities and race. In the process, I hope to contribute to advancing feminist visions, irrespective of the geographic locations in which women experience the dynamic and constantly mutating power relations of gender.

Even as I hold mainstream and Western feminist theorists accountable for the refusal to fully acknowledge the contributions of black feminist theorists, I am compelled to consider whether or not Caribbean² feminist scholarship and practice have engaged with black feminist scholarship – and if not, why not? What are some of the main issues Caribbean feminists attempt to address, and how do these

intersect with the conceptual tools offered by black feminist theorists? Why haven't Caribbean feminists consciously utilised the theoretical tools of black feminist scholarship? How much do we know about these theoretical contributions?

Part of the motivation to write this article comes from a desire to disseminate widely what I see as the strengths of black feminist theory, and to begin to think through why Caribbean feminists have not made more use of it. I have suspicions (many of which I can substantiate) as to why black feminist scholarship is generally missing from the canonical anthologies of feminist theories, but why is it absent in the works of feminists who share an historical legacy of racist and colonial exploitation? Problematising race and exposing how racist practices complicate all other social relations of power is a central organising principle of black feminist theorising. As a black Caribbean woman and feminist, race and racism do not enter my life and the lives of most Caribbean women in the identical trajectories that they do for minority women in racist societies – the geographic and political locations for much of this theorising. This is not to suggest that racism and racist practices are not threaded through the social fabric of Caribbean life. They are, but they are experienced differently. As I stated 14 years ago:

Black women's experiences of race in the Caribbean differ from that of black women in North America. With population composition ranging from 95,4% to 79,9% black in most Caribbean countries³ [White, 1986: 65] there is the legacy of race rather than say the North American version of the day-to-day reality of racism. For example, in Barbados, indigenous whites dominate the corporate economy. They own or control economic activities within major industrial sectors. They maintain a web of corporate interlinkages based on ethnic or kinship ties [see Beckles 1989a]. *Yet for black Barbadians racial discrimination in the areas of health services, education, transportation, housing and public policy is an alien experience* [emphasis added] (1992: 25).

To what extent has the absence of state-sponsored racism in the post-independent Caribbean affected the engagement of Caribbean feminists with black feminist theorising that makes an interrogation of racism central to its analysis? If some feminists claim there is evidence of racism in state practices in certain Caribbean countries, why haven't the theoretical insights of black feminist theory been used to reveal these practices?

As it relates to black feminist theorising, the politics of creating knowledge about women's lives takes an internecine turn. Feminists have been theorising

for centuries to correct the falsity, gendered hegemony and intellectual violence of patriarchal knowledge claims (see, for instance, Spender, 1982; Rossi, 1974; Schneir, 1972; Martin, 1972). Ironically, while most feminist theorists discern quite readily the exclusionary parameters of mainstream (i.e., androcentric) knowledge production, they replicate these exclusionary practices in the new generalisations they offer and the lived realities they investigate to distil these knowledge claims.

A Caribbean feminist perspective

What do I mean by a Caribbean feminist perspective and by describing myself as a Caribbean feminist? It means that I define myself as a black woman, a feminist and a political scientist – who reflects upon and negotiates, operates, theorises, and works within the trenches of gender relations in the Commonwealth Caribbean (Barriteau, 2003b: 57). As a precondition to problematising the intersection where my multiple identities meet Caribbean realities, I believe I have a responsibility to generate new knowledges about Caribbean societies. I locate myself and my analysis at the juncture where regional experiences of rapid changes in the global political economy intersect with fundamental developments in the social relations of gender (Barriteau, 2001). I attempt to work at the crossroads where a politicised, theoretical stance and the competing, complex realities and contradictions of everyday life in the Caribbean meet. I see this location as a ground-level vantage point that enables me to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on rethinking Caribbean society from a feminist perspective. This position enables me to argue that an understanding of the operations of the social relations of gender and gender systems is foundational to any assessment and critique of Caribbean society. It means that I am very interested in North-South relations, and the policies and politics of industrialised countries and their impact on children, women and men in the Caribbean and other southern regions.

Even though Caribbean countries have achieved “flag independence”, and our peoples and most of our leaders truly desire to be sovereign, the Caribbean has not escaped new versions of enduring colonial legacies, some of which have been wilfully maintained by newly minted independent governments (Barriteau, 2004b: 136). We may look and wish to be beyond the political dimensions of colonialism, but many of our leaders and peoples have neither surrendered nor even interrogated the cultural and economic trappings of colonialism.

Even though the economic and political discussions now centre on globalisation, in reality Caribbean countries are suspended somewhere between formal political independence and new forms of colonialism. An equal vote at the United Nations does not necessarily translate into equal treatment in the international arena. The post-Columbian⁴ Caribbean is perhaps the original geopolitical configuration of globalisation. For more than five centuries, Caribbean realities have been violently punctured, punctuated and systemically redefined by international economics, politics and cultures. Though decimated and plundered by and since the Columbian intrusion, the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean managed to survive alongside migrants from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the near, far and Middle East.

In the 21st century, the Caribbean can still be comprehended as a misunderstood metaphor for the global. Misunderstood because as the ongoing processes of globalisation convulse, conquer and reconfigure commerce, cultures and citizenship, the Caribbean is increasingly neglected in internationalised, intellectual discourse and enterprise. Continuing to assess and reflect on the post-Columbian Caribbean would yield important lessons to the global community. One obvious but overlooked lesson is that in this confrontational world, the Caribbean exists as a zone of peace. This is part of the larger context in which particular issues affecting Caribbean feminism are played out.

Issues in Caribbean feminism

What concerns of Caribbean feminism can benefit from taking up the conceptual tools of black feminist theory? As reflected in the literature, much Caribbean feminist scholarship centres on Caribbean states, and state neglect of Caribbean women or complicity in issues negatively affecting women (see, for example, Reddock, 1994; Barriteau, 1995; 2004a; Bailey, 2003; Harris, 2003; Pargass and Clarke, 2003; Vassell, 2003; Maxine Henry-Wilson, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Rowley, 2004). A special issue of *Feminist Review*, entitled “Rethinking Caribbean Difference”, reveals additional concerns of Caribbean feminist theorising from interdisciplinary perspectives. Pat Mohammed locates the politics of identity as a central concern of feminism and feminist theory in the Caribbean (1998: 6). She also signals an unexplored demarcation of Caribbean and black feminist concerns when she cautions that she “cannot speak for or in the manner of a white middle-class academic in Britain, or a black North American feminist”, even though she shares with both similarities that go beyond societal difference, and which are fuelled by shared commitment

to gender equality (1998:6). Hilary Beckles charges that Caribbean feminist theorists have failed to investigate why “institutional political projects such as independence took hegemonic precedence over women’s liberation” (1998: 48). He specifically challenged me to “redefine and relocate Caribbean women’s movements within the ideological space provided by postmodern feminism in order to create and promote social activism that reflects a coherent feminist opposition and vanguard” (1998: 51–52).

Rhoda Reddock explores and links the emergence of women’s organisations and the development of feminist consciousness in the 20th-century Commonwealth Caribbean. She traces the evolution and changing character of women’s organisations over the last two centuries, while highlighting the emergence of small radical or feminist-oriented groups (1998: 57, 61–62). Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen undertakes a critique of Caribbean feminism as largely Afro-centric and argues that the women’s movement should reflect the experiences of women of other ethnic groups in the region: “The Caribbean post-independence and feminist discourses gave pre-eminence to the historical experiences and present-day situation of African-Caribbean people, leading to an Afro-centric rather than a multicultural paradigm” (1998: 83).

In a 2002 keynote address, I attempted to capture some of the challenges of Caribbean feminism as follows:

1. To unravel the knot that surrounds power, and to investigate how our difficulty with power influences what issues receive our attention; to grapple with feminists’ ambivalence over power, how we come to power, claim it, respect it, and use it.
2. To begin to rethink the processes we can develop and use to ensure that democratic practices define how we create knowledge, and how we expose and avoid replicating the hierarchies of power in the social relations we seek to disrupt.
3. To be aware that feminist scholarship and activism has to be distinguished by a commitment to interrogating, picking apart and honestly confronting how power works. In whatever avenues we work, we have to acknowledge that we are contesting and seeking to change relations of power.
4. The need to establish genealogical authority and continuity between feminist thought and gender studies. This is not a quest for theoretical primogeniture. It is about identifying conceptual frameworks that recognise and explore those relations of power that shape how women and men experience the same social and economic phenomena in fundamentally dissimilar and unequal ways.

5. To maintain and support meaningful dialogue with the study, issues and questions of masculinities. We need to create a space within which to converse with masculinity beyond the necessary, but generally reactive responses that have been generated so far.
6. To tackle the knot of race/ethnicity/class, and deconstruct an us/them frame of analysis, which must transcend its origins in a post-colonial, nationalist treatise.
7. To engage with the challenge of class, another social relation of power and privilege that has not yet been satisfactorily interrogated in our work.
8. To address the fragility and vulnerability of the women's movement in the face of a frontal assault on Caribbean women that goes beyond a backlash (Barriteau, 2003c).
9. The withdrawal of state attention from women and women's issues in a majority of Caribbean countries. Many states believe they have fulfilled their mandates towards women and must now focus increasingly on men.
10. The similar retreat from a focus on women by international development institutions.
11. The weaknesses in both scholarship and activism in linking the adversities in women's lives to larger structures of oppression and exploitation.
12. The gentrification and abuse of power by the leadership in both the academy and the political movement (Barriteau 2002; 2003d: 37–44).

The theoretical contributions of black feminism

Black feminist theorising has made critical contributions to feminist epistemology. Yet this is not reflected in anthologies of feminist thought, critiques of feminist scholarship, or even online encyclopaedic references. In a small attempt to redress the balance, I summarise some of these core contributions here.

Rejection of an undifferentiated notion of sisterhood

The first major move by black feminist scholars was to discard the simplistic, undifferentiated notion of global "sisterhood". Black feminist theory comprises a body of work by black feminist intellectuals reacting to the failure of existing feminist explanatory frameworks to adequately comprehend the realities of black women. Sojourner Truth, Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Gloria Joseph, Toni Cade Bambara, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, Beverley Guy-Sheftall, Paula Giddings, Michele Wallace, Stanlie James, Deborah King, Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia King, Patricia

Williams, as well as many others⁵ from different disciplinary bases, interrogated existing feminist theories and found them lacking, as they myopically and wilfully ignored or denied black women's specific experiences.

For instance, Sojourner Truth's powerful statement at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 was a 19th-century deconstruction of the notion of a global, common womanhood and an insistence on inserting black womanhood in the concept of what it meant to be a woman.

Speaking of the United States in the 1970s, Audre Lorde stated, "By and large, within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretence to homogeneity of experiences covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (1984: 116). And Zillah Eisenstein reminds us of Hazel Carby's theoretical stance: "there is no lost sisterhood to be found; ... there are definite 'boundaries' to the possibilities of sisterhood" (Eisenstein, 1994: 208; Carby, 1987: 6, 19). Carby's statements contain echoes of the calls by Patricia Mohammed, Rawwida Baksh-Sooden and Neesha Haniff for a more differentiated reading of identities within Caribbean feminism (Mohammed, 1998; Baksh-Sooden, 1998; Haniff, 1996). I hold that the more comprehensive and inclusive insights offered by black feminism strengthen all feminist knowledge.

Prioritises and problematises race as a social relation, complicated by other social relations

A foundational contribution of black feminist scholarship is its exposure and problematising of race/racism as a social relation, which simultaneously complicates and is complicated by other social relations of domination. The intellectual and activist work of black feminists reveals hierarchies of power within categories of race, class, gender, patriarchal relations, sexuality and sexual orientation. Black feminism demonstrates that white or other feminist theorising that refuses or fails to recognise race as a relation of domination within feminism and society, facilitates the continued oppression of black women within the feminist movement and within society. This is a very powerful argument, and many of the dynamics of power and privilege crystallise around this.

Barbara Ransby notes that one of the strongest ideological tenets around which black feminists have organised "is the notion that race, class, gender and sexuality are co-dependent variables that cannot readily be separated and ranked in scholarship, in political practice, or lived experience" (2000: 1218).

The insertion and simultaneous theorisation of race and racism changes what constitutes feminist theory and what could be its subject matter. Radical, socialist and liberal feminists had examined other oppressive social relations, but none had made race central to their analysis. Black feminist theory exposes racism and the politics of exclusion and denial embedded in feminist knowledge production in the same way that black feminist activism confronts racism in everyday life.

Changes feminist methodologies and requires new methodological approaches

Feminist knowledge and feminist methodologies change when the specificity of the lives of black women/minority women/marginalised women inform feminist theory. Beside exposing racism and the politics of exclusion and domination, what we know and how we come to know it, what that ongoing body of knowledge looks like, and what purposes it serves, all look radically different when we recognise that other knowledge claims are less universal than they first appeared. Patricia Hill Collins insists that we understand and use black women's modes of resistance as a basis for examining the simultaneous oppressions women experience (1990). Zillah Eisenstein notes that black feminist theorist Barbara Christian is "troubled that the overtly political literature of African-American women and of the women of South America and Africa is being pre-empted by a postmodern view that assumes that 'reality does not exist' and that 'everything is relative and partial' (Eisenstein, 1994: 208; Christian, 1988: 74, 73). She goes on to state that the critiques offered by Christian and others help to clarify an important difference between a postmodern focus on diversity and the political focus offered by black feminists. She recognises that black feminists focus on difference in order to understand problems of oppression: "They struggle to theorise a feminism that is diverse at its core, rather than to theorise difference as an end in itself" (208). This distinction that Eisenstein draws out of the work of black feminist theorists is critical, and yet it is goes unrecognised in the larger body of feminist work.

Audre Lorde's open letter to white radical feminist Mary Daly (1984) demonstrates how what we think we know changes when that knowledge is approached from another vantage point. In her critique and exposure of the racism in Daly's work on the nature and functioning of the Goddess, Lorde points out that Daly images white women as Goddesses, with African women entering her analysis "only as victims and preyers-upon each other" (1984: 67).

Here Lorde exposes a key distortion that is very similar to the way that early development discourses constructed women in the Caribbean and Africa. Women in the South, whether Caribbean, Asian or African, were generally seen as helpless victims in need of international development intervention. To categorise black or any other grouping of women exclusively as victims is a persistent narrative seen all too often in discourses on women in development, minority women and abused women (Carby, 1997: 47).

A theoretical foundation shaped by women's lived experiences and subjectivity

Patricia Hill Collins states that black feminist theory needs a theoretical foundation that deals simultaneously with the experiences and effects of race, gender and class in examining and shaping the complex realities of black women's lives (1989). Black feminist theory holds that the constructed invisibility of black women's lives must be challenged. For example, much black/African-American and West Indian history has focused on the activities of black men. Feminist historians in the Caribbean such as Rhoda Reddock (1985), Lucille Mair (1986), Hilary Beckles (1989b), Verene Shepherd (1993), Bridget Brereton (1994) and Patricia Mohammed (1995) have countered this by analysing the experiences of black and Indian women in order to address women's exclusion (or token inclusion) from West Indian history.

Black feminist scholarship underlines the importance of using lived experience as a criterion for generating knowledge. These experiences should be used to validate knowledge claims, and to create or refute generalisations. This insistence that theory should be built "from the ground up" rejects Western philosophy's fascination with and faith in rationality, objectivity and theory that move from the abstract to the concrete. The epistemological and methodological shift offered by black feminism also recognises and values black women's subjectivity.

The concept of multiple jeopardies/multiple consciousness/multiple identities

Deborah King's concept of multiple jeopardies/multiple consciousness shifted the conception of women's oppressions as confined within ethnic and racial boundaries (1986). Like many other black feminists before her, King was concerned about the practical and theoretical invisibility of black women. She situates her analysis in the fluid and constantly mutating confluence of race,

class, sexism (or relations of gender) and sexuality. Barbara Smith likewise informs us that “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” (1983: xxxii).

I used Deborah King’s analysis of the simultaneity of multiple oppressions to build a postmodern feminist theory for Caribbean social science research, noting that “theoretically and politically her contribution recognises that much of feminist theory represents white, Eurocentric feminist theorising and is therefore inadequate in not addressing the epistemological and practical concerns of other women, especially black women” (Barriteau, 1992: 22–23).

Deborah King and Fiona Williams maintain that the simultaneous experiences of these relations of domination not only compound these oppressions, but reconstitute them in specific ways, an important theoretical breakthrough. Barbara Ransby states:

Because any political agenda that addresses the realities of most African-American women’s lives must deal with the four major systems of oppression and exploitation – race, class, gender and sexuality – black feminist politics radically breaks down the notion of mutually exclusive, competing identities and interests and instead understands identities and political process as organic, fluid, interdependent, dynamic and historical (2000: 1219).

Yet such simultaneity of analysis is very difficult to achieve in practice. Even when there is a commitment to tracking simultaneous oppressions or relations of domination, there is tremendous political pressure to prioritise a particular oppression, to create hierarchies, to rank one as more debilitating, more devastating, more demanding of political activism than the others. All too often, the search for alternatives breaks down when confronted with the challenge of moving simultaneously on all oppressions, or recognising how the experiences of black women unite these oppressions. Even though black women exist at the intersection of all these oppressions, they are constantly asked to choose and identify with one only.

If we interrogate the powerful title of the book *All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but some of us are Brave* (Hull, Bell Scott and Smith, 1982), this can clearly be discerned. “All the Women are White” reveals that Gender = Race = Privileged Femininity. This kind of simplistic thinking, however, fails to mask the privileges available to women of the dominant race. In societies with institutionalised racism, race nuances adverse relations

of gender for women of the dominant race. In other words, for members of the dominant race, relations of race mute or mediate adverse relations of gender. For example, in the United States, relations of race carry privileges to white women individually and collectively, whether or not they want to access them. These privileges await them, are bestowed on them and are available for their use.

Likewise, “All the Blacks are Men” tracks how Race = Gender = Inferior Masculinity. The belief that all blacks are men equates race with masculinity, but with race (blackness) understood as inferior and pathological. So race in this equation brings relations of domination to masculinity in an obsessively patriarchal, capitalist society. Thus a wounded, inferior masculinity is created with expectations of the expression of that masculinity, irrespective of what individual black or minority men might contribute. And the black woman? She of course remains invisible, with no recognition of either her race or her gender. And yet society remains racist and sexist, is still driven by capitalist patriarchal racism, which means that merely to exist as a black woman requires bravery.

Simultaneously problematises public and private spheres

A major contribution of black feminist theory is that it simultaneously problematises the public and private spheres from the perspective of race. Like radical feminist theory, black feminist theory is concerned with patriarchal relations in the private domain. However, unlike radical feminism, black feminism goes on to demonstrate how racist relations follow black women into the private realm and in the process reconfigure their household and intimate spaces very differently. Experiences of relations of oppression within households differ for black or minority women in a racist state, because the remedies of the state may be applied differently. For example, these oppressive relations may be read as “cultural” as a way of side-stepping engaging with or changing them. Alternatively, domestic or intimate practices that are not understood or accepted may be viewed as pathological in an attempt to avoid acknowledging their difference. Hazel Carby informs us that black family structures in Britain have been seen “as pathological by the state and are in the process of being constructed as pathological in white feminist theory” (1997: 47). Patricia McFadden reminds us that in several African countries, archaic notions of culture are continuously invoked to curtail the advancement of women, to protect the sexual and socio-cultural privileges of men, and to deny women their property rights (2002: 18, 30–31, 34).

Analysis is located in political economy

Like socialist feminist theorising, black feminist theory deliberately adopts a framework of analysis that is situated in the political economy of state systems. Material relations and class relations are intrinsic to this analysis, which identifies how working-class black women experience antagonistic capitalist relations more intensely, as a result of the ideological relations arising from race acting upon the oppressive relations arising from gender. Once more, a very different and far more nuanced rendering emerges when the political economy of a society is examined from a black feminist theoretical perspective.

In Western political thought and within Enlightenment philosophy, the public and private realms represent radically different spheres of existence for women, in which the private world is one of dependence, while the public world is one of freedom. One result is that the private sphere becomes dependent on the public sphere, which in turn is dominated by internal and external (i.e., international) capitalist relations, thus creating hierarchies of dependence. This is why liberal feminists have argued for women's inclusion in the public realm, so that they too might enter the world of freedom, the world of liberation.⁶ However, black feminist theory reveals that both spheres represent hierarchies of dependence for black women. In a racist society, the state trivialises, misrepresents and infantilises women's citizenship and domestic concerns (Carby, 1997: 47).

Black feminist theory deconstructs patriarchal relations

Central to black feminist theorising is the knowledge that patriarchal relations structure women's lives very differently to their male peers. The "rule of the father" institutionalises men's power in the family and society. The notion that the source of this power is natural, supported by biology, and sanctioned by religion and state practices, complicates patriarchal relations for women in the family and the state. However, the crucible of racism exposes patriarchy as a construct that is neither natural, nor sanctioned by biology, nor ordained by religion, as it is clear that racism denies black men the patriarchal privileges held by white men, thus exposing the fallacy that maleness automatically confers power.

Yet this remains a powerful construct that grants domination, control and authority to men who wish to access the privileges of patriarchs. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, men of European, African and Asian/Indian descent have assumed the role of patriarchs. Black men who are minorities in racist

societies often seek control and manifest their desire to be patriarchs in ways that are pathological. Meanwhile, through their everyday experiences, black women confront the falsity of the universalising tendencies of patriarchy in a racist state. This is vital, as women who do not understand the contradictory and antagonistic interactions of patriarchal and race relations can make arguments for the reinstatement or establishment of black or other ethnic patriarchies.

Placing race at the centre alters basic concepts

By centralising women's experiences of relations of domination in race and racism, black feminist theorising radically alters the meanings and understandings of basic concepts critical to feminist analysis. Race-contesting-gender-contesting-class-contesting-race turns many concepts on their heads. In the process, black feminist theory destabilises the coherence and certainty with which certain concepts and constructs are regarded in the general body of feminist thought. I glance at several of these below.

The home

Liberal, radical, and socialist feminist theories typically analyse the home as a site of oppression for women. Betty Friedan set the stage in her 1963 analysis in *The Feminine Mystique*: "It is very urgent to understand how the very conditions of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women" (Friedan cited in Agonito, 1977: 380–81). Likewise, think of radical feminism's emphasis on patriarchal relations beginning in the family and radiating outwards to civil society, the state and the economy. In the context of a hostile, racist society, black feminism theorises the home as a respite. Note this position does not romanticise the home or deny oppressive gender relations that may be present there. However, this position recognises that for black women, the home might well be a place of physical and psychic retreat from overtly racist practices and experiences.

Black feminist theory thus reveals that there are other dimensions to black women's experiences of home that are not captured by liberal, radical, and socialist feminist analysis – especially for those black women who for centuries have been obliged to work outside the home, whether in fields, factories or the homes of others. Many of these women, instead of longing to be liberated from the home, yearn for the opportunity to go home or stay at home. In the words of two scholars, "Black feminist Barbara Smith has argued that ...

families of people of color have been havens, even if the safety or buffer they have provided has been incomplete. The invasion of the state into black family life does not negate the protective functions of the family and community” (Eisenstein, 1994: 204; Smith, 1983: 64–72).

The family

By extension, the family becomes in some instances a site of political and cultural resistance, or at least a place of respite from racism. Hazel Carby notes that ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed through black women’s employment in chattel positions as domestic workers and surrogate mothers to white families, rather than in relation to their own families (1997: 47).

Sexuality

Black women’s sexuality has been objectified, commodified and pathologised, with black women stereotyped as having wild and unbridled sexual urges. Alternatively, black women were presented either as unsexed or whorish – they are either Nanny or Jezebel (Stanton, 1992). Evelyn Hammond has argued that black women’s sexuality is constructed in opposition to that of white women (1993). However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that in the struggle for sexual liberation, many white women demanded reproductive technologies in order to say yes to sex, while many black women wanted autonomy and freedom from an intrusive and racist state in order to be able to say no.

Audre Lorde led the way in theorising sexuality as a source of power, exposing homophobia and heterosexism within black communities, especially towards black lesbians (1984). Patricia Hill Collins notes that for Lorde, “sexuality is a component of the larger construct of the erotic as a source of power in women. Lorde’s notion is one of power as energy, as something people possess which must be annexed in order for larger systems of oppression to function” (1990: 166). How much of Audre Lorde’s path-breaking work in theorising the range of women’s sexuality has informed work on women’s sexuality in the Caribbean?

Meanwhile, looking at the intersection of sexuality and slavery studies, Angela Davis has considered how the ending of slavery created new social and sexual realities for black women and men. She insists that it was not the economic status of former slaves that underwent radical transformation on emancipation – they were no less impoverished upon being emancipated than

they had been during slavery. Rather, it was the status of their personal and sexual relationships that was transformed or revolutionised. She argues that for the first time in the history of the African presence in the Americas, masses of black women and men were able to make autonomous decisions about their sexuality and sexual partners. Whether this was respected or not, black women and men now had sovereignty over the decision about who they could or would sleep with, and it was this that marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation (1998: 7–8).

So we see that concepts of great interest to feminist scholars, including the construction of the family, the home and sexuality noted above, are transformed in the hands of black feminist scholars.

The politics of creating feminist knowledge

Black feminist theorising presents scholars with some hard questions concerning the politics of generating knowledge, including feminist knowledge. Investigation reveals that many of the conceptual tools that “appear” (as if for the first time) in postmodern and feminist theorising of the past few decades in fact draw on the work done by black feminist scholars – but without acknowledgement of the genealogy or theoretical roots of these concepts. For example, the concept of multiple jeopardy/consciousness/identities, as well as Audre Lorde’s conceptualisation of difference,⁷ both predate their extensive and uncredited use by other scholars during the 1980s.

For instance, if we take the case of Rosemary Tong’s *Anthology of Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, we find that she somehow manages to exclude any reference to black feminist thought in the eight schools of feminist thought she covers. She does, however, recognise the work, or perhaps more accurately, the personhood of Audre Lorde, whom she individualises. In making the point that “attention to difference is precisely what will help women achieve unity” (1992: 237), she states:

Audre Lorde, whose very person is a celebration of difference – Black, lesbian, feminist, disfigured by breast cancer – and whose poetry is a voice against the duality of mind/body, wrote that as we come to know, accept, and explore our feelings, they “will become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring ideas – the house of difference so necessary to change the conceptualisation of meaningful action” (Lorde, 1985: 126). Feelings lead to ideas and ideas lead to action, said Lorde (1992: 237).

Yet Tong neither analyses nor even notes Audre Lorde's substantive earlier theorisation of the concept of difference. In what claims to be a comprehensive anthology of feminist thought, we meet Audre Lorde as an individual whose life was a celebration of difference, rather than as a scholar credited for the analytical concepts that she created, and which have been repeatedly used in feminist theorising. Tong cannot claim to be unaware of the work of black feminists as her bibliography lists several of the important works of the 1970s and 1980s, including works by Angela Davis, bell hooks, Gloria Joseph, Alice Walker and others. Her subject index makes no reference to black feminism or women of colour.

Exceptions to this kind of wilful blindness do exist; for instance, Zillah Eisenstein is a self-defined white, middle-class feminist, whose work *The Color of Gender: Reimagining Democracy* (1994: 2) presents an uncommon appreciation of what black feminist theory offers feminist epistemology, in much the same way that Jane Flax's pedagogical and research strategies do (1998).⁸ In the *Color of Gender*, Eisenstein engages fully with the collective works and contributions of black feminist theorists, offering new conceptual tools for building on this work. For example, she draws on the work of black feminist theorists to create the concept of "racialized patriarchy", stating that:

Patriarchy differentiates women from men while privileging men. Racism simultaneously differentiates people of color from whites and privileges whiteness... Like any other structuring of power, the racializing of gender is a process that always needs to be renegotiated. I use the term "racialized patriarchy" to bring attention to the continual interplay of race and gender in the structure of power (1994: 2–3).

Unfortunately, most contemporary feminist scholars continue to ignore the work of black feminists. Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, lists six main schools of feminist thought, psychoanalytic, radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist, and postmodern. It goes on to categorise sixteen subtypes of feminism (including fat and religious feminism) without mentioning black feminism, even though the last subtype – womanism – is related (Wikipedia, 2006).

Towards a conclusion

The issues that concern Caribbean feminists – the state and women, identity politics, fractures and fissures within the women's movement (including exclusionary practices), the development of feminist consciousness, dialogues with masculinities – all resonate within black feminist theory.

In 1977, exactly 30 years ago, black feminists were addressing the question of identity politics, the claim that “the personal is political” and the need to dialogue with masculinities (all issues that Caribbean feminists are currently tackling). These issues coalesced in the statement issued by the Combahee River Collective, and explicitly called a Black Feminist Statement. This constituted a powerful theorising of the concerns confronting black women (Gloria T. Hull et al, 1982 [1977]). While expanding on the concept of identity politics (“we believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity”), the Statement ruptured the continuity between biology, being, gender roles and politics: “although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand” (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 16).

The Collective also expanded the radical feminist principle or mantra, “the personal is political”, to include the notion of the personal as also cultural:

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions for example, we have gone beyond white women’s revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women’s style of talking, testifying in Black language about what we have experienced, has a resonance that is both cultural and political (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 17).

The Collective also anticipated the construction of gender roles and recognised that like women, how men express maleness and masculinity is due to how they have been socialised, rather than the result of some essential, inherent biological maleness that makes male behaviour inevitable, fatalistic and destructive. In the process, the Collective rejects biological determinism, paving the way for a fuller understanding of the ideological and material dimensions of relations of gender:

We reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness per se, i.e., their biological maleness that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 17).

The Collective highlighted some of the conceptual flaws of radical feminist theorising (specifically lesbian separatism as a political strategy) and advocated an inclusive politic strategy that would enable black women to struggle together with black men against racism while also challenging them on sexism (Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]: 16). They were also beginning to explore the simultaneity of multiple oppressions. What is even more compelling is that as lesbians, these women could have easily privileged their sexual orientation in their feminist politics and gender identities. Instead, they chose to politicise race and use it as a base from which to build coalitions with black men whom they did not desire sexually, but whose survival in a racist, rabidly capitalist society mattered in their analysis of capitalism, racism and sexism. Nevertheless, the revolutionary theoretical insights of this comparatively early analysis and its potential value for future feminist strategies have not been appreciated. The theoretical insights from this Statement alone could be useful for feminist coalitions and agendas in Africa and the Caribbean.

We must ask how black feminist theorising could be relevant to African women and women of the African diaspora, such as those in the Caribbean? What is its significance to white women in Northern industrialised societies? Asian women? Muslim women in the Middle East? Black feminist theorising provides many important conceptual tools for rethinking our understanding of social institutions, especially if we wish to reveal and erase relations of dominations in everyday life. I believe that African and Caribbean feminists can benefit from assessing the conceptual tools offered by the vast body of work that comprises black feminist theory, and by examining the factors surrounding its relative absence in our intellectual and activist work. This article merely scratches the surface of black feminist theory. We need ongoing investigation of this body of scholarship, as well as interrogations of its applicability. Even while recognising that the contributions of black feminist thought are confronted by the politics of knowledge production, the body of feminist knowledge is poorer for not acknowledging and disseminating the work of black feminist theorists.

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Footnotes

- 1 Black feminist scholarship is an exceedingly rich and heterogeneous body of work, spanning three centuries. This survey does not in any sense pretend to capture all the ideas, debates, theories, concepts and strategies that would comprise black feminist theorising.
- 2 I accept the Caribbean as the geographic grouping of island states and Latin American and South American countries bordering the Caribbean Sea – what has also been referred to as the Circum Caribbean. In terms of my theoretical work, I define the Caribbean as the independent Anglophone island states and British dependencies within the Caribbean Sea, including the Central American country of Belize and the South American country of Guyana. These are the former colonies of Britain, or, in a few cases, British Protectorates. They form the political grouping called the Commonwealth Caribbean (Barriteau, 2001: 3).
- 3 Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana, are the exceptions in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In these countries, especially in the post-independence period, charges and experiences of racist practices centre on relations between Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean peoples, and the contours of state policies and governance when predominantly “black” or Indian-descended parties occupy state power.
- 4 This term refers to the period after Christopher Columbus, acting on behalf of the Spanish monarchs, made landfall in the Americas in the 1490s, while searching for a trade route to the East. This is generally accepted as the beginning of European colonisation of the Americas, including the Caribbean.
- 5 This list is merely meant to be representative, suggests no hierarchies of contributions, and makes no claims to being exhaustive.
- 6 Ironically, in order to facilitate women’s participation in the public sphere, the approach of the Commonwealth Caribbean states has been to prioritise equality over freedom.
- 7 For an understanding of difference not as a polarised opposition, but a full, rich, complex location and basis from which to theorise, see Lorde’s classic essay, “The Master’s Tools will never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984).
- 8 In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jane Flax, a white, Jewish, feminist philosopher, political scientist and psychotherapist, introduced me and many other postgraduate students at Howard University to the work of black feminist theorists. In courses on political theory, feminist theory and feminist philosophy, she routinely included the scholarship of black feminists, not as part of special topics on race, but as core components of the courses she taught. I am deeply indebted to her for exposing me to this rich body of scholarship.

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