Black Feminist Thought: Understanding the Intersection of Sexism and Racism

**Is there a common woman’s nature?**
Elizabeth Spelman: *The Inessential Woman*

"Inessential" is meant to point to and undermine a tendency in dominant Western feminist thought to posit an essential "womanness" that all women have and share in common despite the racial, class, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences among us. I try to show that the notion of a generic "woman" functions in feminist thought much the way the notion of generic "man" has functioned in Western philosophy: it obscures the heterogeneity of women and cuts off examination of the significance of such heterogeneity for feminist theory and political activity.

bell hooks: *Ain’t I a Woman*

The assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race, has so clouded the vision of American thinkers and writers on the “woman” question that most discussions of sexism, sexist oppression, or woman’s place in society are distorted, biased, and inaccurate.

Black feminist thought undermines the claim that black women and white women have led similar kinds of lives:

In America, the social status of black and white women has never the been the same. Although they were both subject to sexist victimization, as victims of racism black women were subjected to oppressions no white woman was forced to endure. In fact, white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to back women and black men. (bell hooks)

In “Multiple Jeopardy,” Deborah King makes a similar point:

The group experience of slavery and lynching for blacks, genocide for Native Americans, and military conquest for Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans is not substantively comparable to the physical abuse, social discrimination, and cultural denigration suffered by women. This is not to argue that those forms of racial oppressions are greater or more unjust but that the substantive differences need to be justified and to inform conceptualizations.

**Black Feminist Standpoint**
Patricia Hill Collins: *Black Feminist Thought*

Collins argues that Black women occupy a unique standpoint on their own oppression composed of two interlocking components:
1. Black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups.
2. These experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality.

Collins’ view follows the general standpoint logic of arguing that a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group. This emphasizes the connection between what one does and how one thinks. Black feminist though formulates and rearticulates the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African-American women. Kimberle Crenshaw agrees (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”):

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race and on the basis of sex. And sometimes they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.

The Marginalization of Black Women
Black feminist thought is often not represented in mainstream and second-wave feminist thought. As bell hooks observes:

When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women.

Kimberle Crenshaw

Black women are regarded either as too much like women or Blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case Black women’s Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas. (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”)

Consider the role of race in:

- Wollstonecraft
- Firestone
- Gilligan
The Exclusion of Black Women from Feminism
In bell hooks’ essay “Racism and Feminism,” she argues that every movement in America from its earliest origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation (124). White women, she maintains, have absorbed, supported, and advocated racist ideology and individually acted as racist oppressors in various spheres of American life.

1. Colonial Period: America was colonized on a racially imperialistic base and not on a sexually imperialistic base. Racism took precedence over sexual alliances in both the white world’s interaction with Native Americans, just as racism overshadowed any bonding between black women and white women on the basis of sex. American society is one in which racial imperialism supersedes sexual imperialism.

2. 19th century abolitionists: White abolitionists, though vehement in their anti-slavery protest, were totally opposed to granting social equality to black people. When white women reformers in the 1830s chose to work to free the slave, they were motivated by religious sentiment. They attacked slavery, not racism. The basis of their attack was moral reform. That they were not demanding social equality for black people is an indication that they remained committed to white racist supremacy despite their anti-slavery work. While they strongly advocated an end to slavery, they never advocated a change in the racial hierarchy that allowed their caste status to be higher than that of black women or men. In fact, they wanted that hierarchy to be maintained.

3. Women’s rights movement and the suffragettes: White suffragists felt that white men were insulting white womanhood by refusing to grant them privileges that were to be granted black men. Stanton, along with other white women’s rights supporters, did not want to see blacks enslaved, but neither did she wish to see the status of black people improved while the status of white women remained the same.

4. Women’s club movement: Hooks details the negatives prejudices regarding black women, due to the prevailing racist-sexist stereotypes that portrayed black women as morally impure. Many white women felt that their status as ladies would be undermined were they to associate with black women. White women were reluctant to acknowledge black women socially for fear of sexual competition. They did not want to be contaminated by morally impure creatures.

5. Women’s right to work: During the period between 1880 and World War I white women’s rights activists focused their attention on obtaining for women the right to work in various occupations. They saw work for pay as the way for women like themselves to escape economic dependence on white men. But the efforts of white women activists to expand employment opportunities for women were focused exclusively on improve the lot of white women workers, who did not identify with black women workers. In fact, the black woman worker was seen as a threat to white female security; she represented more competition. White women did not want to compete with black women for jobs nor did they want to work alongside black women. As a group, white women workers wanted to maintain the racial hierarchy that granted them higher status in the labor force.
than black women. Those white workers who supported employment of black women in unskilled trades felt they should be denied access to skilled process.

6. The contemporary woman’s movement: The 1960s women’s rights movement also failed to address the issue of conflict between black and white women. The structure of the contemporary women’s movement was no different from that of the earlier women’s rights movement. White feminists did not challenge the racist-sexist tendency to use the word woman to refer solely to white women; they supported it. As a group, white participants in the woman’s movement did not denounce capitalism. They chose to define liberation using the terms of white capitalist patriarchy, equating liberation with gaining economic status and money power. They proclaimed work as the key to liberation. Implicit in the assertion that work was the key to women’s liberation was a refusal to acknowledge the reality that, for masses of American working class women, working for pay neither liberated them from sexist oppression nor allowed them to gain any measure of economic independence.

How to Understand the Relationship Between Race and Sex
Rosemarie Tong: Feminist Thought

Among the central claims of black feminists is the inseparability of the structures and systems of gender, race, and culture. Most black feminists deny it is possible for women to focus exclusively on their oppression as women. On the contrary, each woman, or each relatively distinct group of women, needs to understand how everything about her—the color of her skin, the amount of money in her purse, the condition of her body, the sex of the person(s) with whom she is intimate, the date on her birth certificate—provides part of the explanation for her subordinate status.

Deborah King, in “Multiple Jeopardy,” rejects an additive approach to women’s oppression, in which racism and classism can simply be added to sexism. She suggests that this incremental approach does not represent the nature of black women’s oppression but, rather, leads to nonproductive assertions that one factor can and should supplant the other.

The modifier “multiple” refers not only to several simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism…. A black feminist ideology fundamentally challenges the interstructure of the oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism both in the dominant society and within movements for liberation. It is in confrontation with multiple jeopardy that black women define and sustain a multiple consciousness essential for our liberation, of which feminist consciousness is an integral part.
The Black Woman’s Experience: The Impact of Slavery

bell hooks: “Racism and Feminism”

Prior to slavery, patriarchal law decreed white women were lowly inferior beings, the subordinate group in society. The subjugation of black people allowed them to vacate their despised position and assume the role of a superior. White women were the immediate beneficiaries of slavery. The only way her new status could be maintained was through the constant assertion of her superiority over the black woman and man. A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years.

The impact of slavery and a patriarchal culture on the black man

hooks emphasizes a number of elements of black male sexism:

- Patriarchal social structure gave the enslaved male higher status than the enslaved female.
- The sexist definition of the male role as that of protector and provider has caused scholars to argue that the most damaging image of slavery on black people was that it did not allow black men to assume the traditional male role.
- The black liberation movement has been dominated by black males and reflected a patriarchal bias.
- Black women supported these same patriarchal values: black women wanted to assume the feminine role of homemaker supported, protected, and honored by a loving husband (91). Black women working outside the home regarded the black male who could not free them from the labor force with hostility, anger, and contempt.
- The image of the emasculated black male is based on the assumption that men find their identity through work and are personally fulfilled by acting as breadwinners.

More than any other male group in the US, the black male is constantly concerned about the contradiction between the notion of masculinity he was taught and his inability to live up to that notion. He is usually “hurt,” emotionally scarred because he does not have the privilege or power society has taught him “real men” should possess (From Margin to Center, 73). But H also suggests that the “black power” response to this has also traded on stereotypes: the “power” of black men was the stereotypical, racist image of the black man as primitive, strong, and virile. Although these same images of black men had been evoked by racist whites to support the argument that all black men were rapists, they were now romanticized as positive characteristics (96).

Images and Stereotypes of Black Men and Women

- The black man as hyper-sexualized: virile, dangerous. The black male rapist.
The Matriarch: Black women as unfeminine, castrating matriarchs. Black women were told that they had overstepped the bonds of femininity because they worked outside the home to provide economic support for their families and that by so doing they had de-masculinized black men. Black men were told that they were weak, effeminate, and castrated because their women were laboring at menial jobs. The independence, will power and initiative of black women is perceived as an attack on the masculinity of black men.

The black woman as welfare mother: breeder woman image, lazy, a bad mother

Black women as sexual savages: sexually permissive, sexually depraved, immoral and loose. In sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped. Furthermore, this led to the inference that black women were accomplices in their rapes. White women typically blamed them when men raped them. Additionally, black male rape of white women has attracted much more attention and is seen as much more significant that rape of black women by either white or black men.

Black women as masculinized sub-human women or the romanticized image of the strong Black woman. To explain the black female slave’s ability to survive without the direct aid of a male and her ability to perform tasks that were culturally defined as male work, white males argued that black slave women were not real women but were masculinized sub-human creatures. Black women posed so great a threat to the existing patriarchy that white men perpetuated the notion that black women possessed unusual masculine-like characteristics not common to the female species.

The Amazon: The image of black women as masculinized, domineering, amazonic creatures.

Aunt Jemima, the mammy figure: The black woman as passive, longsuffering, and submissive. The faithful obedient domestic, asexual, surrogate mother.

Sapphire, Jezebel: the black woman depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful.

**Issues for Black Feminist Thought**

- Economic and social issues
- Labor outside the home: “Working outside the home: black women have traditionally worked outside the home in numbers far exceeding the labor participation rate of white women….Yet the very fact that Black women must work conflicts with norms that women should not, often creating personal, emotional, and relationship problems in Black women’s lives.” (Crenshaw)
- Pornography: the genre of racist pornography. “The treatment of Black women’s bodies in 19th century Europe and the United States may be the foundation upon which contemporary pornography as the representation of women’s objectification, domination, and control is based.” (Collins)
- Sexual harassment: “Black women, especially poor black women, are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment because of their pressing need for education and employment.” (Tong)
Rape: “To characterize rape law as reflecting male control over female sexuality is for Black women an oversimplified account and an ultimately inadequate account. Rape statues generally do not reflect male control over female sexuality, but white male regulation of white female sexuality. The singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror.” (Crenshaw)