INTERSECTIONALITY AND SOCIALISM:
BLACK WOMEN NAVIGATING RACISM AND SEXISM IN AMERICAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Caitrin Smith

Honors Senior Thesis
Rocky Mountain College
Spring 2015
INTERSECTIONALITY AND SOCIALISM:
BLACK WOMEN NAVIGATING RACISM AND SEXISM IN AMERICAN SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS

by

Caitrin Smith

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
Rocky Mountain College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science
in
History and Political Science
THE UNDERSIGNED FACULTY COMMITTEE APPROVES

THE THESIS OF CAITRIN SMITH

Timothy Lehman, Chair
Professor of History

Susan Duncan
Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology

Stephen Germic
Associate Professor of English

Matthew O’Gara
Director, RMC Honors Program

4/28/2015

Rocky Mountain College
Spring 2015
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................................................................................. i

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................................. ii

INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................................................... 1

BLACK WOMEN AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY ......................................................... 7
  Origins of Intersectionality ................................................................................................................................. 7
  Contemporary Intersectionality .......................................................................................................................... 9

RACISM AND FIRST WAVE FEMINISM ................................................................. 12
  The Early Feminist Campaign .......................................................................................................................... 12
  White Privledge and Early Feminism .................................................................................................................. 15
  Linking Feminism, Reformism and Marxism ........................................................................................................ 17

SEXISM AND BLACK LIBERATION ........................................................................ 21
  Sexism in the Early African Liberation Movement .......................................................................................... 22
  Origins of the Civil Rights Movement ............................................................................................................... 25
  Conservative Civil Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. ............................................................................................. 27
  The Black Power Movement: The Black Panthers and Malcolm X ................................................................. 30
  Linking Black Liberation, Reformism, and Marxism ......................................................................................... 32

INTERSECTIONALITY AND SOCIALISM .......................................................... 36
  Connecting Race, Gender, and Class ................................................................................................................... 36

CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM .................................................................. 40

REFERENCES .............................................................................................................................................................. 46
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dr. Timothy Lehman, Dr. Stephen Gemic, and Ms. Susan Duncan, I would like to sincerely thank you all for your continued efforts to challenge me as a student. Throughout this process I have been immensely grateful to have had your guidance and suggestions. I am blessed to have such a brilliant team of scholars supporting and pushing me to dig deeper, learn more, and keep writing.

To Dr. Matthew O’Gara, thank you for your continued efforts to direct the Honors Program; your guidance has been deeply appreciated.
ABSTRACT

Intersectionality gained recognition as a theoretical tool latter half of the twentieth century. It allows for a comprehensive analysis of how systems of oppressions overlap, rather than function as mutually exclusive categories. For instance, intersectionality allows us to recognize how racism and sexism combine to create a unique set of oppressions experienced by women of color. This paper is an analysis of how American black women have developed and experienced intersectionality in the context of being discriminated against in both race-based and sex-based liberation movements. Examining the marginalization of black women in the male dominated black power movement and the white privileged feminist movement allows for an analysis that sees racism and sexism as systematically intertwined, rather than blemishes in an otherwise perfect society. This research utilizes intersectionality to provide a critique of certain American social movements in the context of capitalist hegemony and argues for the revolutionary spirit of Marxism and its call for socialism.
INTRODUCTION

In 1977, the case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* was brought before a judge in St. Louis, Missouri. The plaintiffs, five black women by the names of Ella DeGraffenreid, Brenda Hines, Alberta Chapman, Brenda Hollis, and Patricia Bell, stood before the courts to sue General Motors Assembly Division in St. Louis for dual-discrimination, as they and every other black female hired after 1968 lost their jobs. Until 1970, General Motors had only hired one black woman, a janitor, and reported purposefully not hiring women in positions that required assembly line production and operating heavy machinery. In 1970, when state laws prohibiting women from working more than nine hours a day were lifted, General Motors hired large numbers of black women. By 1973, General Motors employed 155 black women. However, in January of 1974, General Motors laid off more than 1,000 of its workers. The layoffs functioned under a “last-hired, first-fired” policy and thus, 154 of the 155 black women working at GM were fired, as they were hired last because of the persistence of legalized discrimination laws.\(^1\)

The plaintiffs faced dual-discrimination, as being both black and female created conditions for them that disallowed them from being hired before the 1968 cut-off date. For instance, while black men had been hired in the masses in the auto industry since the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century, black women continued to be discriminated against because of their sex. This created a unique double bind that halted them from being able to gain access to employment before the 1968 deadline. Additionally, all plaintiffs reported having applied to General Motors before the 1968 deadline but were not hired until after 1970. Therefore, they were laid off not because they simply applied for the job last and received an unlucky streak of fate, but because

\(^1\) *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Division*, St. Louis, 558 F.2d 480, United States Court of Appeals Eighth Circuit 1977.
of a long standing history of gendered and racial oppression which has created conditions that systematically disadvantage black women, even in an era marked by liberation.

However, the courts ruled in favor of General Motors, freeing them of all charges of unlawful discrimination. The judge asserted that these black women, “should not be allowed to combine statutory remedies to create a new ‘super-remedy’ which would give them relief beyond what the drafters of the relevant statutes intended. Thus, this lawsuit must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both.”² This kind of ignorance to the experiences of black females effectively renders unimportant America’s history of racism and sexism and how it has shaped the realities for oppressed groups today. It suggests that racism and sexism cannot co-occur, and thus, black women are either female or black, but not both. Any examination of our history that fragments populations in this way, fails to recognize the cross-identification between race and sex that black women experience. Especially in analysis of black liberation and feminist discourse, it is crucial that the experiences of black women are examined and analyzed, as their intersectionality provides for scholars and revolutionaries an understanding of how oppressions intersect and interact and how such an understanding can shed new light on class-relations within a capitalist model.

The term intersectionality was coined in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.”³ She defined intersectionality as a theoretical tool that comprehensively analyzes the intersections between

² DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Division, 42.
systems of oppression, the interactions between these systems, and how these interactions and intersections affect the livelihoods of those who cross identify between these systems. Crenshaw examined the experiences of American black women, using these experiences as case studies for the development of intersectionality, as its premise functions under the assumption that racism and sexism, as systems of oppression, intersect and interact, rather than function as mutually exclusive institutions. Therefore, black women whose identities intersect with both race and sex are adversely affected by the interactions between racism and sexism. While black men experience racism and white women experience sexism, the black woman is a victim of both sexist and racist oppression, which creates for her a unique double burden.

Of course, racism and sexism are not the only two systems of oppression in America, nor are they the only two systems that intersect and interact with one another. Additionally, black women are not the only women of color that experience these interactions or whose identities intersect with multiple systems of oppression. There are a variety of complex, diverse, and vast experiences for all humans in regards to how they understand intersectionality or identify with oppression. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing specifically on how intersectionality relates to black women and how experiencing the dual oppression of racism and sexism unfolds under the capitalist mode of production. I find it crucial to note here that in no way is this paper meant to provide a homogenized explanation depicting the uniformity of the black female experience. Black women, in all their complexity, are far more diverse and complicated than what can be explained in the pages of this thesis, or any pages of a book for that matter. However, it is possible to make some general assumptions about the positioning of black women within the working-class and capitalism at large, paying specific attention to how they have navigated and resisted sexism, racism, and the liberation movements associated with
resisting such institutions.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the “character of capitalism,”4 by examining the experiences of black women as they navigate multiple systems of oppression. Employing a Marxist perspective, exploitation is defined as the way in which capitalists profit from purchasing labor power for less than it’s worth to extract a surplus of capital. Oppression is the forces that drive people to allow their labor to be exploited by capitalists; it is the conditions that create a reproduction of the labor force. Understanding intersectionality is a necessary prerequisite for any kind of dissection of Marxism today, as it reveals the manner in which interacting and intersecting oppressions produce different experiences for members of the working class, thus providing us with a more profound understanding of the two-class system? Intersectionality allows us to recognize that oppressions are not “single axis,”5 issues, but are interacting, overlapping; systems that perpetuate class relations under capitalism.

Just like a parasite and their host, the bourgeoisie feed on the labor power of the proletariat. Employing intersectionality reveals this destructively parasitic nature of the capitalist-worker relationship, as it allows for an examination of black women as being victimized by both racist and sexist oppression, which marginalized them in both race-based and sex-based liberation movements. These movements neglected to take seriously the perspective of more marginalized layers of the working-class, as their socialized acceptance of gender and race as indictors of status disallowed them from creating a class consciousness throughout the working class. For instance, the black liberation movement was often plagued with sexism, while the feminist movement has been characterized by racism. Thus, despite their revolutionary


5 Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 139.
promise, these movements were largely reformist and failed to provide true liberation for those involved.

This paper will reveal the failings of American social movements under capitalism and their inability to provide liberation for black women. This kind of examination of the perpetuation of racism and sexism within liberation movements points us towards the conclusion that black women, due to the persistence of racism and sexism, have become the “institutionalized other,”\(^6\) required “in a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need,” and, “there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of dehumanized inferior.”\(^7\)

The exposition of the reality that black women are systematically disadvantaged due to the nature of capitalism and the oppressions it perpetuates creates a new level of class-consciousness that can be harnessed by the working class to foster solidarity between proletariats. Therefore, intersectionality becomes not only a theoretical tool, but also a revolutionary one that allows for a full excavation of capitalist reality. It allows us to see how race and sex are fetishized illusions that simply complicate vantage point of the worker, blinding them from seeing the obviously parasitic relationship between America’s two classes: the workers and the owners. In other words, while racism and sexism and real oppressions, these oppressions come from fetishized illusions that skin color and genitalia have some form of value beyond their simple existence. The idea of assigning objects and symbols with values stems from capitalist ideology, which functions entirely in selling a product for more than its worth to

---


make a profit. This deeper understanding of the “character of oppression” allows for a more comprehensive analysis of capitalism and its faulted and exploitative nature. This condemnation of capitalism points us towards the reality that only the overthrow of exploitative capitalism coupled with a revolutionary transition to egalitarian socialism will generate solutions powerful enough to eliminate gendered and racial inequalities.

The following paper will present a revolutionary argument that calls for a full indictment of capitalism and, consequently, its immediate obliteration as a mode of production. It will first provide a frame of reference for black women and intersectional identity by analyzing the works of America’s most instrumental intersectional theorists and subsequently, a critique of some of Americans most famous race-based and sex-based liberation movements and their reformist proclivities. Following, it will provide a discussion of the connection between intersectionality and Marxism, and thus, the revolutionary aspects of intersectionalism. Finally, this thesis argues for socialism as the solution to oppression by discussing the contradictions of capitalism and its inability to exist without exploitation.

---

8 Sharon Smith, “Black Feminism and Intersectionality.”


BLACK WOMEN AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY

Black women have intersectional identities. In other words, black women identify with both their race and their sex as primary indicators of their identity. Of course, the recognition of one’s own race and sex for anyone is a form of identity, but what makes the black women *intersectional* is the way in which her gender and racial identities combine to make her experience of oppression distinct from other groups.

Often, scholars make the assumption that because feminism has challenged sexism and black liberation has challenged racism, that black women have been propelled into equality. However, to suggest that black females now experience the same freedoms as their counterparts neglects the reality that each movement saw either race or sex as the primary cause of oppression. The singularity of these movements neglected to realize the possibility that these oppressions could be interconnected, or that the combination of these two oppressions could be just as, if not more debilitating. As suggested by the title of the anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men but Some of Us are Brave*, conceptualizing intersectionality as an afterthought or even outwardly dismissing the existence of such an experience, omits the unique identities of black women from important discourses. Historically, the exclusion of black women in race-based and sex-based liberation movements is all too real.

**Origins of Intersectionality**

While Crenshaw is credited with coining the term intersectionality and defining it as representing the intersection of race and gender, she was not the first to recognize how these

---

intersections interact with the identities of black women. Perhaps one of the earliest reference points for understanding how intersectionality interacts with black womanhood is the speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” orated by Sojourner Truth in the mid-nineteenth century during a women’s rights convention held by early suffragists in Akron, Ohio.

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well. And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?10

It was this famous speech, and the reaction to it, that marked the first public display of intersectionality and subsequently served as a backbone for its development. Truth’s words pointed out irrefutable holes in the arguments presented by the disapproving men in attendance, who asserted that women did not deserve equality because they were the weaker sex and needed to be helped over puddles. Her brute strength stood in opposition to the association of femininity and weakness, while later her words refuted the claim that Christ himself was a man, which determined the destiny of man to be ruler. “That that little man in the black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ was a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with it!”11

The majority of the women in attendance were white and middle class. For the most part, these women hardly spoke up in meetings and were often accompanied by their husbands. The meetings were largely centered on discussion of suffrage and the principles outlined in the

11 Ibid.
Declaration of Sentiments, which included accessing gainful employment and critiquing the differing moral codes for white men and white women. It was no surprise that the presence of a large black woman at the convention was met with hostility, as the grievances were largely directed at advancing the plight of white women. While they saw Truth as a woman, they did not see her as a woman they wanted to ally with; they feared her race would tarnish their gender-based mission. “The leaders of the movement trembled upon seeing a tall, gaunt, black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted with an uncouth sunbonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and there fell on the listening ear, ‘An abolition affair!’ ‘I told you so!’ “Go it, darkey!”12

The success of Truth’s words lies in the fact that she was able to reveal her intersectional identity as a black woman. She revealed that her race, while it was a part of her identity, did not remove her womanhood or ability to experience sexism. Actually, her race caused her to experience different, often more severe, levels of oppression than white women did.

**Contemporary Intersectionality**

Nearly one hundred years after Truth orated her speech, Audre Lorde related her experience as a radical, black, lesbian, feminist in her book, *Sister Outsider*. She explained, “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.”13 The channelings of black women into categories and movements that cannot, or will not, fully encompass the experience of multi-dimensionality of race and sex-

---

13 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 120.
based identities has created conditions for black women today that continue to strip them from parts of themselves. By emitting the unique experiences of black women from the discourse of feminism and black liberation, they have been pushed to the margin in the discussion and fight for human rights.

It is no wonder, then, that black women, especially impoverished black women, were some of the first to discuss and develop intersectionality. As suggested by one the more revolutionary developers of intersectionality, bell hooks, black women and their experiences as being victimized by multiple oppressions has created a unique vantage point that must be utilized in the shaping of black liberation and feminist theory. Their inherent intersectionality allows them to understand the interconnectivity between racism and sexism, while “privileged feminists have largely been unable to speak to, with, and for diverse groups of women because they either do not fully understand the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression, or they refuse to take this interrelatedness seriously.”

It was this unique experience, and possibly the ignorance to it on the part of significant feminist populations, that led hooks to recognize the inability of both the feminist movement and the black liberation movement to fully encompass her desires for freedom from patriarchy and racism. It is in this cross identification and how it relates to the working class that allows black women to be the ultimate subject of study with it comes to dissecting intersectionality and capitalism. They are the evidence of working class solidarity and intra-class warfare. They, in all their complexity, are breathing examples of triumph and terror, progress and pitfall, reformism and regret. hooks explains,

---

Let’s face it – despite the reality of racist oppression, there are other ways that we as black people are victimized in American society. And it is just as important that we be aware of other oppressive forces like sexism, capitalism, narcissism, etc., that threaten our human liberation. It is no way diminishes our concern about racist oppression for us to acknowledge that our human experience is so complex that we cannot understand it if we only understood racism.15

Understanding the intersectionality of racist and sexist oppression brings to light the diverse experiences of the American people. Just as hooks sees the interrelatedness between patriarchy and white supremacy, Marx’s theory allows us to understand the nature to which relationship between oppression and exploitation. By examining the experiences and ideas of black women, both historically and contemporarily, and applying it to Marxism, we can see the interconnectivity between all oppressions and how they relate to capitalism.

The Early Feminist Campaign

The Seneca Falls Conference, held in July of 1848, marks the beginning of first wave feminism, as it was the very first women’s conference held for the sole purpose of discussing women’s rights. However, the rights discussed were primarily those of a privileged population of women: the white-middle class. What was left out of discussion was an examination of the experiences all American women had with patriarchy. A study of the records kept from the Seneca Falls Conference by Angela Davis showed that, “while at least one Black man was present at Seneca Falls conferees, there was not a single black women in attendance. Nor did the conventions documents make even a passing reference to Black women.”

The Grimke sisters, two radical white feminist leaders at the time, were perhaps the only white women’s rights activists at the time who aimed to reveal the peculiar position of black women in society. They were outraged by the classism and racism that was all too familiar to the women’s rights movements, and, as early as 1837 drafted addresses that called for white women to include black women in their fight against slavery and sexism. However, white women’s rights activists often refused to recognize the need to foster solidarity with their black sisters, often disallowing them from speaking openly at conferences and refusing to acknowledge them in their addresses. This placed black women in uniquely challenging situation. “To support women’s suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male

---

17 Ibid., 55-58.
suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice.”

Referring again to Truth and her speech in Ohio, she revealed this bind when she singly handedly exposed both her racist sisters and sexist brothers. “In repeating her question, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ no less than four times, she exposed the class-bias and racism of the new women’s movement. All women were not white and all women did not enjoy the material comfort of the middle class and the bourgeoisie.” Truth’s presence at this conference revealed the double bind that black women had been subjected to. They aimed not only to be free of sexism, but racism as well. However, the ignorance demonstrated by the white feminists of the day suggested that, while they despised the institution of slavery, they did not support the progress of black women.

Again, this racism was apparent when Frederick Douglass, a black liberation activist at the time, sent his daughter to a white school and was she expelled because she was black. While this was not uncommon for black people at the time it is crucial to note that the principal who enforced the segregationist policy was a woman who supported the abolition of slavery, and was an ally to the feminist cause. This sentiment, which failed to encompass a worldly anti-racist sentiment, was carried over into the women’s movement, as many of the members of the women’s movement descended from the anti-slavery movement. As opposed to black women, white women largely failed to see the connectivity between the subjugation of women and the institution of slavery. Their perspectives as white women encouraged them only to see sexism as the cause of oppression, which disallowed them from being able to see the interrelatedness of multiple systems of oppression.

---

20 Ibid., 59.
This assumption is perhaps best illustrated by examining the Declaration of Sentiments, which came out of the Seneca Falls Convention and was the first widely popularized written manifesto of the collective consciousness of (some) women’s ideas about gender equality. It was the culmination of years of silent disdain and oppression experienced by middle class and bourgeois women. However, it was indeed, just that. “As rigorous consummation of the consciousness of white middle class women’s dilemma, the Declaration all but ignored the predicament of white working class women, as it ignored the condition of Black women in the South and North alike. In other words, the Seneca Falls Declaration proposed an analysis of the female condition which disregarded the circumstances of women outside the social class of the document’s framers.”  

The irony of this is that only one woman present at Seneca Falls lived to see the passing of the 19th Amendment, and was able to exercise her right to vote; she was a proletariat, workingwoman, Charlotte Woodward Pierce. Woodward, unlike the majority of the women at the conference, signed the document because she wanted to improve her status as a worker. She revealed to more privileged non-working women, that laboring women were “more serious about women’s rights than about anything else in their lives.”

While the Declaration exposed the harsh inequality between bourgeois men and women, it neglected to take into account that black women across America were experiencing the brunt of racism and sexism. In other words, first wave feminism was a movement that belonged narrowly to the bourgeoisie. Thus, it was not a comprehensive women’s rights movement, but a

22 Ibid.,56.
23 Ibid.,57.
movement of white, middle class women who wanted social equality with the men in their class. Consequently, reformist rather than revolutionary, action followed suit.

**White Privilege and Early Feminism**

It is not surprising that the feminist perspective has largely functioned on a pedestal of privilege, as it was, in its origin, a largely bourgeois movement that failed to take into account the positions of women of color and poor white women. For instance, after the passing of the 19th amendment, while white women enjoyed their right to vote, black women were subjected to a variety of disenfranchisement measures aimed at keep them from the polls. In some cases, black women were forced to wait in line for twelve hours to register to vote. Some women were even victims of physical assault or put in jail to prevent them from voting. The American Civil Liberties Union reports that laws requiring literacy tests and poll taxes as prerequisites for registration diminished the number of potential registered African American voters. Additionally, by 1940, only 3% of African Americans in the south were registered to vote.

Meanwhile, white women gained access to greater employment and black women began to fill the spaces left behind by them. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*, which is arguably one of the most famous accounts of feminist literature, framed feminism simply in terms of the white bourgeois, leaving out the experience of black women entirely. Her narrow perspective, which saw college-educated white women as oppressed by a society that pressured them to be

---

26 Ibid.
housewives and child bearers, suggested that the heart of feminism lied in removing the restrictions placed on white women.

Friedan concludes in her first chapter by stating: “we can no longer ignore the voice within women that says: ‘I want something move than my husband and my children and my house.”’ That “more” she defined as careers. She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freedom from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white-women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife.27

This homogenized explanation of the female condition effectively marginalized the black feminist perspective and “socialized out of existence,” the experience of black women in what later became the foundation for contemporary feminist theory.28 bell hooks’s captivating explanation of Friedan’s work lends support to the idea that black women have a unique vantage point that allows them to point out privilege in ways that are often challenging for white scholars to recognize themselves. Friedan’s own white privilege, coupled with the historical narrowness of feminist ideology, suggests uniformity in female experience. However, this ignorance to understanding intersectionality created a strand of indifference that is all too common in contemporary feminism today. Modern feminism often rests in the idea that Friedan’s book can speak for the experiences of all women. This fails to take into consideration the diversity of experience women have and the other factors that determine the severity of oppression in their lives. Understanding intersectionality allows for a more in depth and holistic approach to feminist theory, which could in turn provide more comprehensive solutions for all women facing varying levels of discrimination.

28 hooks, introduction, 7.
Linking Feminism, Reformism, and Marxism

Reformism suits everyone! Bourgeois order, capitalism, phallocentrism are ready to integrate as many feminists as will be necessary. Since these women are becoming men, in the end it will only mean a few more men. The difference between the sexes is not whether one does or doesn’t have a penis, it is whether or not one is an integral part of a phallic masculine economy.

–Antionette Fouque

While the plight of middle-class white women is indeed a real struggle, as in they do experience sexism, their own interests end up standing in opposition to interests of other women, as their definition of liberation is within a framework of capitalist ideology. Therefore, understanding the diversity of experience that results from the intersection of these categories of identification and stratification, which is the crux of intersectionality, is absolutely necessary if one is to fully dissect the extent to which capitalism stratifies the working class. Providing a homogenized explanation of female experience fails to take into account what Engels, and later Lenin, identified as the aristocracy of labor. In an article written by historian Eric Hobsbawn, he discusses Lenin’s theory of the aristocracy of labor, which suggests that the working class is stratified and within it, spreads the ideology of the bourgeois amongst its ranks. Hobsbawn explains,

Given the “law of uneven development” within capitalism—i.e., the diversity of conditions in different industries, regions, etc., of the same economy—a purely “economist” labor movement must tend to fragment the working class into “selfish” (“petty bourgeois”) segments each pursuing its interest, if necessary in alliance with its own employers, at the expense of the rest. …Consequently such a purely “economist” movement must tend to disrupt the unity and political consciousness of the proletariat and to weaken or counteract its revolutionary role.29

This except explains beautifully how, under capitalism, each worker is taught that liberation rests in bettering his or her condition as a worker; an obvious statement since freedom has so long been defined in terms of ability to accumulate capital. Thus, workers end up becoming fragmented, with interests standing in direct opposition to one another. They begin to see social institutions that restrict the worker from accumulating capital as oppressions. Workers, then, see the absence of some choices as due to sexism or racism and aim to remove these systems so they can have more choices. However, because workers are competing against each other to accumulate more capital, workers that have the least amount of oppression are able to succeed more.

Marx explains this dichotomy by simply stating that the capitalist, “seeks to get the greatest possible benefit out of the use-value of his commodity.”

In this case, the worker is the commodity. Therefore, any capitalist aims to buy labor at the cheapest price and have their laborers produce the maximum output of goods. At any time, “the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.”

Therefore, the goal of the capitalists is to a) extract the highest possible profit from a worker and b) make sure the worker, in her free time, is still generating profit for the capitalist, either by purchasing goods or providing services that reproduce the labor force.

Tying this back to Hobsbawn’s ideas, the working class has been indoctrinated to a belief system that perpetuates selfishness and individuality. The idea of the “petty bourgeoisie,” has developed from the mode of production, which suggests that each person aims to get the best possible benefit from his input, whether it be their own labor or someone else’s. This shared

---

31 Ibid.
strand of thought, held by both workers and capitalists, suggests that success is only possible “at the expense of the rest.” hooks explains,

White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Both groups have led liberation movements that favor their interests and support the continued oppression of other groups. Black male sexism has undermined struggles to eradicate racism just as white female racism undermines feminist struggle. As long as these two groups, or any group, defines liberation as gaining social equity with ruling-class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation of others.

White women would have been unable to leave their home to move into the workforce if there didn’t exist a lower rank within the working hierarchy to take their place. Therefore, the homogenization of the female experience, as perpetuated first by the early feminist campaign and then by Friedan’s ideas, ends up furthering the cause of white women because it silences and marginalizes black women, who in turn reproduce the labor once provided by white women.

Employing this rhetoric, social mobility within the working class does not eliminate the existence of exploitation. Therefore, as white women accessed the ability to vote and were granted legal protection from sex-based discrimination in the job market, for instance, they believed that they had achieved liberation. However, this is an illusion because social mobility does not excuse one from being exploited by capitalism. Rather, it creates more choices for those at higher levels of the working class, which deludes the workers ability to recognize the fact they are still being exploited. Arguably, it is the absence of extreme restrictions provided by wage labor capitalism that has created conditions that continue to stratify all women, however relative, within the working class today.

---

32 Hobsbawn, “Lenin and the Aristocracy of Labor.”
Reform, as in assimilation into the dominant structure rather than revolutionary overhaul, functions as an anesthetic for those seeking liberation from oppression. “As more and more women acquired prestige, fame, or money from feminist writings or from gains from feminist movement for equality in the workforce,” states bell hooks, “individual opportunism undermined appeals for collective struggle. Women who were not opposed to patriarchy, capitalism, classism, or racism labeled themselves ‘feminist.’” 

This conceptualization of feminist struggle as being one of liberal individualism suggests that female progress lies in the social mobility of privileged women; they aim to be equal with males of the ruling class. It does not aim to change the system creating the inequality in the first place but rather to work within the system to learn how to benefit, like bourgeoisie men do, from capitalist exploitation. Therefore, any genuine feminist struggle will have to be redefined as revolutionary if it is to actually liberate women. As it stands, feminist reform does not liberate women; it anesthetizes white women to capitalist exploitation by providing them with some improvement of their condition while simultaneously funneling black women into the spaces created by this newfound mobility.

---

SEXISM AND BLACK LIBERATION

bell hooks in, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, asserts, “had surveys been taken among black women in the thirties and forties and had they been asked to name the most oppressive force in their lives, racism and not sexism would have headed the list.”

However, hook’s owned lived experience during this time as a black feminist, allows for a comprehensive picture that paints both black male sexism and white female racism as equally oppressive.

Often, black women were victims of sexism within the black liberation movements that marked the 19th and 20th century. From the abolition movement through the civil rights movement “black female activists did not receive the public acclaim awarded black male leaders. Sexist role patterning was as much the norm in black communities as in any other American community. It was an accepted fact among black people that the leaders who were the most revered and respected were men.”

This created, as mentioned earlier, a unique double bind for the black woman because both liberation movements that marked the 19th and 20th centuries asked her to remove aspects of herself; to participate in the feminist movement would mean she would be a victim of racism while to participate in the black liberation movement would mean she would be a victim of sexism. Either way, black women essentially supported causes that ended up pushing her into the role of designated other. She began to fill the spaces left in the wake of the progress of black men and white females experienced. Therefore, in order to fully understand how black women have navigated capitalism, an analysis of the black liberation movement is required, paying specific attention to how black women, such as bell hooks, navigated the sexism prevalent in the movement to eradicate racism.

---

35 hooks, introduction, 4.
36 Ibid., 5.
African patriarchy functioned independently long before it collided with European patriarchy. However, it is important to recognize that “there has always been a greater emphasis on the violent acts of black men in American society, as it diverts attention from away from white male violence.” Therefore, I find it crucial to note that while this section focuses on black male misogyny, is in no way does so to discount white male chauvinism. Writing about black male misogyny is often a challenging area to research, as it is often plagued by racial biases perpetuated by the myth of the black rapist. It is also challenging to dissect black sexism because often black male figureheads, who society has come to idolize, had sexist attitudes. For instance, Malcolm X, whose works criticizing the racism of the American system provide meaningful insight into how black liberation and socialism interact, often glorified his days as a pimp, in which he had full control over women he subjugated. That being said, neither the racism black men have experienced, nor the progress they have made for the black populous as a whole should stop one from dissecting the reality of black male sexism. In other words, while it is obvious that black males have been real victims of racial oppression and made real progress to put a stop to that oppression, the focus of this section is to excavate the reality of sexism imposed onto black females within black liberation movements.

**Sexism in the Early African Liberation Movement**

The experiences of black women and black men are not uniform, as black liberation discourse has often suggested. Actually, the experiences of black men and woman are vastly different as suggested explicitly by the fact the persistence of African patriarchy in America. While Sojourner Truth is one of America’s most famous black female figureheads of the

---

nineteenth century, she was absolutely not representative of the norm. In other words, while her strength and courage were profound and she was remembered greatly by the feminist movement, the majority of black women in that day were not addressing conferences on the issues of sexism and racism. The fact that she was uncommon is perhaps what gave her such notoriety, rather than the idea that she represented the freedom allowed for black women in the 19th century. In reality, black women were liberated from plantation slavery in the South only to become enslaved to their husbands.

The majority of early abolitionists and black male suffragists saw slavery and disenfranchisement as the primary cause of oppression. While, on the surface, this seems obvious, the reality is that black activists saw racist slavery and disenfranchisement as emasculating because it creating conditions that disallowed black men from assuming authority over their wives. Asserting that “the most damaging impact of slavery on black people was that it did not allow black men to assume the traditional male role…of protector and provider,” black male activists effectively subjugated black women by seeing racial conflict as simply between white men and black men. This was apparent when black men were granted the right to vote in 1869 and Frederick Douglass reportedly said, “This hour belongs to the Negro,” to which Elizabeth Cady Stanton replied, “Do you believe the African race is composed entirely of males?”

The unwillingness, on the part of black male activists at the time, to include black women in the fight for suffrage revealed that, “black male leaders were not against granting women access to political rights as long as men remained the acknowledged superior authorities.”

---

Perhaps the animosity that grew between black men and black women was, in part, due to the fact that as white women progressed, black women were able to gain access to employment. Black men, on the other hand, were being painted as rapists, as depicted by a scene in the *The Birth of a Nation*, a “top 100” American film released in 1915, that featured scenes in which black men jumped out from behind trees in the forest to rape white women. This relative deprivation perceived by black males is argued to have contributed to the increasing tensions between black women and black men. This deprivation is considered relative because,

White people did not perceive black women engaged in service jobs as performing significant work that deserved adequate economic reward. They saw domestic service jobs performed by black women as being merely an extension of the ‘natural’ female role and considered such jobs valueless. While white men could feel threatened by competition from black males for sound wage-earning jobs and use racism to exclude black men, white women were eager to surrender household chores to black female servants.

As black women gained some access to low wage employment, black men struggled to find meaningful work. They, and black women alike were victims of racism that was backed by Jim Crow policy in the South and ghettoization in the North. Harassed by the police, hate groups, discriminated in employment and housing, the brutality directed at black people hit a tipping point when Emmett Till, a fourteen year old black boy, was brutally beaten to death and lynched by white extremists. It was this movement that triggered a sea of outrage and catapulted organizations that had long been organizing against black oppression into a new movement for racial equality. However, as the new civil rights movement that marked the mid twentieth century commenced, strictly defined gender relations between black men and women were created. It became apparent to black women that the leaders of the civil rights movement were

---

41 hooks, “Imperialism,” 91.
more interested in black male liberation than black female liberation. While black females may have had access to jobs, which is often the argument used to defend black male sexism, this access, in no way, limited them from being painted in racial stereotypes and being victimized by racism.

**Origins of the Civil Rights Movement**

The Civil Rights Movement that swept across the country in the 1960’s can be analyzed by examining two distinct approaches, each with a black male figurehead and large following. Martin Luther King Jr., who is considered the father of the more conservative movement, represented a non-violent strand of activism that called for black people to organize in large peaceful protests to ensure proper assimilation into white, capitalist society. On the other side of the Civil Rights Movement was the more radical approach, which called for agitation and rejection of white society, or most aspects of it. The more radical approach is often depicted as being led by Malcolm X. Both approaches, though distinct in many ways, aimed to liberate black people from a society that legalized and institutionalized racism.

The movements, both violent and nonviolent, resulted in substantial gains for black people all across America. The end of Jim Crow in the South, the creation of new public assistance programs in the North, and the proliferation of increasing black people in the workforce are a few examples of how the Civil Rights Movement improved the conditions of life for black people in America. However, as stated by bell hooks, “the meaningful gains of the black power movement do not either justify or lessen the negative impact of anti-woman attitudes that emerged in much of the black power rhetoric.”

---

42 hooks, “Imperialism,” 98.
While Martin Luther King and Malcolm X did wage an effective war on American racism and even the capitalist dogma they, similarly to white women in the feminist struggle, neglected to fully take into account the experiences of black women and their unique interaction with racism. While some similarities existed, they too often “responded as if they were the sole representatives of the black race and therefore the sole victims of racist oppression.”\textsuperscript{43} Actually, black male activists often made no effort to conceal their sexist beliefs, stating outwardly that black women did not deserve equality. Amiri Baraka, one of the most famous black poets whose works often reflect the pulse of black liberation, stated in one of his essays, “We must erase the separateness by providing ourselves with healthy African identities, by embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only the divine complement of the black woman is for her man. For instance, we do not believe the ‘equality of men and woman.’ We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals.”\textsuperscript{44}

These assertions suggest that while black male activists may have rejected the institutions of racism and “Americanism,”\textsuperscript{45} as Malcolm X put it, they aimed to uphold the patriarchal values embedded in both African and American culture. Such an assumption lends itself to the belief that black males, then, “who express the greatest hostility toward the white male power structure are often eager to gain access to that power.”\textsuperscript{46} This claim can perhaps best be examined by analyzing the conservative evolution of black liberation, as spearheaded by Martin Luther King Jr.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{46} hooks, “Imperialism,” 94.
Conservative Civil Rights: Martin Luther King Jr

Just after the Bus Boycotts in 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. and a few others started the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), which focused on mass action and putting nonviolent pressure on the Southern government. The focus on mass action that the SCLC called for was criticized by members of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which, as stated by expunged founding NAACP member W.E.B. Du Bois, “had become American in their acceptance of exploitation as defensible and proposed to make money and spend it as pleased them.” The NAACP had focused their interests on lobbying and politics; they had removed themselves from the original ideas of W.E.B. Du Bois. Mainly, the NAACP was made of up black middle class professionals, the majority of them men, and had assimilated into capitalist culture aiming to steer black radicals away from socialism and towards the Democratic Party.

The SCLC, however, while still not a Marxist organization, saw both the Democratic and Republican party as corrupt, as they recognized even in the North, where Jim Crow was not in effect, blacks were victims of even worse crimes of police brutality and ghettoization. They steered away from compromising with the government because the government refused to compromise with them. At a meeting King had with Eisenhower, the president stated, “Reverend, there are so many problems...Lebanon...Algeria.” Upon return from this meeting, King’s followers began to recognize that neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party were able to provide an adequate political platform for radicalizing black activists. Ella Baker, then the executive director of the SCLC, left the organization to start the Student Nonviolent

---

Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which ended up becoming the left wing of the civil rights movement.

The SNCC radicalized rather quickly, as its members had strong interest in working class struggles, struggles that the NAACP and SCLC failed to recognize. King, who has been reportedly disallowing black women from taking on leadership roles in the organization, was still interested in finding a solution within the system of capitalism where Baker saw the issues of racism and classism as interlinked. As she stated almost a decade after the formation of the SNCC,

> In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning-getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.\(^48\)

The SNCC continued to radicalize at the turn of the 1960’s, and slowly their basis grew. They organized freedom rides, sit-ins and jail-ins. Soon enough, members of the SNCC were lured by Robert Kennedy to McComb, Mississippi. Kennedy asserted that if they focused on voter registration instead of protesting and continuing their freedom rides the police would protect them. However, the McComb police jailed nearly all of them within one year.\(^49\) It was this experience that not only led the SNCC to detest the liberal agenda of the Democratic party, but recognize it as a ploy to keep the oppressed from organizing in such a way that would


threaten the economic security of those benefitting from the capitalism. They largely grew to see “King’s strategy and overall politics as ‘inflicted with an anti-leftist political bias’. “

Meanwhile, John F. Kennedy then began to work with King to establish a Civil Rights Bill that would end segregation in the South, and this was solidified at the March on Washington in 1963. King’s acceptance of legislature to combat racism was a statement to the more radical black activists that he accepted the capitalist order. It represented a middle-of-the-road solution that saw eliminating racism as the primary factor that would lead to liberation. This concept, that saw racism as the singular cause of oppression, failed to take into consideration the variety of injustices black people were facing in America, such as sexism and classism. The induction of this bill and its endorsement by King represented the idea that he aimed not to liberate himself from all forms of injustice, but rather the forms of injustice that disallowed him from embracing the power white men had. As stated by an SNCC member,

There is not one thing in that bill that would protect our people from police brutality. What is in the bill that will protect the homeless and starving people of this nation? What is there in this bill to ensure the equality of a maid who earns $5.00 a week in the home of a family whose income is $100,000 a year?

While King’s conservatism came to an end later in life, he was assassinated not long after his radicalization commenced. Unfortunately, for black women and men alike, the movement was by and large reformist. Thus, like the quote above illustrates, the March on Washington and the Civil Rights Bill did nothing to combat the socialization of racism and how, even with lawful protection from discrimination, black people continued to face discrimination in all aspects of life. It did nothing to protect black women from the obscenely low wages they were compensated with for providing housework; it did nothing to end the racial profiling of black people by police

officers. Renaming the March on Washington, “The Farce on Washington,” in his autobiography, Malcolm X, once separated from the Nation of Islam and exposed to afro-socialism in the newly independent states in Africa, began to see classism, imperialism, and racism as interconnected. Therefore, his teachings provided an alternative for black people seeking a more radical reform of the capitalist system. This, coupled with the radicalization of the SNCC, was the genesis of the black power movement and the new left.

The Black Power Movement: The Black Panthers and Malcolm X

While the Black Power Movement provided an alternative for many black feminists, including Elaine Brown, who was the leader of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in the early 70’s, many black power activists were unable to see how sexism was also a piece of the puzzle they aimed to understand. Brown’s personal autobiography, however, confronts the issues of sexism within the ranks of a socialist, revolutionary organization. While the BPP aimed to liberate all black people from the oppressions of capitalism and racism, they failed to recognize their own sexism within the ranks of their organization. Brown explains that she truly believed in the cause of the movement, and there was no other alternative for her, so she put up with the treatment she experienced by some of her male counterparts, notably Huey Newton, who she revealed physically assaulted her.52 However, in her later years of life, she was able to speak out about the depths of sexist oppression she experienced in the BPP and American society at large.

Oddly, I had never thought of myself as a feminist. I had been denounced by certain radical feminist collectives as a ‘lackey’ for men. That charge was based on my having written and sung two albums of songs that my female accusers claimed elevated and praised men. Resenting that label, I had joined the majority of black women in America in denouncing feminism...Sexism was a secondary problem. Capitalism and racism were primary. I had maintained that position even in the face of my exasperation with the

chauvinism of the Black Power men in general and the Black Panther men in particular... The feminists were right. The value of my life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being black and poor. Racism and sexism in America were equal partners in my oppression.\textsuperscript{53}

Malcolm X’s glorifying of his days as a pimp,\textsuperscript{54} Amiri Bakara’s plays in which black women were murdered on stage,\textsuperscript{55} and the sexism of the Black Panther Party, left black women, once again, silenced by the lack of attention to intersectionality in both the moderate and radical black liberation movements. As a result, black women, once again, were funneled into an empty space marked by silence. They once again had to sacrifice parts of themselves and subjugate themselves to race-based and sex-based discrimination in order to secure some form of liberation in their lives.

Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriarchs. It was the silence of the oppressed- that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one’s lot. We were afraid to recognize that sexism could be just as oppressive as racism. We clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were a new generation of black women who had been taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority and to be silent.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 367-8.
\textsuperscript{54} Hooks, “Imperialism,: 108-110.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{56} hooks, introduction, 7.
Linking Black Liberation, Reformism, and Marxism

*When someone sticks a knife into my back nine inches and then pulls it out six inches they haven’t done me any favor.*

-Malcolm X

On May 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1967, leaders of the Black Panther Party marched into the state capitol building in California and demanded, among other things, freedom and autonomy for black Americans. According to their statement,

We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of the Black Community. We believe that Black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny. We want full employment of our people. We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the business man and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.\textsuperscript{57}

Subsequently, the statement went on to list ten grievances including the inadequate housing for black people, problems with the Eurocentric school system, black imprisonment and police brutality. While some may argue the demands outlined by them, including the demand that called for the immediate release of all black people held in jail before 1967, are far too extreme, the reality is, the Black Panther Party had a point. While Americans debate about the whether or not white privilege and racial discrimination is prevalent today, many readily accept that, up until the Civil Rights Movement, black people were subjected to unfair treatment because of their race. This suggestion implies that black people imprisoned during the Jim Crow era, especially in the South, may be in prison because of racism, rather than to serve a sentence

for a crime. Therefore, requesting the immediate release of imprisoned black people is not too *radical* of a demand, though, in the face of King’s reformism, it may have seemed as such.

Just as feminist reform proved to be anesthetic that numbed the consciousness that took grievance with the structure of society, so did black liberation. In a 2005 audit study, “Race at Work: Realities of Race and Criminal Record in the NYC Job Market,” sociologists Devah Pager, Bruce Western, and Vart Bonikowski explored the prevalence of racial discrimination in the labor market. The study revealed that while, “according to a recent Gallup poll, more than three quarters of the general public believe blacks are treated ‘the same white in society,’” there exists in the labor market a, “strong racial hierarchy, with whites in the lead, followed by Latinos, with blacks trailing far behind.”58 Their study, which included sending a Latino man, a black man, and a white man into a store with the exact same credentials, showed that black men were often asked to apply for a lower level position, white men were promoted, and Latino men had varied experiences. In order to see if race was, in fact, a predominant factor in employment choices, the white man was given a felony conviction and the black man had no felony. Even in these cases, the “white applicant with a felony conviction appears to do just as well, if not better, than his black counterpart with no criminal background. These results suggest that employers view minority job applicants as essentially equivalent to white just out of prison.”59

In addition to black people facing more challenges in finding employment, they also have remained relatively segregated in the places they live, a phenomenon that has remained largely unchanged in the last one hundred years. While the areas to which black people and white people have migrated has changed as a result of different economic and infrastructural developments,

59 Ibid., 428.
data collected by the Census Bureau reveals that America continues to remain largely segregated by race. Additionally, black men are imprisoned at rates higher than their white male counterparts, which is an alarming reality since there is little difference in the amount of criminal activity between the races. “Although the current rates of illicit drug use are roughly the same between Blacks and Whites (7.4% and 7.2%, respectively) and lower for Lations (6.4%), the number of White drug users is vastly greater than that of drug users of color because White people are a larger share of the population.”

These instances of discrimination, coupled with the claims made by the Black Panther Party nearly forty years ago, make the case that the reformist policies that came out of the Civil Rights Movement have done little to provide black people the freedom to determine their own destiny. Unlike white people, African American people are subject to myriad of social, political and legal barriers that continue to hinder their ability to succeed, which, under the system of capitalism, means to make enough money to secure that you and your children can not only survive, but thrive.

The biggest failure of the Civil Rights Movement simply was that eventually, it aimed to assimilate into a culture that does not have room for the progress of all black people. Black activists, such as King, equated freedom with capitalism, falling victim to the idea that eventually, if they could just remove racism, they too could be free to make as much money as the richest Americans do. The problem with this mentality is that, as discussed earlier, capitalism needs large labor pools of people to extract profit from. Corporations need low wage employees,

---

62 Ibid.
capitalists need laborers, and so there is no possibility that all people can make as much as the richest Americans do.
INTERSECTIONALITY AND MARXISM

Connecting Race, Gender, and Class

Black women have powerful insight to provide in regards to how black liberation movements have been hindered by the co-optation of the Marxist revolutionary spirit and the inability of its leaders to see how systems of sexism and racism interact under capitalism. Simultaneously, they provide a feminist critique that sees, in ways white feminists traditionally have not, how racism compounds sexism. While the black male aims to be free of racism, defining success in terms of gaining access to the power of patriarchy, this leads to the oppression of black women, as similar to how the advancement of white women lent itself to the marginalization of black women due to racism. Intersectionality, then, reveals the issues that arise in seeing race or gender as the primary oppressive force victimizing people today. By viewing racism or sexism as the primary agent of oppression in American society, activists often fail to recognize the interconnectedness between race and gendered oppression. That is, the idea that these institutions function to stratify the working class so the ultimate oppression (class) can be upheld in order to provide labor for capitalists to exploit.

In Capital Volume One, Marx defines capital as “dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” As explained in earlier sections, capitalism can be broken down for understanding very simply by looking at worker-capitalist relationships. Marx explains that capitalism divides society into “two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat.” While the bourgeoisie is the class that owns the means of production, the proletariat is anyone

---

63 Marx, “Capital,” 363.
who sells their labor, for a wage, to the capitalist. The proletariat, therefore, is anyone who, in exchanging their labor and time, gets a paycheck from an employer. The capitalist then increases his profit by extracting as much labor from the proletariat for as little a cost to himself. Consequently, organizing labor this way, created a system in which many laborers make commodities to sell at market and in making those commodities they are provided a wage. In turn, they then use their wages to purchase the commodities necessary for their survival.

With this understanding at the basis of Marxist theory, it becomes easy to see how first, a reproduction of labor force is needed and second, a constant source of labor is needed. As mentioned by Marx, “if the laborer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist.” Therefore, the capitalists have a vested interest in making sure the worker is, in her free time, purchasing commodities that also generate the capitalist profit. Additionally, the capitalist aims to cut himself from bearing the cost of the worker, such as the cost of providing the necessary food, clothing, shelter, and rest a worker needs to survive. Therefore, the capitalist has an interest in securing for himself a population of people who are able to reproduce the labor force in this way by providing, for free, the burden of raising and caring for workers. This labor force is created through socialization, and enforced by institutions of oppression. Therefore, racism and sexism function to create, within the working class, a surplus of people doing unpaid labor to regenerate the worker. Additionally, the oppressions of racism and sexism create a hierarchy within the working class that allows for an aristocracy of labor which encourages competition amongst the workers because the capitalists have provided some workers with more capital and others with less. In this way, workers equate progress with the accumulation of capital, and the pursuit of their own interest towards this goal stands in opposition to that of

---

others. This, in turn, creates fractures amongst the workers, which protects the capitalist from worker solidarity and thus, revolution. Marx explains, “the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”

Black women have been the consistent other that has provided the reproduction of the labor force and been the surplus labor supply capitalism rests upon for its success. Therefore, as they were marginalized in both gender and race-based liberation movements, they began to see how their intersectionality compounded their experiences under capitalism. With this as a basis of understanding, it is no surprise that black women have been the leading theorists in the development of a comprehensive revolutionary movement.

The original developers of intersectionality, as opposed to some contemporary scholars, thus reveal intersectionality as a two-fold revolutionary process. First, understanding intersectionality drives one to recognize the extent to which capitalism is a failed system. Second, it points us towards systems that value community and equality rather than competition and individuality. Angela Davis explains that Marxist revolutionary action, as a result of understanding intersectionality, allows for a movement that “lifts as it climbs,” towards a revolutionary vision of a true equality for all members of society. This suggests that understanding intersectionality is an extremely crucial tool that can allow for a better understanding of whether or not our political system is successful, as it calls into question the “absence of extreme restrictions,” that lead people to “ignore the areas in which they are

---

exploited or discriminated against,"\textsuperscript{68} by revealing the realities of the experiences of black women.

Intersectionality, however utilized for the purpose of this paper, is not limited to understanding simply the relationship between race and sex. It allows us to examine the interconnectedness between racism, worker exploitation, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, and other forms of oppression that create surplus labor and reproduction processes for regenerating workers. Instead of looking at these issues as blemishes in an “otherwise acceptable society,”\textsuperscript{69} intersectionality allows for a comprehensive analysis that sees how all these oppressions function to propel forward the capitalist order. Black women, who “bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression,” were conversely able to see the intersectionality of these three things because, as bell hooks states, their own lived experience “directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology.”\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{68} hooks, “Black Women,” 5.
\textsuperscript{69} Davis, “Early Women’s Rights,” 66.
\textsuperscript{70} hooks, “Black Women,” 17.
CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM

No, I’m not an American. I’m one of the twenty-two million Black people who are victims of Americanism. One of the twenty-two million Black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I’m not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver-no, not I. I’m speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I do not see the American dream; I see the American nightmare. -Malcolm X

“Poverty is always horrible. It only becomes and obscenity when the material means exist to eliminate it, yet it persists.” According to Forbes in 2009, the 793 billionaires of the world had a combined worth of $2.4 trillion, which is more than the combined annual income of the poorest half of the world’s population. More than one third of the world’s population lives on less than $2.00 a day. If we took the combined wealth of the 793 people mentioned above, which represent approximately .00001% of the world’s population, and divided it equally amongst them, they would each have an annual income of $2.9 billion. This means that the richest 793 billion people in the world make 7.9 million dollars a day, with a remaining 1.1 billion people making less than $1.25 a day. Additionally, we live in a world where we produce enough food every day to the entire world, yet 6 million children die every year from malnutrition. “The priorities of capitalism are starkly revealed by the fact that the per capita income in the sub-Saharan Africa is $490, whereas the per capita subsidy for European cows is $913.”

73 D’Amato, Marxism, 9.
74 D’Amato, Marxism, 10.
75 Ibid.
These numbers reveal the reality that it is truly impossible for the world to be marked by equal opportunity under the system of capitalism, because the entire system of capitalism is rigged to encourage competition. In simple terms, capitalism encourages people to work hard enough; if they do they can make enough money so that they survive, and even thrive if they are lucky. The American way is to project that if you finally do work hard enough, you will get to reap the benefits that the richest men, the 793 billionaires mentioned above, have. But this paper challenges you by asking how, knowing what we know about black women, this is possible. If it was the case that working hard resulted in substantial economic progress wouldn’t black women like Sojourner Truth who had, “borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery,” been one of the richest people on earth? Wouldn’t slave women who had been beaten “so that the blood and the milk flew mingled from their breasts,” have owned the most luxurious homes and watched their grandchildren mark the pages of history? What about Emmet Till, who at fourteen years old was abducted by full-grown white men and beaten until, “all his teeth were out, his head caved in, his body mutilated with horrible wounds,” a bullet was put in his head and he was dropped into a river? Did his mother, who spent the rest of her life mourning the loss of a son she could not protect from the racism, not work hard to overcome her own grief? No, equality is not possible under capitalism, because who then, would sell their labor in exchange for wage if not for the thousands of workers who are forced to?

Marxism asserts that until the working class can create similar consciousness, they will continue to be oppressed by those who they sell their labor to. In other words, capitalists will continue to exploit the proletariat until the proletariat is unified. However, if the women’s

---

76 Stanton et al., History of Woman Suffrage, 115-117.
movement and the civil rights movement tell us anything, it’s that capitalism is the metaphoric “man behind the curtain,” providing an illusion of grandeur that anesthetizes the consciousness of the masses and the possible solidarity that could come from it. The point is capitalism creates only the illusion that you can succeed, and that illusion is what drives people back to work day-by-day but it’s the reality that has kept black women from succeeding. Malcolm X explained,

> It’s like when you go to the dentist, and the man’s going to take your tooth. You’re going to fight him when he starts pulling. So he squirts some stuff in your jaw called novocaine, to make you think they’re not doing anything to you. So you sit there and ’cause you’ve got all of that novocaine in your jaw, you suffer peacefully. Blood running all down your jaw, and you don’t know what’s happening. ’Cause someone has taught you to suffer — peacefully.\(^78\)

The examination of black women and how they interact with the oppressions of racism and sexism under within the capitalist order, allows us to fully consider the perspective that has, for so long, been silenced. Black women have provided critique of capitalism that provides perhaps one of the most powerful insights in human history, the insight that equality under capitalism is not possible. This perspective, while it calls into question all that we know, does suggest that some form of change must occur if we are to live and die together, in peace, as humans.

As stated by Alan Maass in *The Case for Socialism*, “At its heart, socialism is about the creation of a new society, built from the bottom up, through the struggles of ordinary working people against exploitation, oppression, and injustice—one that eliminates profit and power as the prime goals of life, and instead organizes our world around the principles of equality, democracy, and freedom.”\(^79\) Additionally, comrade D’Amato states, “The obscenities make the case, if not for Marx or Marxism, then at the very least for some project to change the world.”\(^80\)

---

\(^78\) Ahmed Shawki, “Politics of Malcolm X,” 186.
\(^79\) Maass, *Socialism*, 5.
\(^80\) D’Amato, *Marxism*, 10.
REFERENCES


*DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Division, St. Louis*, 558 F.2d 480, United States Court of Appeals Eighth Circuit 1977 (http://faculty.law.miami.edu/zfenton/documents/DeGraffenreidv.GM.pdf).


