

Black Feminist Thought and why it Matters Today

Lindsay Hein

Global and Area Studies, University of Wyoming, lhein1@uwyo.edu

Abstract: As tensions based on race, gender and class continue, I believe it is imperative for scholars reexamine Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins uses an intersectional approach to describe the unique oppression which women of color in the United States face. Although the book was published over a decade ago, I believe it can aid one in understanding current oppression women of color still face today. Furthermore, *Black Feminist Thought* can help to facilitate meaningful dialogue around topics of racism and sexism which are happening across the country. As women continue to be at the forefront of activism against the current division and oppression in the United States, *Black Feminist Thought* will aid in establishing an inclusive and educated movement.

Key Words: Black Feminism, matrix of oppression, outsider within, controlling images

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 1990. Paperback. 283 pp. ISBN: 0415905974. \$14.94.

In the recent viral blog post, *Academia, Love Me Back*, Tiffany Martinez, a student scholar at Suffolk University, voices her struggle as a Dominican woman in academia.ⁱ Despite her extensive accomplishments as an academic, she is harshly criticized because of her identity as a woman of color. Martinez's experience is a clear case of Patricia Hill Collins'ⁱⁱ concept of "outsider-within" which persists in academia. She states: "my last name and appearance immediately instills a set of biases before I have the chance to open my mouth. These stereotypes and generalizations forced on marginalized communities are at times debilitating and painful".ⁱⁱⁱ Experiences like Martinez's are not uncommon. Throughout the United States' workforce, women of color experience the feeling of belonging without *truly* belonging. Another example of Collins' outsider-within concept is found in research by Susan E. Martin^{iv}. After conducting in-depth interviews with 106 black and white officers and supervisors from five large municipal agencies, she found that black police women face unique problems which cannot be defined by sexism or racism alone. Martin argues that these problems often contribute to a feeling of being an outsider within their own workplace.^v The extensive reaction to Martinez' blog post and the increasing visibility of widespread oppression of women of color in the United States behooves one to reexamine Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, which explores the unique oppression of women of color.

In her book, Collins^{vi} illuminates the unique and multiple oppressions which contribute to experiences like Martinez's and the experiences of other women of color. Collins' work stands

out because of the unique and self-defined arguments of black feminism. Not only does Collins' illustrate the systemic oppression which black women in the U.S. face by drawing extensively on her own experience, but also by drawing on the experiences of other black women in the U.S. and black women's literature, poetry and music. The defining, unique feature of black feminism and *Black Feminist Thought* is that it is representative of black women's *lived* experience and realities; it is not an interpretation. *Black Feminist Thought* gives voice to the American black woman whose experience and reality remain outside the realm of knowledge for most.

The essence of black feminism remains starkly different from that of "mainstream" feminism which ignores feminists who do not fit a white, middle-class demographic. Unlike white, middle-class women, black women remain in the distinctly unique position in society in which they are marginalized via their sex, class and race. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins builds on Kimberlé Crenshaw's ^{vii}concept of intersectionality by exploring the ways in which racism, sexism and classism are coextensive. Collins describes this concept as "interlocking oppression" and examines just how problematic this is for women of color in the U.S. For example, throughout her work Collins brings up the constant pressure black women face to choose between their identity as women and their identity as African-Americans. Collins argues that if a black woman chooses solidarity with her race, her identity and struggles as a woman are lost. On the other hand, if she chooses solidarity with her gender, her unique perspective as a woman of color is lost.

According to Collins, agency and individual perspectives are further lost and oppressed through the use of controlling images. She argues that black women are often portrayed in one of three ways: as a "hoochie", a "mammy" or a matriarch. In each of these images, a woman's sexuality is pre-determined as being either non-existent or over-the-top. Not only are black women not in control of their own image, they are accused of being the source of their problems. The "welfare queen", for example, is an ever-popular controlling image which depicts black women as lazy, unmotivated and reliant on government support. This illustrates the importance of self-definition in black feminism and just how important Collins' work is in terms of self-portrayal. Such controlling images, as Collins' describes, do not represent the lived realities of black women in the United States. However, the experience of black women and Collins' work allow those who read her work to see these lived realities as they really are: unique, complex and nuanced.

A core concept introduced by Collins' examination of oppression is the concept of a "matrix of domination". She argues that the matrix of domination illustrates how oppression is systemically organized. The matrix, she argues, has four domains which reappear across different types of oppression. This expands on the work of Marion Young ^{viii} who states that there are at least five fundamental "faces" of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural domination and violence. These faces of oppression cannot be collapsed into one category, according to Young.^{ix} In Collins' work, the first domain is the structural domain which operates to organize power and oppression. Second, the disciplinary domain sustainably manages oppression. Thirdly, the hegemonic domain legitimizes oppression. Finally, the interpersonal domain controls the interactions and consciousness of individuals. One could perhaps view the matrix of domination as a spectrum where intersections of oppression meet. Along this spectrum lie the greatly varied experiences of black women in the United States.

Just as the oppression which black women face is unique, so too are the ways which black women combat it. Throughout *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins explains how activism is

essential to black feminism. Firstly, one must recognize that oppression forces black women into the position of “outsider-within.” Although black women are a visible part of mainstream society, they are often forced into positions in which they are merely observers. Historically (and still today) black women have been considered “outsiders” to the white, middle-class world, and, yet, they remain active in the everyday lives of large numbers of white-dominated institutions, such as low-level government offices and households as domestic workers.^x Thus, to survive, women must reject their oppression in the confines of white-dominated institutions. Readers can see this phenomenon through several examples of domestic workers indirectly challenging their allegedly inferior status. Collins also explains how activism has taken place in unconventional places, such as black women’s literature, poetry and music.

One can see this phenomenon today in the recent work of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. Her music explores what it means to be a black mother and a black woman. This is particularly well-exemplified in her latest album, *Lemonade*, in songs such as *Formation*^{xi}, which explicitly explored black identity with lyrics such as “I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros/ I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostril”.^{xii} Other examples can be found in her songs *Hold Up* and *Sorry* which lament the struggle of black women to confine to traditional standards of beauty and to find a faithful relationship. In *Sorry*, Beyoncé sings, “He only want me when I'm not there/ He better call Becky with the good hair”.^{xiii,xiv} Thus, one can see how Beyoncé is the quintessential example of black feminist activism through unconventional methods. Through her music and music videos, she has sparked international discussion of issues facing black women.

Simply put, black feminist epistemology is radically unique. Black feminism values lived experience as opposed to a worldview which is predicated on positivism. Thus, experiences of black women are prominent features of black feminist work. The reader can see the relationship Collins makes to standpoint theory which explores the power of individual knowledge and positionality of women^{xv}; Collins highlights the way in which social and political experiences shape individual perspectives. She explores the unique standpoint of black women who experience varying degrees of race, gender and class identities. What is most notable about Collins’ emphasis on experiences is that it rejects positivist notions that truth is exclusively derived from knowledge. Additionally, the *sharing* of experiences is essential to black feminist activism and thus, relationships become a cornerstone of black feminist epistemology.

A strong connection can be made to Afrocentrism and, in particular, Errol Anthony Henderson’s first chapter *Afrocentrism and World Politics: Towards a New Paradigm*^{xvi}. Like Collins, Henderson discusses the limitations of Eurocentric worldviews and the problems with Eurocentric worldview’s assumptions. Furthermore, Henderson’s discussion on the ways in which subjects of development are defined by what they are not is analogous to Collins’ discussion on the ways in which black women in the U.S. are often defined by what they are not. In both instances, groups are defined by a white, middle-class Western standard, instead of being defined through the lens of their own worldviews and epistemologies. Both Henderson and Collins examine how comparing oppressed groups to Western, white, middle-class groups exacerbates oppression and leads to perpetual “failure” to reach Western standards of “development”.

Unlike other feminist work, Collins is able to use not just hard data but rather a multitude of resources and experiences, including her own. Readers are able to step into the shoes of an African-American woman, if only for a brief moment because of the way that Collins’ not only

explains the lived reality of black women, but illustrates it with experiences of black women. Furthermore, Collins is able to illuminate the experiences of black women in literature, music and poetry which readers, like myself, may have been largely ambivalent to.

Black Feminist Thought offers readers a deeper understanding of the oppression and struggle against oppression that black women in the U.S. face. Through her application of black feminist epistemology, Collins simultaneously illustrates the concept in her work and offers readers an opportunity to gain knowledge through a unique, non-positivist approach. Furthermore, Collins' work is relevant perhaps now more than ever as black feminist voices, such as that of Tiffany Martinez and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, reach an international stage.

Notes

ⁱTiffany Martinez, October 27, 2016, "Academia, Love Me Back," *Tiffany Martinez: A Journal*, <https://vivatiffany.wordpress.com/2016/10/27/academia-love-me-back/>.

ⁱⁱ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ Martinez.

^{iv} Susan E. Martin, "'Outsider Within' The Station House: The Impact of Race And Gender On Black Women Police," *Social Problems* 41 (1994): 383-400, doi:10.2307/3096969.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Collins.

^{vii} Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989):139-167.

^{viii} Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the politics of difference*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Collins., 97

^{xi} Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, Sony, 2016, CD.

^{xii} Cheryl Thompson, "The Sweet Taste of Lemonade," *Herizons*, Summer 2016, 40-43.

^{xiii} Knowles-Carter.

^{xiv} Thompson.

^{xv} Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *The feminist standpoint revisited and other essays* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

^{xvi}^{xvi} Errol Anthony A. Henderson, *Afrocentrism and World Politics: Towards a New Paradigm*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995).

Bibliography

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, And The Politics Of Empowerment*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 1990.

-
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory And Antiracist Politics". *Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.
- Hartsock, Nancy C. M. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing The Ground For A Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism". In *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited And Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Pres, 1997.
- Henderson, Errol Anthony. *Afrocentrism And World Politics*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995.
- Knowles-Carter, Beyoncé. *Lemonade*. CD. New York City: Parkwood; Colombia, 2016.
- Martin, Susan E. "'Outsider Within' The Station House: The Impact Of Race And Gender On Black Women Police". *Social Problems* 41, no. 3 (1994): 383-400. doi:10.2307/3096969.
- Martinez, Tiffany. "Academia, Love Me Back". Blog. *Tiffany Martinez: A Journal*, 2016. <https://vivatiffany.wordpress.com/2016/10/27/academia-love-me-back/>.
- Thompson, Cheryl. "The Sweet Taste Of Lemonade". *Herizons*, 2016.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Justice And The Politics Of Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.