

BLACK FEMINISM FOR A NEW CIVILIZATORY FRAMEWORK

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- *A Brazilian perspective* •

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the importance of black feminism in the current political debate. It shows how the absence of an ethnic-racial perspective in the feminist movement has made black women and their struggles invisible, thus making it difficult for them to become political subjects. The author emphasises the theoretical-analytical contribution of black feminists, which highlights the combination of oppression - of race, class and other forms of discrimination - and its concrete functioning in the life of black women. For the author, a critical and intersectional outlook might point to new forms of understanding and political existence that breaks with the invisible reality of black women.

KEYWORDS

Black women | Feminisms | Race | Intersectionality

It is essential for the continuation of the feminist struggle that black women recognize the special advantage our marginalized perspective grants us and make use of it to criticize racist, classist domination and sexist hegemony, as well as refute and create a counter-hegemony. I'm suggesting that we have a central role to play in the realization of feminist theory and a contribution to offer which is unique and valuable.¹

This quote from bell hooks sums up the importance of black feminism to the political debate. Contemplation of how forms of oppression are compounded and interlaced, creating new forms of oppression, is fundamental in order to consider other possible means of existence. Furthermore, the theoretical and critical framework offered by black feminism serves as a tool for thinking not just about black women, a broad category in itself, but also about the model of society we desire.

Black women have historically considered the notion of women in a non-universal, non-critical manner, often pointing out the need to perceive other possibilities of womanhood. In 1851 Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became a public speaker, gave her famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?", at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention:²

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 planted, 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 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?

Truth immediately announces here that black women face a radically different situation than white women. While white women of that era were struggling for voting and labour rights, black women struggled to be seen as people. And this radical discrepancy made a world of difference.

Angela Davis is another thinker who, even prior to the concept of intersectionality taking hold, considered multiple structural oppressions to be inseparable. In *Women, Race and Class*,³ recently published in Brazil,⁴ Davis emphasises the importance of using other parameters for femininity and denounces the racism that exists in the feminist movement, while also constructing an anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-sexist analysis.

Despite the intersectional analyses of several black feminists in previous years, the term was first coined in 1989, by Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her doctoral thesis.⁵

Intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that seeks to capture the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It deals specifically with the manner in which racism, patriarchy and class oppression along with other discriminatory systems create basic inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and others.⁶

To think about intersectionality is to perceive that there can be no primacy of one form of oppression over all others and that, being structural in nature, such structures must be broken up. It means thinking about race, class and gender not in an isolated manner, but as inseparable categories.

In Brazil black feminism began to gain strength in the 1980s. According to Núbia Moreira, “the relationship of black women to the feminist movement was established through the Third Latin American Feminist Encounter in Bertioga in 1985, from which the current collective expression of the organisation of black women emerged with the intent to increase their political visibility in the feminist sphere. From there arose the first Black Women’s Collectives, during which several State and National Encounters of Black Women occurred.”⁷ Important organisations such as Geledés, Fala Preta, Criola, along with other collectives and intellectual products, emerged. In this context Lélia Gonzáles became a significant figure to be discussed and studied. Besides placing black women at the centre of the debate, Lélia saw the hierarchy of knowledge as a product of the population’s racial classification, since the universally valued model is white. According to the author, racism constituted “the ‘science’ of Euro-Christian (white, patriarchal) superiority, to the extent to which it structured the Aryan model of explanation.”⁸

Within this framework, feminist theory also ended up incorporating this discourse and structuring that of white women as dominant. Thus counter-discourse and counter-narratives were not only important epistemologically, but also as an assertion of existence. The invisibility of black women in the feminist agenda causes none of their problems to be mentioned whatsoever. And no emancipatory solutions can come out of problems which are not even stated. This absence is also ideological. Many black feminists place the issue of breaking the silence as primary for the survival of black women. Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, in their work, deal with the importance of speaking out. “Silence won’t protect you,” says Lorde.⁹ “No person is your friend who demands your silence,” says Walker. “Black unity was built on top of the silence of black women,” says Davis.¹⁰ The authors are talking about the need to not keep quiet about oppression in order to achieve a supposed unity among oppressed groups; that is, they alert us to the important idea that being oppressed cannot be used as an excuse to legitimise oppression.

The issue of silence can also be extended to an epistemological silence and political practice within the feminist movement. The silence in relation to the reality for black women denies them their place as political subjects. It is a silence that, for example, goes back over the last ten years, in which homicides of white women have decreased 10% while homicides

of black women have increased nearly 55%, according to the 2015 Map of Violence.¹¹ There is a lack of an ethnic-racial perspective towards policies to confront violence against women. The combination of forms of oppression puts black women in a place in which only intersectionality allows for true action that does not deny identities to the detriment of others.

Because they weren't white, nor men, black women occupy a very difficult position within the white supremacist society. We represent a doubly vulnerable species, a double otherness, since we're the antithesis of both whiteness and masculinity. In this sense, black women can only be the other, and never themselves. (...)

White women have an oscillating status, as both themselves and the "other" for white men, since they're white, but they're not men; black men exercise the function of opponents of white men, being possible competitors in the conquest of white women, since they are men, but not white; black women, however, are not even white, nor men, and exercise the function of the "other" of the other.¹²

In Kilomba's affirmation we see she disagrees with the Simone de Beauvoir's categorisation.¹³ For the French philosopher, there is no reciprocity: women are always seen in men's eyes in a position of subordination, as the absolute other. But Beauvoir's affirmation speaks to one aspect of being a woman – in this case, a white woman. Kilomba, in addition to making a more sophisticated analysis, includes black women in her comparison. To her, there is reciprocity between white men and white women, and between white women and black men, there is an oscillating status that can allow the white woman to position herself as a subject. But Kilomba rejects the rigidity of this status. White women can be seen as subjects in certain moments, like black men. Beauvoir says, "What defines in a singular way the situation of women is that being, like every human, an autonomous liberty, she discovers and chooses within a world in which men impose on her the condition of the Other. The intent is to turn her into an object, raise her to immanence, but her transcendence however will be perpetually transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness." Kilomba, while showing that women face differing situations, withdraws from this universality in relation to men, showing that the reality of white men is not the same as black men, and thus we also must ask: which men are we talking about? Recognising the status of white women and black men as oscillatory allows us to see the specifics and eliminate the invisibility of black women's reality.

To Kolimba, being the antithesis of whiteness and masculinity makes it impossible for black women to be seen as subjects. To use Beauvoir's terms, black women would be, then, the absolute Other – both in the eyes of white men as well as black, while white women would confine black women to a sub-alternativeness much more difficult to overcome.

In a society whose legacy is patriarchal, classist and slavery-promoting, the theoretical and practical basis of black feminism becomes increasingly necessary to achieve a new civilizational framework.

NOTES

- 1 • bell hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Express, 2000), 15.
- 2 • Sojourner Truth Speeches and Commentary, accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/Default.htm>.
- 3 • Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York, NY: Random House, 1981).
- 4 • Angela Davis, *Mulheres, Raça e Classe*; trad. Heci Regina Candiani (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2016).
- 5 • Kimberlé Williams 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, 14, 1989).
- 6 • Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Documento para o encontro de especialistas em aspectos da discriminação racial relativos ao gênero," *Revista Estudos Feministas* 10 (2002): 177.
- 7 • Núbia Regina Moreira, "Representação e identidade no feminismo negro brasileiro" (article presented at the Seminário Internacional Fazendo Gênero, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, August 7, 2006).
- 8 • Lélia Gonzalez, "A categoria político-cultural de amefricanidade," *Tempo Brasileiro*, 92/93 (January/June 1988): 69-82.
- 9 • Audre Lorde. *Textos Escolhidos*, accessed November 30, 2016, <https://acervofeminista.wordpress.com/2015/12/02/audre-lorde-textos-escolhidos/>.
- 10 • Angela Davis, "As mulheres negras na construção de uma nova utopia," *Geledés*, July 12, 2011, accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.geledes.org.br/as-mulheres-negras-na-construcao-de-uma-nova-utopia-angela-davis/#gs.rNTsonl>.
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- 12 • Grada Kilomba, *Plantation memories: episodes of everyday racism* (Munster: Unrast, 2012), 124.
- 13 • Simone de Beauvoir, *O Segundo sexo - fatos e mitos*, trad. Sérgio Milliet (São Paulo: Difusão Europeia do Livro, 1980).

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