

Theories on intersectionality and colourism



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The feminist theoretical tradition examines micro and macro social structures, and confronts patriarchy, power, social convention and gender inequality. Our textbook defines feminism as a “ sociological school of thought claiming that male domination and female subordination are determined not by biological necessity but by structures of power and social convention” (Brim & Lie, 2018, pp. 16-17). As I examine the feminist ideology as a woman of colour, the question surfaced, “ How does this brand of feminism measure speak to the experiences of White and Black women? Is it equal or is the face that represent us mainly that of a White woman?” Engaging in meaningful conversations with my two daughters who are both in their 20’s added some dimension to the querying process. During one discussion on patriarchy, a word I had not heard before, in conjunction with feminism was introduced— intersectionality.

From what I am learning and gradually beginning to understand, the background and conversation of intersectionality is intended to shed light on dynamics that have often been overlooked in the feminist movements and theory. The core concept of intersectionality acknowledges the fact that women are not a homogeneous grouping who share the same life experiences; and that White middle-class women do not serve as an accurate representation of the feminism as a whole. The life experiences of women of colour always lay between the intersection of race and gender. As Black women, our experiences are not the same, or equal to White women, or Black men; as such, we are uniquely positioned within an intersection of race and gender which causes us to experience discrimination and marginalization in ways that need to be practically framed. In this way, these

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experiences are seen and understood by others.

Catherine Harnois, in her book, *Analytic Interventions of Multiracial Feminism: Measuring and Modeling Sexism with an Intersectional Approach*, quotes legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw who frames this theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw posits that, “many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood...The intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Harnois, 2012, p. 5).

While women, regardless of race, may face the possible challenges that gender, ableism, colourism, ageism, heterosexism, and cis-genderism create; White women—whose position within the macro, patriarchal structure is fairly secure, seem to rarely have to contend with race as a barrier. As a Black woman, if I am to apply for loan at a bank, there is a high chance that my phenotype would be noted first, and could actively undermine my chances of receiving the best service possible. Being within a banking environment may present a few strikes that may work against me. Harnois demonstrates the idea of the environment in her book, “Writing primarily about racial discrimination, sociologist Joe Feagin (1991, p. 102) argued that “there is a spatial dimension to discrimination” and that the probability of encountering racial discrimination depends in part on the environment one is in (see also Feagin & Eckberg, 1980; Roscigno, 2007). A multiracial feminist approach takes this idea one step further, emphasizing that the particular spaces that one moves through on a day-to-day basis are

largely determined by intersecting hierarchies of race, gender, class, and age” (Harnois, 2012, p. 4). As an example of one such “ space” was observed in a short documentary viewed in class, where the experience of one young woman seeking to gain access into a realm dominated by White women was examined.

For aspiring Canadian/Jamaican model, Renee Thompson, we see intersectionality vividly conveyed in the short documentary, *The Colour of Beauty* . As a fellow Islander, her story spoke volumes to me since all Black women in this colonized and enslaved part of the world carry scars of colourism, which until recently, were not easily spoken of. Colourism is described as an internal racism practiced within ethnic groups, and is a residual stain brought about by colonialism and slavery. This type of racism, based on complexion, has functioned to subconsciously shape the perception and personal concepts of Black women regarding their phenotype. In the Caribbean, to be of a darker complexion is to be stigmatized and marginalized; and coveted opportunities and jobs are readily given to those of fairer skin. Despite the fact that most Caribbean governments are administrated by Black men; the Black woman still struggles against the bonds which make her dark skin seem inferior. The pervasiveness of “ Whiteness” and its descending shades amongst women of colour impact upon the way Black girls and women (at the bottom of the colour strata) measure themselves, and are handled or regarded by others.

When a woman with a Caribbean background like Renee Thompson describes the scrutiny that is faithfully present throughout all her dealings with modelling agencies, she is conveying the two ideas. First, she is positioned within an intersection of race and gender as she fights to forge a

way through a White-dominated fashion industry, in order to claim a place within the North American market. Second, she has to confront and overcoming the inner stigmatism inherited from colourism which is deeply embedded from her Caribbean upbringing. From her story we can examine the unreasonably higher standard to which she is held, where any minor physical fault—too much bottom compared to the more straight physique of the White model, or being probed and dissected for features that “ look more like a white girl” (St. Philip, 2010). Such frustrations to overcome so that she can qualify to represent the designer’s

brand.

To succeed,

Renee has to be driven and focused. Mediocrity that is acceptable from a White model cannot be her approach. Her efforts have to be twice and thrice as much—yet, from what we have seen in the documentary, her prospects for securing work are still slim. I look at her and see a strong person who is relentless in her dream to make a mark for herself, to “ kill Fashion Week” (St. Philip, 2010). Yet deeper still is a desire to be a pioneer for aspiring women of Caribbean descent to see themselves represented within the ranks of Fashion. There is still much work to be done in order for women like Renee can have a fair opportunity to work in a field that she loves and is good at. It is encouraging to see that this short documentary— *The Colour of Beauty* is seeking to raise awareness regarding the biases and stereotypes encountered by women of colour, and hopefully, be one step closer to bring equity and shatter a few glass ceilings.

The powerful documentary series, “ Killing Us Softly” by Jean Kilbourne confronts the ways in which American advertising is systemically crafted with sexist and misogynistic images that suppress, victimize, oversexualize,

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dehumanize and trivialize women, while diminishing their worth. At least 160 prints and television ads are highlighted throughout this film, yet only a token photograph features a woman of colour. She is a Black model dressed in a bright white suit, and positioned halfway across her face is a mask featuring the face of a White woman. The message suggests that the standard of beauty is that of the Eurocentric woman; that the face of a Black woman simply would not measure up, and has to be concealed by a face deemed as beautiful by society's standards. That whiter is

better.

Today we see Black

women responding to this ancient, structurally embedded message that whiter is better. Face and body whitening products geared towards lighten darker skin complexions have become an ever growing, dangerous trend.

Jamaican Dancehall artist, Spice, in her 2018 album *Black Hypocrisy*, advocates against the situation facing Black women who feel pressured to conform to a look that is not their own. In her first track she sings, " I was told that I would go further, if the colour of my skin was lighter; and I was made to feel inferior, because society said that brown girls were prettier"

(Spice, 2018, track 1) This track posits that colourism is expressed as a burden upon Black women from her own ethnic group, where the artist states that the face of her accuser is not a Caucasian, but her own Black people pointed the finger of condemnation.

The World Health Organization has been valiantly seeking to raise awareness worldwide to the danger of mercury poisoning found in unregulated skin bleaching products. Despite these efforts, skin bleaching remains prevalent in African countries like Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Togo where

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the highest usage is measured in Nigeria at 77%. (WHO, 2011, p. 1). The numerous billboards entice, and showcase images of Black women with their whitened skin, sending the message that—finally, there is a way to be like White women; now the doors will be open because this unattractive black skin is not the first thing seen and judged by others.

The documentary *Killing Us Softly* has functioned to bring in awareness, and holds great value for exposing the damaging socialization taking place through advertising. Unfortunately, the film's attention aligns with a brand of feminism that does not recognize the plight of intersectionality faced by Black and women of other ethnicities. When I consider this documentary, I admit that I was disappointed to see that again, women who look like me, with our range of experiences are not represented. The lens it seems, naturally focuses on dominant White women. While I am thankful to Jean Kilbourne for producing such a provocative, informative film, I could not help but ponder, "How is my voice and those of my two daughters being represented in this film?" Intersectionality seeks to raise awareness regarding the fundamental societal structures which readily ignore the fact that not all women are regarded, and considered equally; that women of colour and their experiences do not take the same priority. This situation definitely needs to change.

This reflection on colourism and intersectionality has served to make me understand my own experiences. Being a person of mixed ethnicity carries its own setbacks, where you do not quite fit into any mold. My own encounter with colourism came about at the age of 9 when my cousin held my inner wrist against her own and asked me, "Who is fairer?" As hard as I tried, I failed to see the difference between her fairer complexion and my

darker one, but a seed of self-doubt was planted that day.

Within weeks of moving to Canada at age 21, I had my first experience of being followed at a Shoppers Drug Mart, and asked to empty my purse. I was humiliated and traumatized as a newcomer because I knew that I did nothing to warrant this kind of scrutiny and treatment. I have been stopped by the police and asked for my identification with no valid explanation at least three times. Today I see that I was being racially profiled and this dealing comes with race and gender intersectionality.

Even as I type this reflection, I know that I do not want to make the existing inequality and injustice negatively influence me. Knowledge is power, and I simply choose to acknowledge that there is indeed a system of whiteness that has been constructed for some time now—that the fault is not with a person but the system. My goal is to speak up when I sense that I am being treated unjustly, and educate myself on the best ways to maneuver through challenge ahead.

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