

# ‘Home Truths’ on Intersectionality

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“If nothing else, Black feminism deals in home truths.”<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** In the wake of intersectionality’s trans-disciplinary institutionalization, this Article considers how the meaning and practice of intersectionality has changed in different historical moments. This Article studies three periods in black feminism’s long history of *doing* intersectional work: an early period (1968-87) marked by a broad conception of intersectionality, the watershed years (1988-90) marked by the institutionalization of intersectionality, and the hip hop feminist years (1999-present) marked by the interchangeability of black feminism and intersectionality. By underscoring that intersectionality is a *product* of black feminism—rather than a synonym for black feminism—and by emphasizing that intersectionality is a historically contingent concept, this Article advocates new ways of configuring the relationship between intersectionality and black feminism.

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1. HOME GIRLS: A BLACK FEMINIST ANTHOLOGY, at xxxvii (Barbara Smith ed., 1983). Smith’s interest in “home,” in crafting a space for black feminists to theorize the experience of multiple marginalization, is captured in the title of her now-canonical anthology *Home Girls*. Smith writes,

Home Girls. The girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with. I knew I was onto something, particularly when I considered that so many Black people who are threatened by feminism have argued that by being a Black feminist (particularly if you are also a Lesbian) you have left the race, are no longer a part of the Black community, in short no longer have a home.

*Id.* at xxiv. Smith, then, imagined black feminism specifically—and her anthology *Home Girls* in particular—as offering a home space for black women who wanted to name the injuries inflicted on them by heteropatriarchy and white dominance, who wanted to organize for redress, and who wanted to insist on their agency despite their subordination.

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Intersectionality has become institutionalized.<sup>2</sup> At its inception, intersectionality was a black feminist "home truth," a theory and practice which insisted on the intellectual and political significance of black women's experiences. By describing the experience of "multiple jeopardy"<sup>3</sup> specific to black women,<sup>4</sup> intersectionality became both a black feminist politics of survival and an analytic interested in how race, gender, class, and sexuality interact in complex ways that shape subjects and institutions alike. Over the last decade, this outsider knowledge has become a mainstay of the academy, the

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2. Jasbir Puar gestures to intersectionality's institutionalization: "Intersectionality is thought by many feminists to be the primary rubric for theorizing difference for the past two decades, and is now a prevalent approach in some strands of queer theory (increasingly known as 'queer of color critique')." Jasbir Puar, *I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics*, TRANSVERSAL – EPIPCCP MULTILINGUAL WEBJOURNAL (Jan. 2011), <http://eipccp.net/transversal/0811/puar/en>.

3. The term "multiple jeopardy" comes from Deborah King's work, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Content of a Black Feminist Ideology"; the term is, in many ways, a reference to Frances Beale's work, which argued that black women experience "double jeopardy." See Frances Beale, *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, in WORDS OF FIRE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMINIST THOUGHT 146 (Beverly Guy-Sheftall ed., 1995) [hereinafter WORDS OF FIRE]. King expanded the concept to "multiple jeopardy" arguing that,

[M]ost applications of the concept of double and triple jeopardy have been overly simplistic in assuming that the relationships among the various discriminations are merely additive. . . . This simple incremental process does not represent the nature of black women's oppression . . . . The modifier 'multiple' refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism.

Deborah King, *Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Content of a Black Feminist Ideology*, 14 SIGNS 42, 47 (1988).

4. Underpinning this theory is the idea that black women have a distinctive experience of multiple marginalization; for the purposes of this Article, I will not explore the experiences of multiple marginalization that other subjects have, nor will I examine the relationship between privilege and subordination that marks the lives of many subjects. See, e.g., Nancy Ehrenreich, *Subordination and Symbiosis: Mechanisms of Mutual Support Between Subordinating Systems*, 71 UMKC L. REV. 251, 257 (2002) (arguing that "privileged positions can be double-edged swords" because "singly burdened individuals," at times, "compensate for the powerlessness they experience by using their privileged positionality to subordinate others . . . . Thus white women's race privilege (for example) may sometimes actually sustain and reinforce their gender subordination.") (citations omitted).

prevailing framework for understanding how structures of domination reinforce each other,<sup>5</sup> a “buzzword” with interdisciplinary reach.<sup>6</sup>

This Article considers what happened to black feminism in the wake of intersectionality’s popularization. In particular, I examine how black feminism’s relationship to theory-making has changed as intersectionality has traversed disciplinary borders and developed institutional legitimacy. Ultimately, I argue that as scholars in a range of fields increasingly draw on intersectionality theory to explore identity and processes of domination, black feminism has moved from an expansive version of intersectionality interested in the intimate relationship between race, gender, class, and sexuality to a narrow version of intersectionality which focuses almost exclusively on the intersection of race and gender.

This narrower intersectionality has been detrimental to black feminism for three reasons. First, while race/gender has become the primary intersection that captures black feminist attention, marginalization has emerged as the principal analytic used to study this intersection. Because intersectionality has come to equate black women’s lived experiences with marginalization, black feminism has neglected to rigorously study the heterogeneity of “black woman” as a category.<sup>7</sup> Second, because black feminism attends to race/gender almost exclusively, black feminism has effectively subcontracted out explorations of other intersections to a range of related intellectual projects. Third, and most importantly, because intersectionality has become the preeminent black feminist lens for studying black women’s experiences, intersectionality itself is never subjected to critical scrutiny. Instead, intersectionality is now often treated as synonymous with black feminism or, as Ange-Marie Hancock argues, with “women of color studies,”<sup>8</sup> rather than as a *product* of black

5. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought*, 33 SOC. PROBS. S14 (1986). For a sampling of intersectionality’s interdisciplinary reach, see Hae Yeon Choo & Myra Marx Ferree, *Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities*, 28 SOC. THEORY 129 (2010); Kathy Davis, *Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful*, 9 FEMINIST THEORY 67 (2008); Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm*, 3 POL. & GENDER 248 (2007) [hereinafter Hancock, *Intersectionality*]; Ange-Marie Hancock, *When Multiplication Doesn’t Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm*, 5 PERSP. POL. 63 (2007) [hereinafter Hancock, *Multiplication*]; Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, *Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality*, 3 POL. & GENDER 254 (2007); Ivy Ken, *Beyond the Intersection: A New Culinary Metaphor for Race-Class-Gender Studies*, 26 SOC. THEORY 152 (2008); Leslie McCall, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, 30 SIGNS 1771 (2005); Dorte Staunæs, *Where Have All the Subjects Gone? Bringing Together the Concepts of Intersectionality and Subjectification*, 11 NORA – NORDIC JOURNAL OF FEMINIST AND GENDER RESEARCH 101 (2003); and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Intersectionality and Feminist Politics*, 13 EUROPEAN J. WOMEN’S STUD. 193 (2006).

6. See Davis, *supra* note 5, at 68.

7. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Rethinking Intersectionality*, 89 FEMINIST REV. 1 *passim* (2008).

8. See Hancock, *Intersectionality*, *supra* note 5, at 253 (arguing that intersectionality should move beyond “women of color studies”). Hancock argues that uncoupling intersectionality and “women of color studies” will unleash intersectionality’s analytical power to study fairness, justice, and “complex causality.” She writes, “What if, as noble a pursuit as it is, I do not wish to study women of color? What

feminism. Intersectionality's synonymy with black feminism allows it to enjoy an invisible theoretical monarchy,<sup>9</sup> so that it is now treated as "a primary, if not singular, feminist method, and the paradigmatic frame through which women's lives are understood and theorized,"<sup>10</sup> as the only tool necessary to study the intimate relationship between race, gender, and a host of other social categories.

This Article suggests that intersectionality's current relationship with black feminism is neither inevitable nor the effect of historical accident; instead, it is the result of a set of historical convergences. This Article traces shifts in black feminism's conception of intersectionality over time to better understand the particular relationship between black feminism and intersectionality in our current moment. Ultimately, I am interested in examining changes in intersectionality's interaction with black feminism over time, challenging the tendency to elide intersectionality's historical formations and transformations.

This Article studies three moments in black feminism's long relationship to intersectionality: an early era<sup>11</sup> (1968-87) marked by a broad concept of multiple marginalization articulated by black feminist organizations; the watershed years (1988-90) marked by the birth of intersectionality as a term and the institutionalization of intersectionality through Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw's now-canonical works; and a hip hop feminist era (1999-present) marked by the virtual interchangeability of black feminism and intersectionality.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, the advent of hip hop feminism in the late 1990s is only *one* way that contemporary black feminism is theorized, practiced, and articulated. I focus on hip hop feminism because it is a significant theoretical space where intersectionality and black feminism have become fungible. I use hip hop feminism, then, to explore the potential pitfalls of institutionalizing intersectionality within the parameters of black feminism.

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can I gain from intersectionality? I think intersectionality can help us better conceive research designs and data collection through its attentiveness to causal complexity." *Id.* at 251.

9. See Jennifer C. Nash, *On Difficulty: Intersectionality as Feminist Labor*, 8 SCHOLAR & FEMINIST (2010), [http://barnard.edu/sfonline/polyphonic/nash\\_01.htm](http://barnard.edu/sfonline/polyphonic/nash_01.htm).

10. Puar, *supra* note 2.

11. This earlier period is often called "second-wave black feminism." I avoid that term in light of critiques of the "wave" model. Kimberly Springer argues that the wave metaphor elides the participation of women of color in feminist history. She writes: "The wave analogy excludes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist activism of women of color. . . . African American women's activism alongside white women's, in the abolition and antilynching movements predates that of the suffrage movement." KIMBERLY SPRINGER, *LIVING FOR THE REVOLUTION: BLACK FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS 1968-1980*, at 8 (2005). Other critiques of the "wave" metaphor assert that it is underpinned by a "positivist understanding of generations founded on the idea of progress." ASTRID HENRY, *NOT MY MOTHER'S SISTER: GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM* 60 (2004).

12. While I focus on particular texts produced during these periods, black feminism is, of course, a vibrant and complex terrain filled with all kinds of intellectual production. So, for example, while I describe hip hop feminism, I do not view the latter period of black feminist production as marked exclusively by hip hop feminism; I am instead interested in studying the particular relationship between hip hop feminism and intersectionality.

This Article is distinctive in its historical approach to intersectionality.<sup>13</sup> While scholars have critiqued intersectional methodology,<sup>14</sup> interrogated the metaphor of intersections to analyze identity,<sup>15</sup> described intersectionality theory's inattentiveness to particular intersections,<sup>16</sup> and gestured to the dawning of a "post-intersectional" moment,<sup>17</sup> there has been relatively little scholarly work addressing the historical development of intersectionality and the dynamic relationship between intersectionality and black feminist theory.

The lack of an intersectional history means that intersectionality is imagined to be theoretically static, rather than an innovation that is constantly re-made *in* and *through* a dynamic relationship with black feminism. A historical approach complicates the prevailing wisdom that the advent of the term intersectionality simply gave name to a practice that black feminists had been engaged in for decades. My work reveals that the content of intersectional work has shifted tremendously over the last four decades, and that the very nature of what constitutes intersectionality is, in and of itself, contested terrain. By treating intersectionality as a product of black feminism that has alterable meanings, it becomes possible to imagine new ways of configuring the relationship between intersectionality and black feminism.

Periodizing is necessarily a tricky affair. By charting intersectionality's development vis-à-vis black feminism, my aim is not to suggest that theoretical and political endeavors can be neatly placed into temporal packages. Nor do I aim to nostalgically celebrate previous iterations of intersectionality and to

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13. Others, however, share my concern with the lack of an intersectional history. Ange-Marie Hancock notes, "A comprehensive intellectual history of intersectionality has yet to be published, with . . . significant ramifications that affect scholars seeking to conduct intersectional research and those seeking to understand the intellectual contributions of intersectionality." Hancock, *Intersectionality*, *supra* note 5, at 249.

14. See Lisa Bowleg, *When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative and Quantitative Intersectionality Research*, 59 *SEX ROLES* 312 (2008); McCall, *supra* note 5; Ladelle McWhorter, *Sex, Race, and Biopower: A Foucauldian Genealogy*, 19 *HYPATIA* 38 (2004).

15. Peter Kwan's work is emblematic of this position. He has advocated for supplanting intersectionality with "cosynthesis,"

[A] dynamic model of the conditions of categorical formations whose ultimate message is that, since the multiple categories through which we understand ourselves are implicated in complex ways with the formation of categories through which others are constituted, political emancipation and the achievement of justice are realizable only when we recognize that we all have a stake in finding ways of seizing control over the legal and cultural forces that shape all of the categories that are formed to maintain systems of oppression.

Peter Kwan, *Jeffrey Dahmer and the Cosynthesis of Categories*, 48 *HASTINGS L.J.* 1257, 1292 (1997).

16. Hawley G. Fogg-Davis notes, "Nominal inclusion of black lesbians has increased in black feminist arguments, but mere reference to sexuality does not ensure the substantive inclusion of black lesbians' experiences. Indeed, inconsistent nominal references to 'sexuality' and avoidance of the term 'lesbian' within and among black feminist arguments renders such inclusion superficial." Hawley G. Fogg-Davis, *Theorizing Black Lesbians Within Black Feminism: A Critique of Same-Race Street Harassment*, 2 *POL. & GENDER* 57, 59 (2006).

17. For a discussion of "post-intersectionality," see Robert Chang and Jerome McCristal Culp, Jr., *After Intersectionality*, 71 *UMKC L. REV.* 485 (2002) and Ehrenreich, *supra* note 4.

criticize its newer iterations. Instead, I am interested in using periodization strategically to study how black feminism and intersectionality have interacted, and to explore the problematic conflation of black feminism and intersectionality that has come to mark one particular form of contemporary black feminism.

Periodizing also often obscures connections between moments, ignoring the roots of theoretical innovations and activist work. While this Article traces the relationship between black feminism and intersectionality specifically back to 1968, black feminist investigations of the mutually constitutive nature of structures of domination predate 1968. Even in the nineteenth century, activists like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Anna Julia Cooper labored to show how race and gender cooperate to marginalize black women. These “freedom dream[ers]”—to borrow Robin D.G. Kelley’s term—“flipped the script on the black freedom movement, arguing that freedom for black women would result in freedom for black people as a whole—better yet, all people.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Kelley acknowledges, these “freedom dreams” coalesced in the formation of “an autonomous radical black feminist movement” in the late 1960s.<sup>19</sup> This “autonomous” black feminist movement placed black women’s experiences at the center of an activist project, and developed a politics around critiquing both the racism of white hegemony and the sexism of the black freedom movement. While recognizing the intellectual labor of the black feminist scholar-activists whose work pre-dates the moment when my analysis commences, this Article begins in the era when black feminists formally organized *as* black feminists committed to systematically toppling sexism and racism.

I should note that this Article is not invested in defining the parameters of black feminism. In an era when the boundaries of disciplines, theories, and politics are more policed than I would like, I prefer not to debate who—or what—falls into the category of black feminism; I remain faithful to how scholars and activists characterize and define themselves. So, for example, both the Combahee River Collective and Roderick Ferguson share an interest in theorizing and describing the experiences of black queers; yet the Combahee River Collective situated itself as a “Black feminist” organization<sup>20</sup> while Roderick Ferguson envisions his work as part of a “queer of color critique” (though Ferguson is explicit about his indebtedness to black feminism).<sup>21</sup> This Article, then, treats scholars, activists, and organizations as they have defined themselves.

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18. ROBIN D. G. KELLEY, *FREEDOM DREAMS: THE BLACK RADICAL IMAGINATION* 137 (2002).

19. *Id.*

20. Combahee River Collective, *A Black Feminist Statement*, in *ALL THE WOMEN ARE WHITE, ALL THE BLACKS ARE MEN, BUT SOME OF US ARE BRAVE: BLACK WOMEN’S STUDIES* 13, 13 (Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, & Barbara Smith eds., 1982).

21. RODERICK FERGUSON, *ABERRATIONS IN BLACK: TOWARD A QUEER OF COLOR CRITIQUE* (2003).

Finally, intersectionality is not the exclusive terrain of black feminism, though black feminists have long been invested in examining how structures of domination collide to produce experiences of oppression and identity.<sup>22</sup> Scholar-activists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, among others, have organized their theory and politics around the intimate connections between race, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many of the organizations that I discuss in the first section of this Article, including the Third World Women's Alliance, were explicitly interested in "third world women" coalition building.<sup>24</sup> My historicization does not aim to exclude the broad coalitions that feminists constructed in the early period. Instead, for the purposes of this Article, I limit my historical analysis of intersectionality to black feminism in the hopes of making broader claims about new directions for contemporary black feminist work.

### I. SURVIVAL THEORIES (OR SOME OF US ARE BRAVE): 1968-87

From 1968-87, black feminists used formal organizations as venues to launch theoretical critiques, generate political activism, and produce the texts that have come to form the black feminist canon.<sup>25</sup> While these organizations' goals were, in part, a continuation of black feminist political labor from earlier historical eras, this moment was distinguished by the formation of formal black feminist organizations that were intellectual, political, and emotional "homeplace[s]" for black feminists.<sup>26</sup> In an era marked by the proliferation of

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22. Jasbir Puar writes, "a brief survey of . . . key texts makes clear that intersectionality emerged from the struggles of second wave feminism as a crucial black feminist intervention challenging the hegemonic rubrics of race, class, and gender within predominantly white feminist frames." Puar, *supra* note 2. While Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality"—see Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 139 (1989)—black feminists have long theorized the mutually constitutive nature of race and gender by describing black women's "double jeopardy"—see Beale, *supra* note 3 and King, *supra* note 3—and by analyzing the "metalanguage of race,"—see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race*, 17 *SIGNS* 251, 255 (1992) (arguing that race is a "metalanguage" which "...tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class [and] blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops.").

23. See GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA* (1987); THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR (Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa eds., 1983).

24. See Third World Women's Alliance, *Statement*, in *DEAR SISTERS: DISPATCHES FROM THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT 65* (Rosalyn Baxandall & Linda Gordon eds., 2000).

25. For more on the work of these formal organizations, see SPRINGER, *supra* note 11.

26. BELL HOOKS, *YEARNING: RACE, GENDER, AND CULTURAL POLITICS* 42 (1990). Hooks writes,

Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. . . . [I]t was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace'. . . that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.

feminisms that focused on white women and anti-racist projects that focused on black men, black feminist organizations produced a set of theories, texts, and politics that insisted on the existence—and the importance—of the black female subject's experience. In so doing, black feminists spoke against the prevailing logic of the time, that “all the women are white, all the blacks are men,” and replied boldly with “some of us are brave.”<sup>27</sup>

The most prominent “home truth” that emerged from black feminist organizing during this era was that black women's lives are marked by multiple structures of domination. Long before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality,” black feminist organizations called for the creation of a feminist movement that would study the “manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.”<sup>28</sup> This commitment made black feminists “the first activists in the United States to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class.”<sup>29</sup>

Black feminists' interest in revealing black women's subordinate social, political, as well as *economic* position made analyses of capitalism's injuries central to their critique of white-dominated patriarchy. The Third World Women's Alliance, for example, advocated the creation of “a socialist society where we can live as decent human beings, free from the pressures of racism, economic exploitation, and sexual oppression.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the National Alliance of Black Feminists envisioned a world where black women would “have the right to full social, political, and economic equality.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, black feminists' commitment to studying class was structural; black feminist organizing happened “in the cracks,” on borrowed time and resources. This made capitalism's gendered and racialized effects hyper-visible, a constant reminder of the distinctive injuries that capitalism inflicted on black women's bodies.<sup>32</sup>

For some black feminists, capitalism was seen as the linchpin in the system of domination that oppressed black women. Frances Beale imagined black women's social positions as fundamentally linked to capitalism's unrelenting “attempt[s] by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of all people, and particularly the humanity of black people.”<sup>33</sup> Most significantly, capitalism remade black family life, producing conditions where black men

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*Id.*

27. Here, I am referencing the now canonical edited volume *ALL THE WOMEN ARE WHITE, ALL THE BLACKS ARE MEN, BUT SOME OF US ARE BRAVE: BLACK WOMEN'S STUDIES*, *supra* note 20.

28. The Combahee River Collective, *supra* note 20, at 13.

29. SPRINGER, *supra* note 11, at 2.

30. *Id.* at 116.

31. *Id.* at 117.

32. *Id.* at 2 (“Politics in the cracks, or, hereafter, *interstitial politics*, conveys two meanings for black feminists and their organizations. First, Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) member Linda Burnham notes, black feminists, not unlike activists in other social movements, fit their activism into their daily life schedules whenever possible, serving as full-time, unpaid staff for their organizations.”).

33. Beale, *supra* note 3, at 146.



were unable to locate sufficient paid work in the conventional labor force, and required black women to serve as the family's primary, and sometimes sole, wage-earner. While capitalism forced black women to participate in a racist and sexist paid labor force, it also relegated them to the least desirable work. June Jordan spoke of black women's collective position, "huddle[d] together miserably on the very lowest levels of the economic pyramid. We Black women subsist in the most tenuous economic conditions."<sup>34</sup>

For some black feminists, it was this subversion of the conventional gendered division of labor and relegation of black women to the worst work that was thought to lie at the heart of the "turmoil that we find in the black family structure."<sup>35</sup> Beale's work both suggested that the structure of the economy fundamentally shapes black sexual politics and made a critique of capitalism central to black feminist activism.

While black feminists recognized the importance of class in shaping black female subjects' experiences, and often advocated for socialism as a way of securing black women's liberation, they were reluctant to hang their political hats exclusively on class. The Combahee River Collective, for example, championed socialism, yet conceded that a socialist revolution would not secure black women's liberation unless it was simultaneously "a feminist and antiracist revolution."<sup>36</sup> As black feminist organizations recognized the importance of a rigorous interrogation of capitalism's intimate relationship with black women's subordination, they also documented the limits of single-axis "freedom dreams."

Though critiques of capitalism were central to black feminism during this period, black feminists were also actively interrogating heterosexuality and its contribution to white hetero-patriarchy. Barbara Smith noted, "[t]he notion that struggling against or eliminating racism will completely alleviate Black women's problems does not take into account the way that sexual oppression cuts across all racial, nationality, age, religious, ethnic and class groupings."<sup>37</sup> Smith's interest in the realities of "sexual oppression" highlights the fundamental importance of sexuality as both a category of analysis and a structure of domination that colludes with race, class, and gender to shape black women's experiences.

While black feminists were invested in studying how sexuality shaped all black women's lives, they gave particular attention to the experiences of black lesbian women. Black lesbian subjectivities became fertile theoretical ground for exploring how white racism and black homophobia collaborate, making the black lesbian body the site of intersecting violent discursive projects. Cheryl

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34. June Jordan, *Where is the Love?*, in *MAKING FACE, MAKING SOUL/HACIENDO CARAS: CREATIVE AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES BY WOMEN OF COLOR* 174, 175 (Gloria Anzaldúa ed., 1990).

35. Beale, *supra* note 3, at 146.

36. The Combahee River Collective, *supra* note 20, at 16.

37. Smith, *supra* note 1, at xxix-xxx.

Clarke asserted, “the black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism—like every other nigger in America—and must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black political community, some of whom seem to have forgotten so soon the pain of rejection, denial, and repression sanctioned by racist America.”<sup>38</sup> Clarke’s formulation reveals that black lesbian subjectivity is marked by multiple interlocking structures of domination including race, gender, and white and black homophobia.

By mentioning the importance of sexuality—particularly black lesbian sexuality—to black feminists’ conception of multiple marginalization, I do not mean to ignore the moments when black feminists entrenched the very homophobia they critiqued. Queer sexualities often caused ruptures in radical political movements, and black feminist organizations were not immune to the homophobia that plagued mainstream feminism. Some organizations, like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), were critiqued for their failure to adequately address black feminist homophobia and for their inattention to black lesbian subjectivities. In fact, the Combahee River Collective, which has long been celebrated for its work on the “front lines of black lesbian feminist struggle in the 1970s,” formed in response to the NBFO’s homophobia.<sup>39</sup> Their “simultaneously queer, antiracist, feminist, and socialist” politics might make Combahee more of an outlier rather than a representative of the prevailing perspective, even among black feminist organizations that were explicitly interested in sexuality.<sup>40</sup>

Early articulations of intersectionality studied how race, gender, class, and sexuality collaborated to construct black women’s experiences of subordination. Importantly, this proto-intersectionality’s theoretical approach focused on the *simultaneity* of structures of domination rather than their *interactions*. For example, Barbara Smith argued, “A black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppressions, but instead, demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third World women’s lives.”<sup>41</sup> Rather than examining how structures of domination collaborated, oftentimes imperfectly, or how their intersections shaped subjectivities, each structure of domination was imagined to operate simultaneously, adding to the oppressive weight that black women were thought to shoulder. This approach flagged that structures of domination are fundamentally linked, yet left little room to theorize how they might be co-constitutive, overlapping, or even mediated by each other.

Ultimately, the survival theories proffered by black feminist organizations and activists during the early era focused on the simultaneous oppressions that black women experienced. Black women’s experiences of “multiple jeopardy,”

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38. Cheryl Clarke, *Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance*, in WORDS OF FIRE, *supra* note 3, at 244.

39. SPRINGER, *supra* note 11, at 130.

40. *Id.*

41. Barbara Smith, *Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement*, in WORDS OF FIRE, *supra* note 3, at 256.

their social location at the intersections of multiple structures of domination, were made visible by a group of activists invested in responding to the elisions of black women's narratives and experiences. In so doing, black feminist organizations insisted on crafting a "homeplace" for black women within the parameters of feminism, challenging mainstream feminism's preoccupation with white women's experiences.

## II. WATERSHED MOMENTS: 1988-90

Within a two-year span, two events happened that fundamentally changed the black feminist intellectual landscape.<sup>42</sup> First, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," giving a name and an irresistibly visual metaphor to the practice of studying how structures of domination collaborate to marginalize black women.<sup>43</sup> Second, Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* cemented black feminism's status as an "intellectual tradition" with a distinctive approach for analyzing how race and gender intersect.<sup>44</sup> These two events placed intersectionality at the heart of black feminist scholarship, and cemented black feminism's place in the academy.

While earlier black feminist projects—like the edited volume *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*<sup>45</sup>—aspired to institutionalize "black women's studies," it was these watershed years that saw the institutionalization of women of color studies come to fruition. Ann DuCille captures this moment:

Today there is so much interest in black women that I have begun to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. . . . Within the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier. . . . Why have black women become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation, the peasants under glass of intellectual inquiry in the 1990s?<sup>46</sup>

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42. Significantly, Crenshaw's and Collins's now-canonical pieces were not the only significant publications released in the watershed years. See, e.g., Aída Hurtado, *Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color*, 14 *SIGNS* 833 (1989); King, *supra* note 3. I have chosen to focus on Crenshaw and Collins because of the canonization of their respective works.

43. I am referring to Crenshaw's two now-canonical articles, which developed the concept of intersectionality: Crenshaw, *supra* note 22, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 *STAN. L. REV.* 1241 (1991) [hereinafter Crenshaw, *Mapping*].

44. PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT* 130 (1990).

45. *Supra* note 27.

46. ANN DUCILLE, *SKIN TRADE* 81 (1996).

No longer a form of insurgent “outsider” knowledge produced by activist organizations like the Combahee River Collective or the National Black Feminist Organization, black feminism came to be an integral part of the academy with the (contested) institutionalization of African American Studies and Women’s Studies programs and departments.

If black feminism was moving from “outsider” knowledge to academic practice, intersectionality was becoming central to black feminism’s institutionalization. Crenshaw’s and Collins’s interventions were essential to intersectionality’s prominent theoretical place in black feminism studies, and contributed to black feminism’s installation in the academy. I underscore the centrality of institutionalization to this moment because it is a crucial turning point in the history of both intersectionality and black feminism; the shift from activist organizations to academic departments as loci of black feminist intellectual production meant that intersectionality was no longer simply a “survival theory” insisting on black women’s place in feminism and anti-racist projects. Suddenly, intersectionality was also an intellectual product, one that began to move across disciplinary borders, and that was celebrated as “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far.”<sup>47</sup>

Crenshaw’s and Collins’s respective projects share a set of aims: to include black women in feminist and anti-racist conversations that all too often ignored black women (Crenshaw in legal doctrine and Collins in Sociology and Women’s Studies), and to demonstrate how existing epistemological frameworks are complicated by black women’s intersectional experiences. Both advance the ethical and political utility of adopting black women’s vantage points, suggesting that black women’s intersectional experiences reveal something significant—and otherwise unknown—about power’s workings.

Importantly, the temporal convergence of their respective projects fundamentally shifted intersectionality away from the multiple marginalization approach of the early era. For both Crenshaw and Collins, the race/gender intersection is the centerpiece of intersectional analysis; even as both gesture to the significance of other intersections, sexuality, class, nation, ethnicity, and a host of other structures of domination are under-theorized, if not entirely ignored, by their works. Indeed, both Crenshaw and Collins envision exposing black women’s marginalization as the normative and political goal of intersectionality. Race and gender are imagined to intersect in ways that render black women multiply marginalized subjects whose experiences of the social world are marked by particular forms of subordination. This theoretical move places oppression at the center of black feminist understandings of black female subjectivity, and reifies the view that black women are the quintessential marginalized subjects. Of course, the early years were also

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47. McCall, *supra* note 5, at 1771.

interested in black women's "multiple jeopardy," their social location as multiply marginalized subjects; yet, what distinguishes the watershed years is that black women's experiences become emblematic of the worst forms of marginalization. Rather than attempting to stake out the complexities of black women's lives, black women's experiences become symbolic of the very worst forms of oppression.

Finally, while both Crenshaw and Collins institutionalized the shift from black feminist *theory* to black feminist *thought*, I will focus on how Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* shifted black feminism from a theoretical endeavor to a practice. I argue that this text institutionalized the practice of using intersectionality as the framework to study how the race/gender intersection operates in different cultural sites, rather than interrogating whether intersectionality is always the most useful framework for studying how race and gender collaborate.

#### *Race/Gender and Marginalization as Intersectional Motifs*

Intersectionality's "early years" were marked by the study of how multiple structures of domination shaped black women's lived experiences; Crenshaw's and Collins's work shifted the study of multiple marginalizations from an investigation of race, class, gender, and sexuality to a rigorous exploration of how race and gender collude to constrain black women's lives. For both Crenshaw and Collins, placing black women at the center of an analytical framework was quite significant, particularly in light of mainstream feminist and anti-racist traditions which neglected, and often explicitly ignored, the particularity of black women's gendered *and* racialized injuries.

Crenshaw's work sought to render visible black women's legal injuries, revealing that black female plaintiffs struggle to make discrimination complaints legible to a legal regime structured around race-based injuries *or* gender-based injuries precisely because their experiences of discrimination are often rooted in the interplay of race and gender. Crenshaw illustrated how race and gender discrimination coincide in her intersection analogy:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.<sup>48</sup>

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48. Crenshaw, *supra* note 22, at 149.

Crenshaw's traffic metaphor aspired to dramatically shift legal doctrine, insisting on a way of conceptualizing discrimination that accounts for injuries "in the intersection." As Peter Kwan notes, "what is distinctive about intersectionality is not so much the recognition of multiple identities in specific loci, but the separate political claim that this multiplicity calls for separate theoretical consideration against the grain of cultural and legal orthodoxy."<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Crenshaw's work rendered legible black women's intersectional injuries, injuries so often relegated to the legal periphery, and made those injuries legally cognizable.<sup>50</sup>

While Crenshaw challenged "legal orthodoxy," Collins confronted both feminist orthodoxy and conventional sociology. Collins asserted that while black feminist epistemology overlaps with other feminist intellectual formations, it acts as a unique form of knowledge production because "[i]nstead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination."<sup>51</sup> Like Crenshaw, Collins viewed her intervention as a kind of visibility and recovery project, arguing that knowing "that the minds and talents of our grandmothers, mothers, and sisters have been suppressed [means that] the task of reclaiming Black women's subjugated knowledge takes on special meaning."<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, for Collins, black feminism aspires to recover black women's "subjugated knowledge" and to use it as a basis for studying how structures of domination reinforce each other.<sup>53</sup>

Both Collins and Crenshaw centered their projects on exploring how race and gender interact to shape black women's lives, even as they rhetorically

49. Kwan, *supra* note 15, at 1275 (emphasis omitted).

50. For more on the relationship between intersectionality and visibility, see Jennifer C. Nash, *Love and the Struggle/Loving the Struggle: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality* (June 2011) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

51. COLLINS, *supra* note 44, at 222.

52. *Id.* at 13.

53. Collins distinguishes the "matrix of domination" from intersectionality, suggesting that the "matrix of domination" is more interested in structural questions than intersectionality (intersectionality, she argues, is more concerned with subjectivity). Collins writes:

In this volume, I use and distinguish between both terms [intersectionality and matrix of domination] in examining how oppression affects Black women. Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression.

*Id.* at 18. I find this distinction less compelling than Collins does; in fact, I think both the "matrix of domination" and intersectionality are interested in the ways that structure and subjectivity interact, and in the host of ways that subjects (particularly black women) experience processes of domination. To that end, I will treat the "matrix of domination" and intersectionality interchangeably in this Article.

gestured to the importance of other structures of domination. Crenshaw, for example, insisted that her interest in race/gender was not meant to foreclose the importance of other axes of domination. She noted,

Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here. Indeed, factors I address only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color.<sup>54</sup>

Though she observed the importance of multiple intersections to black women's experiences of identity and oppression, Crenshaw's work effectively neglected other intersections, mentioning them only to relegate them to the analytical periphery.

This "bracketing" strategy—even if undertaken for the purpose of theoretical simplicity—is not unlike a pattern that critical race feminists (including Crenshaw) observed in mainstream feminist legal thought. Angela Harris's persuasive critique of mainstream feminist legal theory, particularly the work of Catharine MacKinnon, revealed that feminist legal theorists routinely evoked race, only to neglect it later. Harris termed this tradition "nuance theory," a strategy that mentions difference to complicate the fundamental position that gender is the best analytic for understanding women's subordination.<sup>55</sup> "Nuance theory" uses black women who are "trotted onto the page (mostly in footnotes) as the ultimate example of how bad things are," the symbol of just how bad gender oppression can be.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Crenshaw's intersectional account used class and sexuality instrumentally, to gesture to a nuanced intersectionality, only to curtail any examination of class and sexuality, effectively reducing black women's experiences to race/gender.<sup>57</sup>

Where Crenshaw bracketed class and sexuality, Collins's work explicitly dealt with class, though treating it as a subsidiary of race and gender. For Collins, class is significant precisely because labor is a fundamental locus of black women's gendered and raced subordination. Though Collins conceded that black women's class positions are heterogeneous, she concluded that "[a]ll African American women encounter the common theme of having our work

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54. Crenshaw, *Mapping*, *supra* note 43, at 1244-45.

55. Angela Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 STAN. L. REV. 581, 595 (1990).

56. *Id.* at 596.

57. Other scholars have noted how class and sexuality, among other categories, have been less important to black feminists. Hawley G. Fogg-Davis argues that the Combahee River Collective's statement "set[ ] in motion the now-common practice of black feminists' nominal inclusion of class and sexuality." Fogg-Davis, *supra* note 16, at 71. While I disagree with Fogg-Davis's periodization (I would place the institutionalization of this practice in the watershed years), her point that sexuality and class have been largely ignored is well-taken.

and family experiences shaped by the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression.”<sup>58</sup> To that end, labor becomes a site where raced and gendered subordination is at its most visible, a space where the matrix of domination operates most severely to disadvantage black women. While Collins treated class as a significant variable that must be studied to understand black women’s experiences, she envisioned class as a by-product of race and gender, as one way to observe “general patterns of race and gender inequality.”<sup>59</sup> To that end, class is *produced* by race and gender, rather than co-constitutive of race and gender, and operates to reinforce race and gender.

While centering black women was a kind of visibility project, it also allowed Crenshaw and Collins to expose black women’s particular experiences of subordination. Their work revealed that black women’s experiences of marginalization are distinctive from those of both white women and black men precisely because black women often experience the combined effects of discrimination. In so doing, both Crenshaw and Collins suggested the inadequacy of existing paradigms which emphasized race-based or gender-based injuries, revealing that “the continued insistence that Black women’s demands and needs be filtered through categorical analyses that completely obscure their experiences guarantees that their needs will seldom be addressed.”<sup>60</sup>

Yet while emphasizing black women’s *particular* experiences of subordination, both Crenshaw and Collins presumed that race and gender work primarily, if not exclusively, to marginalize black women. Indeed, Crenshaw viewed the very work of intersectionality to be that of “unveil[ing] the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them.”<sup>61</sup> Studying black women allows scholars not simply to study how structures of domination operate, but to observe how structures of domination oppress and marginalize black women.

This marginalization framework, while foregrounding the injuries that race and gender inflict on black women’s bodies, presumes that the only relationship between race/gender and the black female subject is one of oppression. In its relentless focus on marginalization, this articulation of intersectionality ignores the host of times where black women’s experiences of race and gender are marked by far more than simply oppression. Certainly the collusion of race and gender often places black women in socially disadvantaged positions; yet the fractures within race and gender can, at times, place black women in positions of social advantage, and the intersection of race/gender with sexuality, class,

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58. COLLINS, *supra* note 44, at 65 (emphasis added).

59. *Id.* at 45.

60. Crenshaw, *supra* note 22, at 149-50.

61. Crenshaw, *Mapping*, *supra* note 43, at 1297.



ethnicity, nation, ability, etc. can place black women in positions of significant social control. Yet the interplay of privilege and oppression, and the complex ways by which multiply marginalized subjects come to negotiate their privileged and subordinated identities, is elided by Crenshaw's and Collins's respective accounts of intersectionality.

Finally, the notion that race and gender work only to marginalize black women treats both race and gender as fixed loci of power that intersect neatly to mark—and to marginalize—black women. By treating race and gender as coherent, stable axes of domination, both Crenshaw's and Collins's accounts understate the contingency and contextuality of identity, the variety of ways that race and gender are experienced differently in distinctive contexts and historical moments. Because both accounts treat race and gender as fundamentally fixed constructions (rather than as dynamic, fluid, contextual constructions), they treat the race/gender intersection as a coherent and legible site of injury, rather than as shifting, slippery, highly contextual collisions of axes of domination.

Of course, the earlier years were also invested in black women's experiences of "multiple jeopardy" and simultaneous oppression. However, these articulations of intersectionality had a *descriptive* emphasis, seeking to insert black women's voices into feminist and anti-racist conversations that had excluded them. During the watershed years, when scholars like Crenshaw sought to respond to a doctrinal framework that excluded black women, an emphasis on black women's multiple marginalization was used to reveal a doctrinal gap: the failure of law to account for race- and gender-based discrimination. By insisting on black women's multiple marginalization, the "watershed years" treated black women's multiple marginalization *symbolically*, entrenching the idea that black women's lived experiences can be equated with—and only with—marginalization.

### *From Theory to Thought*

While the watershed years institutionalized intersectionality as the study of race/gender, this era also inaugurated a critical transformation in black feminist studies. Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* suggested that black feminism centers on "theories created by African-American women which clarify a Black women's standpoint" (something that Collins would clarify further in the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought* where she conceptualizes black feminism as "critical social theory").<sup>62</sup> While emphasizing black feminism's

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62. COLLINS, *supra* note 44, at 15, 31. It is hard to overstate the significance of Collins's book, though the publication of a tenth anniversary second edition suggests its popularity. The text has received a number of awards (including the Society for the Study of Social Problems C. Wright Mills Award and the Association of Black Women Historians Letitia Woods Brown Memorial Book Prize) and portions of the text have been excerpted in an interdisciplinary array of anthologies including

theoretical contributions, the book engaged in an interesting—and largely unnoticed—slip: from black feminist *theory* to black feminist *thought*.<sup>63</sup> That is, Collins's text sought *not* to engage with black feminism as a theoretical project, one which provides a set of tools and frameworks for subjecting the social world to critical scrutiny, but instead as a fixed set of thoughts or observations. *Black Feminist Thought*, then, became a catalogue of areas that interest black feminism rather than a theoretical text providing tools for studying those areas and suggesting that those areas might be sites that could be analyzed or interpreted in myriad ways.

The significance of this slip extends far beyond the title of Collins's book, and permeates her project in foundational and unanalyzed ways. *Black Feminist Thought* presumes a theoretical framework—intersectionality—and catalogues cultural sites where the race/gender intersection is most visible. These cultural sites, including sexuality and motherhood, Collins argues, produce black women's common stock of experiences. Black feminism, then, traces how these cultural spaces are central to the entrenchment of racialized sexism. Collins's work presumes that particular cultural sites are significant because they are areas in which intersecting structures of domination are visible, yet elides the issue of how domination is actually crafted within these sites. For Collins, then, intersectionality (or the "matrix of domination" as she calls it) becomes an un-interrogated fact rather than an object of critical scrutiny.

This approach, while usefully demonstrating the omnipresence of raced and gendered intersections, assumes that intersectionality operates in the same way *across* cultural spaces, rather than studying the particular articulations of intersectionality in distinct social locations. More than that, it presumes that intersectionality is the normatively desirable method for studying *all* cultural practices, rather than one of the many tools scholars could use to study how race and gender interact. To prove the operation of the matrix of domination, Collins turns to black women's collective experiences, arguing that "[k]nowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate."<sup>64</sup> The fact that (some) oppressed people experience the matrix of domination validates that the matrix exists, and forecloses any questions about the varieties of ways that the matrix is created, replicated, or even variously experienced.

In some ways, the move from theory to thought is unsurprising. Black feminist critiques of conventional notions of theory are long-standing; while the

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FEMINIST THEORY READER: LOCAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES (Carole McCann & Seung-Kyung Kim eds., 2002), CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY READINGS IN SOCIOLOGY (Ian Marsh, Rosie Campbell & Mike Keating eds., 1998), MAKING VIOLENCE SEXY: FEMINIST VIEWS ON PORNOGRAPHY (Diana E.H. Russell ed., 1993), WOMEN: IMAGES AND REALITIES (Amy Kesslerman, Lily McNair, & Nancy Schniedewind eds., 2006). It is, quite simply, a text that has fundamentally influenced fields across the humanities and social sciences.

63. COLLINS, *supra* note 44, at 15.

64. *Id.* at 208.

conventional academy has posited theory as objective, black feminist scholars have crafted theory from experiential knowledge and from the realities of daily life.<sup>65</sup> By collapsing the distinction between theory and experience, black feminism contests the idea that theory need be—or could ever be—a neutral and detached enterprise. Moreover, theory has long been thought to be abstract, esoteric, and inaccessible to the general population, something that black feminism has contested by crafting theory both rooted in experiential realities and written in accessible ways. Collins suggests that theory's abstractness often serves a social purpose: "Educated elites typically claim that only they are qualified to produce theory and believe that only they can interpret not only their own but everyone else's experiences."<sup>66</sup> Instead, Collins endeavors to "examine the complexity of ideas that exist . . . and present those ideas in a way that made them not less powerful or rigorous but accessible."<sup>67</sup> To that end, black feminist projects often reference theoretical traditions—postmodernism, queer theory, feminism, sociological theory, Marxism—without deploying the jargon of those traditions, in an attempt to reveal how subjects are engaged in theory-making all the time.

This subtle shift from theory to thought has aided black feminists in locating a set of sites of interest, and has allowed them to use intersectionality as the lens through which to view these sites. Yet this approach has left intersectionality as black feminism's theoretical constant, rather than something that is actively questioned: do subjects experience their lives—including sexuality and reproduction—intersectionally? As a number of "post-intersectional" scholars have asked, how do we even know that intersection is an accurate metaphor for identity *or* for how structures of domination coincide?<sup>68</sup> Is it *always* the best metaphor to use, or are there others that we can—and should—deploy? And, how do we know when intersectionality is the metaphor we should be using to study identity, and when we should be using other metaphors or analytics?

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65. For the most famous black feminist critique of theory, see Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory." Christian argues:

[S]ome of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, women, Third World) have been influenced, even co-opted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation. . . . For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?

Barbara Christian, *The Race for Theory*, 14 FEMINIST STUDIES 67, 68 (1988).

66. COLLINS, *supra* note 44, at xii.

67. *Id.*

68. For an elaboration of this critique, see Staunæs, *supra* note 5, at 101-10. For more on intersectionality as a metaphor, see Ann Garry, *Intersectionality, Metaphors, and the Multiplicity of Gender*, 10 HYPATIA 1 (2011).

The watershed years were significant for moving intersectionality into the intellectual mainstream. Intersectionality's current interdisciplinary popularity owes a tremendous debt to Crenshaw and Collins, whose work showed the importance of theorizing race/gender for a host of disciplines and transformed intersectionality from outsider knowledge into the preeminent interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach for studying identity and power. Yet this era also ushered intersectionality away from its preoccupation with multiple marginalization towards a preoccupation with race/gender marginalization, and inaugurated the practice of treating intersectionality as black feminism's method, rather than querying under what conditions intersectionality might be analytically useful.

### III. BEYOND OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS: HIP HOP FEMINISMS 1999-PRESENT

Third wave black feminism has distinguished itself as a particular iteration of contemporary feminism, one which treats black popular culture as a set of texts that "convey valuable, transferable messages for activists working around gender, race, and class in U.S. Black communities."<sup>69</sup> Hip hop feminism, one articulation of third wave black feminism, uses hip hop—broadly defined as a form of black popular culture—as a point of departure for studying black sexual politics.<sup>70</sup> In so doing, hip hop feminists endeavor to craft a "functional" feminism, a relevant and grounded feminism that connects theoretical and activist projects.<sup>71</sup>

Hip hop feminism often takes an ostensible paradox as a point of departure: how can black feminists make sense of their enjoyment of a genre that, at least in its mainstream form, is often condemned for its misogyny and homophobia? Joan Morgan, who coined the term "hip hop feminist," locates herself in this contradictory position:

Lord knows our love jones for hip-hop is understandable. . . . But in between the beats, booty shaking, and hedonistic abandon, I have to wonder if there isn't something inherently unfeminist in supporting a music that repeatedly reduces me to tits and ass and encourages pimping on the regular.<sup>72</sup>

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69. Kimberly Springer, *Third Wave Black Feminism?*, 27 SIGNS 1059, 1060 (2002). For more on third wave feminism, see R. Claire Snyder, *Third Wave Feminism?: A New Directions Essay*, 34 SIGNS 175 (2008).

70. See Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *An Interview with Gwendolyn D. Pough*, 29 CALLALOO 808 (2006).

71. JOAN MORGAN, WHEN CHICKENHEADS COME HOME TO ROOST: MY LIFE AS A HIP HOP FEMINIST 76 (1999).

72. *Id.* at 66.

Hip hop feminists negotiate this paradox by treating hip hop as a rich site for cultural analysis; they study hip hop as a space where racialized and gendered scripts are explicitly negotiated, and as a site that is *both* a “battlefield”<sup>73</sup> and a place where “young black women [can] express their race and ethnic identities . . . to critique racism.”<sup>74</sup> The work of hip hop feminism, then, is to offer a critical analysis of hip hop’s representation of black women’s bodies, and to stage loving interventions into one of the main cultural spaces where black sexual politics are explicitly discussed.<sup>75</sup>

Intersectionality is central to hip hop feminism’s analytical and political labor. Indeed, central to this scholarly tradition is tracing the prevalence of “controlling images” in hip hop, documenting representational strategies which reduce black women to an “unproblematized and stereotyped motif.”<sup>76</sup> Joan Morgan’s analysis of the “strongblackwoman”<sup>77</sup>—a trope which encourages black women “[n]o matter how bad shit gets, [to] handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity”—and Gwendolyn Pough’s study of the “ghetto girl motif”<sup>78</sup> are emblematic of this approach. Both contend that race and gender collude to constrain representational (and auditory) space for displaying complex black female subjectivities, and both suggest that race and gender operate to mark black female subjectivities in particular and pernicious ways.

Moreover, hip hop feminists contend that these representational tropes serve particular political ends in hip hop. Morgan argues that the “strongblackwoman” trope bolsters hetero-patriarchy by keeping black women quiet about the violence inflicted upon them by the state, by patriarchal power, by white dominance, and, at times, by black men. As Morgan notes, “Black women are not impervious to pain. We’re simply adept at *surviving*.”<sup>79</sup> The call to “survival,” Morgan reveals, is one that encourages a cultural blindness to black women’s pain. Similarly, Pough argues that the “ghetto girl” image is underpinned by the notion that black women are a threat to black male authority. In reading this “controlling image” as actually one that attempts to visually and discursively tame black women, Pough argues that “[i]f Black men see Black women as a threat, it is easy to see why, even when they begin to tell

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73. Joan Morgan, *Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes: Notes of a Hip-Hop Feminist*, 45 SOC. TEXT 151, 153 (1995).

74. Whitney A. Peoples, “*Under Construction*”: *Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges Between Second Wave and Hip Hop Feminisms*, 8 MERIDIANS 19, 21 (2007).

75. More recently, hip hop feminists have also talked about a more expansive conception of hip hop feminist politics, one that includes critiquing the prison industrial complex and calling attention to HIV/AIDS within black communities.

76. GWENDOLYN D. POUGH, CHECK IT WHILE I WRECK IT: BLACK WOMANHOOD, HIP-HOP CULTURE, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE 129 (2004).

77. MORGAN, *supra* note 71, at 90.

78. POUGH, *supra* note 76, at 128.

79. *Id.* at 104.

Black women's stories and bring them out of the margins, they get it all wrong."<sup>80</sup>

More than that, though, hip hop feminists attend to the *pleasures*—albeit ambivalent pleasures—that performers take in negotiating the fraught terrain of representation, and forging identities in that terrain. As intersectionality enables hip hop feminists to study how race and gender intersect to produce particular representational tropes, it also allows them to examine how black performers self-fashion, crafting rich and complex performances of self which borrow from “controlling images” *and* contest them. Black female hip-hop performers struggle against “the old images of the sexually promiscuous Black woman, and the prone pussy-power-wielding women of the recent past, [and now] we have the bitches, hos, stunts, skeezers, hoochies, pigeons, chickenheads, and baby mamas put forth by Black men rappers.”<sup>81</sup> The labor of hip hop feminists, then, is to analyze how black performers construct their own images in a visual field saturated by representations that draw on intersecting racialized *and* gendered ideologies to secure notions of black women's sexual alterity.

With all of this attention to how race and gender collaborate, one might expect intersectionality—as a term—to permeate hip hop feminist scholarship. Yet, intersectionality has become the *implicit* tool in this inquiry, allowing hip hop feminists to study how race and gender coincide to mark the bodies of black female performers, and to analyze how performers can upset and even subvert the simultaneous injuries of race and gender. While intersectionality has become the primary analytic that hip hop feminists use to understand hip hop's representational strategies, intersectionality's deployment by hip hop feminists has become so commonplace as to be invisible. The invisible omnipresence of intersectionality within the analytical framework of hip hop feminism has meant that intersectionality has become virtually synonymous with hip hop feminism. Indeed, intersectionality's status as a *methodological approach* that may be deployed by scholars has been elided; instead, intersectionality has become the primary approach that hip hop feminist scholars use to study contemporary black cultural production.

The version of intersectionality that has been institutionalized by these scholars closely resembles the theoretical endeavors of the “watershed years.” While race/gender is at the center of hip hop feminist investigations, other questions—questions which are arguably central to understanding black cultural production in a globalized era—have not been central to the hip hop feminist agenda, including queer hip hop, the interaction between hip hop and the state, and the intersections of hip hop and the global marketplace.<sup>82</sup>

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80. *Id.* at 136.

81. *Id.* at 74.

82. Whitney Peoples notes that “[a]ny discussion of the circulation of hip-hop culture in the American and global mainstream that does not address the political economy of the culture and the demands of the capitalist marketplace is incomplete.” Peoples, *supra* note 74, at 23. There are some

Where this version of intersectionality parts company with earlier articulations is around the question of marginalization. While Crenshaw and Collins analyzed the race/gender intersection as conferring subordinate status on the black female subject, hip hop feminists investigate the representational tight rope that black female hip hop performers walk, documenting how they play with sexualized scripts and perform hypersexuality in ways that sometimes upset and sometimes reify racial mythologies.<sup>83</sup> Pough captures this strain of thought,

Lil' Kim or Foxy Brown . . . do represent a kind of space where they are claiming this public sexual identity in ways that we may have seen in small spurts before, but we really haven't seen because of the politics of silence surrounding black women and sexuality. So, I'm not going to say that theirs is a totally positive image, but in a lot of ways they represent a space of freedom . . . .<sup>84</sup>

Pough's analysis retains a focus on the race/gender intersection, but pushes beyond marginalization to ask how race/gender operate to both constrain *and* enable black sexual imaginations.

Ultimately, intersectionality has so permeated hip-hop feminist scholarship as to be foundational, effectively naturalizing an intersectional approach as the predominant way of studying hip-hop's representational strategies, meanings, and social consequences. It is precisely because intersectionality has become the prevailing method of hip-hop feminist scholarship that it need not even be described as the method underpinning hip-hop feminist scholarship. Yet intersectionality's invisibility also supports its primacy during this period, leaving its status as *one* method among the many that black feminists can use to study black cultural production, invisible.

#### IV. "HOMETRUTHS" FOR A NEW DECADE

This Article has traced three moments in black feminism's history with intersectionality, revealing that what started as a broad concept analyzing the intimate connections among many structures of domination has become institutionalized as the primary tool used to study how race and gender interact to marginalize black women. In recent years, intersectionality has become so

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important exceptions to this trend, as discussed in a set of texts that address the significance of global capitalism to hip hop. See, e.g., Aisha Durham, *Using [Living Hip-Hop] Feminism: Redefining an Answer (to) Rap*, in HOME GIRLS MAKE SOME NOISE: HIP HOP FEMINISM ANTHOLOGY 304, 304-12 (Gwendolyn D. Pough et al. eds., 2007).

83. For more on this representational tight rope, see SHAYNE LEE, *EROTIC REVOLUTIONARIES: BLACK WOMEN, SEXUALITY, AND POPULAR CULTURE* (2010); Mireille Miller-Young, *Hip Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography*, 8 MERIDIANS 261 (2008).

84. Carpenter, *supra* note 70, at 808-09.

intertwined with black feminism that it has become virtually synonymous with black feminism. The invisible presence of intersectionality within contemporary hip hop feminism enables particular kinds of questions about black female subjectivities to be asked, but leaves other questions unanswerable. These are precisely the questions that related fields, like queer of color studies, have begun to take up.

As some forms of black feminism have come to incorporate a narrow intersectionality into the heart of their theoretical work, fields like queer of color studies have taken up the mantle of multiple marginalization studies, expanding an analysis of structures of domination to include capitalism, neoliberalism, homophobia, and globalization alongside sexism and racism. Roderick Ferguson's "queer of color critique," for example, explicitly draws on black feminism "as inspiration for intersectional analyses of nonheteronormative racial formations."<sup>85</sup> Yet Ferguson pushes beyond black feminism's interest in the race/gender intersection to analyze the intimate relationship between race, gender, and sexuality. Similarly, Rinaldo Walcott claims Audre Lorde as an antecedent of the "new black queer theory," asserting that Lorde's work "lies at the nexus of diaspora consciousness, queer studies, and feminism."<sup>86</sup> In so doing, Walcott urges queer of color studies to "retain its engagement with feminist of color critics of gender and sexuality" as they precede—at least temporally—the emergence of a "new" black queer theory.<sup>87</sup> Both Ferguson and Walcott's interventions suggest that queer of color studies has situated itself as the inheritor of early black feminism's intellectual and political legacy, explicitly locating continuities with Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective rather than Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. It is the early era's broad conception of intersectionality—which attended to a panoply of intersections (most notably, race, gender, and sexuality)—that contemporary queer of color studies scholarship draws on.

While the intellectual labor of multiple marginalization theory has often been taken up by scholars working in fields related to black feminism, the task of interrogating intersectionality's utility—asking if considering the *intersections* of race and gender is, indeed, the only way to consider their *interaction*—remains incomplete. In the spirit of uncoupling intersectionality and black feminism, I want to suggest a few ways of *doing* black feminist work beyond intersectionality. My inquiry is not motivated by a desire to dispose of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological tool. Instead, I am interested in the theoretical possibilities that might be revealed if

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85. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality*, 23 *SOC. TEXT* 85, 85 (2005).

86. Rinaldo Walcott, *Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory*, in *BLACKNESSES AND SEXUALITIES* 29, 36 (Michelle Wright & Antje Schuhmann eds., 1997).

87. *Id.* at 38.



intersectionality became one tool in a larger black feminist theoretical arsenal rather than the only tool deployed by black feminists.

First, uncoupling black feminism and intersectionality acts as an invitation for black feminism to engage in the project of charting the situationality of identity. Post-intersectionality scholars have routinely gestured to the contingency and contextuality of identity, revealing that particular contexts bring distinctive aspects of all subjects' identities to the forefront.<sup>88</sup> Studying how our senses of self shift situationally would allow us to interrogate intersectionality's utility, and to query *when* or *under what conditions* subjects' lived experiences of identity are best captured by intersectionality and when they are not. Moreover, analyzing the situationality of identity further disrupts intersectionality's tendency to treat race and gender as coherent, fixed, and stable structures of domination. Instead, a study of the situationality of identity highlights the ways that race and gender are themselves fluid, incoherent "assemblages."<sup>89</sup>

Second, a rigorous re-thinking of intersectionality would allow black feminists to ask about moments where race and gender (among other categories) *fail* to seamlessly buttress each other. As Crenshaw noted at the National Women's Studies Association Conference's celebration of her work, some situations, injuries, or harms *are* race-based *or* gender-based, requiring us to ask: When do race and gender, as technologies of power, have colliding strategies of hegemony? What are the moments when race and gender's respective strategies of dominance frustrate each other? When do their attempts to create collision result in imperfect convergences? Theorizing the conditions that permit race and gender (and other categories) to intersect would allow us to better understand the mechanisms by which structures of domination are bolstered and reproduced.

Finally, while intersectionality has focused black feminist attention on thinking about intersections, it has offered little space for considering how various structures of domination are connected, and through what social processes these connections originate and replicate themselves. Collins wrote, "The Black feminist attention to the interlocking nature of oppression . . . shifts the entire focus of investigation from one aimed at explicating elements of race or gender or class oppression to one whose goal is to determine what

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88. See Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *New Complexity Theories: From Theoretical Innovation to Doctrinal Reform*, 71 UMKC L. REV. 431, 436 (2002); Kwan, *supra* note 15, at 1277 ("Each person is composed of a complex and unique matrix of identities that shift in time, is never fixed, is constantly unstable and forever distinguishable from that of everyone else in the universe."); Nash, *supra* note 9 ("Instead, treating intersectionality as a metaphor invites us to test the concept empirically, placing our theory into conversation with lived experiences of subjectivity. It also encourages us to consider precisely the moments when our intersection metaphor is imperfect. We can begin to ask questions like: . . . What are the social, historical, and contextual conditions that give rise to us experiencing identity in a multi-axis way? How do intersectionality and the contextuality of identity intersect?")

89. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Queer Times, Queer Assemblages*, 23 SOC. TEXT 121 (2005).

the links are among these systems.”<sup>90</sup> Yet, black feminism has simply used intersectionality to document the presence of links between structures of domination, with little investigation of the nature of these links, their durability, contours, and constitution. Uncoupling black feminism and intersectionality would allow black feminists to study the nature of structures of domination themselves, and how they depend (sometimes unsuccessfully) on each other.

Ultimately, this Article emphasizes that intersectionality is a *product* of black feminism, one method that black feminists have developed to study how black women experience identity, rather than the primary method black feminists can use to study identity. Intersectionality has usefully revealed particular “home truths”—namely, that race and gender collide in particular ways under particular conditions to mark the experiences of black women—and it has provided an intellectual and political “homeplace” for black feminists to organize and theorize. Yet my concern is that the current institutionalization of intersectionality oftentimes elides how its contours and content have been transformed through black feminist struggle, and that intersectionality continues to be reimagined and reformulated by scholars working in an array of disciplines.

By exposing intersectionality’s status as *one* black feminist framework, this Article endeavors to unsettle intersectionality’s theoretical primacy and to invite continued creative theoretical innovation. If the work of black feminism is “dealing in ‘home truths,’” speaking about the truths of black women’s varied experiences and destabilizing white heteropatriarchy, we have to add far more theoretical and methodological tools to our arsenal. Certainly intersectionality has provided us with a “home truth,” a platform from which we can study identity and power; but it need not be, and cannot be, the only “home truth” we use to describe and analyze power’s workings.

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90. Collins, *supra* note 5, at S20.