POLLUTED NARRATIVES: THE CONSEQUENCES FEMINISM HAD ON BLACK WOMEN IN THE ACADEMICS

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ANTH 3230: Woman, Culture and Society
March 30th, 2022

In the final submission of our journals, the topic that I discussed was the female working experience and how woman have their own stories to share concerning discrimination and violence. However, after submitting the assignment, I came across an article Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote for the Washington Post. She urged readers on the urgency of intersectionality and why it can't wait (Crenshaw, 2015). Crenshaw, in her piece, spoke about how black women's race and gender often intersect in ways that cause extreme cases of discrimination in the workforce (Crenshaw, 2015, 3). Since her concept came from using a black women's lived experience, she urged readers, when using her terminology always, to remember the black women's experience since they are always left in the margins (Crenshaw, 2015, 3). After reading the article, I soon realized that my last journal concerning working women didn't speak about a black woman's work experience and how they face serious obstacles based on their race and gender. I was too caught up in uncovering as many stories as possible regarding female workplace violence that I completely forgot about using an intersectional lens. Therefore, Crenshaw is correct in the urgency of intersectionality because I, too, looked over the black experience in my journal writing. However, after recognizing my mistake, I realized that other academics made the same mistakes, such as Gillis and Munford, who failed to address black women in their piece on the waves of Feminism (Gillis and Munford 2004). Their article discussed how the second and third waves of feminism are being used interchangeably and how some tensions may arise from this viewpoint (Gillis and Minford 2004, 1). However, black women and their experiences were left out in their piece, making them seem invisible in a movement supposed to liberate all women.

Invisibility is an idea that has been brought up in week four concerning Rollins's work when she states how black domestic workers feel a sense of non-existence in their workplace by both the husband and wife of the family (Rollins 1997, 256). At the time of Rollins's work, the

second wave of feminism was already underway (1984); therefore, it seems puzzling that a privileged white woman is treating another woman with such distaste. These ideas allowed me to connect weeks four and seventeen because it appears to be a common theme within early feminist discourses that leave out the lived experiences of black women. After digging into this concept more, I realized that feminism often depicted black women's presence as an endangerment to their cause, an entity that could pollute their victories (Douglas 1984, 2). Mary Douglas' hypotheses in *Purity and Danger* helped me come to the conclusion because her ideas of pollution resemble the moral panic early white feminists had regarding their hesitancy to include black women in feminism. A profound example of this scenario is back women in academics. Many ethnographies and interviews that I have come across when doing my research have delved deep into black women's academic injustices and the struggles they faced during the waves of feminism (Henry 1995; Williams 2020; Bolles 2013).

This essay then argues that the early feminist movement in North America has historically failed black female educators because their presence is a polluted threat to the rights gained by white women in the academy. As a result, black women were often marginalized within the academy and not given a seat at the table because the victories won by a white woman did not pertain to the black woman within the workforce. I will begin my essay by speaking about Douglas' ideas surrounding purity and danger and how this idea permeated early feminist discourses regarding white feminism's exclusion of black bodies in the North American workforce. Next, I will look at the experiences black female educators face due to the pollution discourse and how they must constantly fight against racism and sexism in the academy. To conclude, I will talk about the "Cite Black Woman" movement in anthropology and how these

female educators are actively working to abolish the pollution binary established in the feminist movement and give black female educators the seat they deserve in the academy.

Douglas states that pollution works when people, places and institutions try to influence another behaviour, for example, when someone tells a person not to sit next to someone because they are dirty (Douglas 1984, 2). In other words, when discussing the pollution discourse, it relies on socially constructed ideas of certain bodies being socially and physically inferior. Which then categorizes them as a dirty threat to society. Having this discourse in motion allows groups of people to classify themselves as better and, therefore, justifies varying types of discrimination because a class of people sees themselves as righteous, pure citizens compared to the outliers of society. Pollution, therefore, is used as a metaphor for expressing social order and social hierarchies of power (Douglas 1984, 2). Douglas uses the illustration of the Caste system to show the pollution discourse at play and how people justify racism based on the binary of clean and pure. For example, in the case of the Brahmin and Untouchables, the Brahmin class won't touch anything from the lower class because that could pollute their bodies (Douglas 1984, 34). If they were to be touched by the untouchables, the Brahmin must clean themselves right away because they must get their polluted presence off their bodies as soon as possible (Douglas 1984, 33).

Douglas's ideas were foundational in helping me understand the erasure of black bodies in the early stages of feminism. It was evident that the lack of black women in the feminist movement had to do with racist ideologies of white purity and supremacy. bell hooks describe this imposition by explaining how feminism does not have a unified narrative because the scope of feminism has constantly struggled in unifying what the rights baring women look like (hooks 1984, 18). For example, in the early days of feminism, women fought for equality among the

gender divide; however, when fighting for gender equality, the battle was staged in a society that idealized whiteness. (hooks 1984, 19). Therefore, race plays a vital role in women's liberation. It should also be noted that white women wanted the same rights as white men, not black men, further justifying the exclusion of black women (hooks 1984, 19). When analyzing the victories won by white middle-class women, it's easy to see how they won't trickle down to the working-class black woman because they have been alienated in the movement because of their polluted race and gender (hooks 1984, 19). During the heydays of feminism, racialized women were reluctant to prescribe to the movement because they saw it as a white woman's cause since they didn't do much to help black women (hooks 1984, 24).

Another issue within feminism was that black women were already working when white women demanded space in the workforce. For example, black women for centuries have been working as domestic workers before white women were demanding jobs (Rollins 1997). This practice of the black domestic worker has been at play since the early nineteenth century and has continued well into the first wave of feminism (Rollins 1997, 256). Black women, for years, have been exploited in the homes of white women, working for measly wages to help their families get by. As such, it seems hypocritical that white women were fighting for a spot in the labour market while at the same time they were exploiting black women for their labour in their homes (Rollins 1984, 256). James Baldwin explains this scenario perfectly when he states that the inner eye of white America is unable to see black people because it considers them as not fully human (Rollins 1984, 257). Therefore, when looking at monumental feminist moments in history, such as the Houston Woman's Conference, they looked at women's issues using the white eye of America. When they referred to including women in the labour market, they only had white women in mind (hooks 1984, 21).

As the feminist movement got momentum, women slowly entered the workforce, one area being the teaching profession (Henry 1995). As such, the feminist movement did prove victorious for the white working woman because she could soon incorporate herself into the world of teaching. Nevertheless, as more white women become teachers, it will still be challenging for black women to become teachers, let alone professionals. In her 1995 ethnography, Annette Henry wrote about the hardships black women face while working in academics through the lived experience of a black elementary school teacher named Ese (Henry 1995). Henry works intersectionally when creating this ethnography because she sees black women's lived experiances through the intersections of race and gender (Henry 1995, 280). Black women are often left out of black history because of the black male perspective, and black females are also left out of feminist discourse because of the white woman. Therefore, Henrys' work tries to fill in the gaps regarding the missing information about black schoolteachers (Henry 1995, 281). Ese is a Caribbean-born woman who later moved to England, where her mother worked various factory jobs to help their family get by (Henry 1995, 283).

When she moved to England, she would be enrolled at a predominantly white school, where she would later be bullied daily by her classmates and teachers (Henry 1995, 284). Eses' teachers were mainly white women, and she stated that when teachers saw her getting picked on, they would often look the other way (Henry 1995, 284). As she moved through the school system, she would constantly face sexism and racism because her identity as a black female student proved to be a threat to her predominantly white school (Henry 1995, 386). Nevertheless, as Ese grew older, she knew that she wanted to become a teacher because all her life, she only saw black women either as domestic or factory workers (Henry 1995, 288). Therefore, Ese got herself two degrees, one in education and the other in social work, and soon enough, she became

an elementary school teacher (Henry 1995, 287). However, when becoming a teacher, she soon realized that the same ridicule she received as a young black student continued, but this time from her white colleagues (Henry 1995, 283). They resented Ese because she was finally in a space where she belonged, but the white teachers felt her presence was unwanted and threatened their teaching territory. I decided to add Henry's ethnography because Ese's lived experience is a testament to black women's difficulties in the academy, and it also shows Douglas' purity discourse at play. In the schoolyard as a kid, she was ridiculed because her presence as a black child threatened the white schoolyard, and therefore, like the Untouchables, no one wanted to play with Ese. However, as she grew up, the school was still an unwelcoming place, as seen by the white teacher's distaste for Ese making her life as a black teacher much more difficult.

Black school teachers are also often tasked to do more work than their white colleagues because they must actively prove their worthiness in the academy (Bolles 2013, 57). This idea is what Bolles refers to as double jeopardy since black women's intersecting identities make it hard for them to succeed in the academy (Bolles 2013, 57). Dr. Johnnetta Betoch Cole is another example of the struggles black teachers face in the academy since she was always fighting against racism and sexism within anthropology (Williams 2020, 118). When receiving her doctrine in anthropology, Dr. Cole was one out of eight African Americans to have a Ph.D. in anthropology (Williams 2020, 119). Dr. Cole explained that she decided to pursue anthropology as a doctrine because, as an undergraduate, she found that all areas of studies lack black female representation (Willaims 2021, 120). In black studies, the academics didn't talk about women, and in women studies, the academics didn't speak about blackness (Williams 2021, 120). She thus believed that anthropology was her best option to help her uncover and locate inequality and participate in finding a cure for sexist racism in the academy (Williams 2020, 120).

Dr. Cole took a significant chance pursuing anthropology because no space had ever been granted to a black woman in anthropology (Williams 2020, 121). Therefore, much of her career was dedicated to social justice work, either with her students, at school or in her personal life (Williams 2020, 123). In this sense, Dr. Cole was working the same way Ese was as a black schoolteacher because both teachers needed to create their own space in the academy, and by doing so, they were also creating space for future black students. The fight these two women went through directly correlates to the white feminist movement because, as illustrated, they gave black educators no room within the academic world of teaching. As such, both Ese and Dr. Cole needed to push the boundaries of race and gender and help showcase that their presence in the academy isn't a polluted threat but rather a necessary reality.

The struggle for visibility within the academic world is still a struggle for many black female educators. Both the lived experiences of Ese and Dr. Cole have shown this predicament. However, as essential as their stories are in uncovering the prejudices that function in the academy, especially regarding the distaste other white female educators have given them. Black female educators are still constantly fighting to be active agents at the academic table. Sociology professor Whitney Pirtle shares this scenario during her second-year teaching at the University of California and her experience at one of her educational meetings (Pirtle 2021). Pirtle, running late for one of her team meetings, was denied a spot at the meeting by one of her work colleagues as he would not move his leg to allow her to sit in the vacant seat next to him (Pirtle 2021, 180). She repeatedly tried to gain his attention, but after many failed attempts, her only option was to sit in a chair far removed from the table, symbolizing that she did not have a seat at the academic table (Pirtle 2021, 180). Being a black female educator, Pirtle felt "excluded, alienated and belittled" because no one helped her gain the man's attention, nor did anyone care

that she had to sit so far away (Pirtle 2021, 181). The story Pirtle shares are symbolic in many ways; first, it helps showcase how feminism failed black women because they must still continually prove their presence valid in the workforce. It also helps indicate that other teachers and academics still feel a sense of disgust or uneasiness; having black educators around them thus illustrates that their presence is still an unwanted polluted threat.

Lynn Bolles, another academic, felt the same way as Pirtle. She felt that her colleagues never gave her or other black female academics the proper credit for their work due to lacking citations in anthropology papers (Bolles 2013). Citations, to Bolles, are essential components of all academic papers. The use of citations helps show a sense of respect for the author's written work and recognizes their scholarly contributions, which can then start a conversation in the academic community (Bolles 2013, 67). A lack of black female citations in academic papers illustrates that the community still has no respect or space for black females' intellectual capabilities. Bolles, in her argument, points to white feminism as the main culprit for this situation in anthropology. Before, men were the active voices in anthropology.

Nevertheless, with the rise of feminist anthropology, more white women began entering the field, thus altering the male-dominated profession to accept woman's intellectual thought (Bolles 2013, 60). However, as indicated earlier, feminism did not pertain to the black women's lived experience, especially regarding their right to work. Therefore, when feminist anthropology started, white supremacy and privilege barred black women from entering the field because white women did not warmly welcome their academic thought (Bolles 2013, 60). Recall, Dr. Cole was one out of eight black female educators in America to have a Ph.D. in anthropology in 1967 and around that time, feminism was already in its second wave (Williams 2020, 118).

Bolles uses the example from two prominent feminist anthropological texts released respectively from 1975-1975 titled, *Woman Culture and Society* and *Towards Anthropology of Woman* (Bolles 2013 65). Both books were groundbreaking textbooks for feminist anthropology, but they lacked black representation in their citations and contributions (Bolles 2013, 65). The black female academic community especially criticized Sherry Ortner's work regarding her use of gender asymmetry, which saw her homogenizing the lived experiences of all women and their subordination (Bolles 2013, 65). Since black female academics were outsiders within their anthropological field, the "Cite Black Woman" was initiated (Smith and Garrett 2021, 23). Anthropologist Christen Smith founded the organization after heavy critics she gave the academics for their lack of citations within their work (Cite Black Woman 2022). With her fellow black academics, Smith created a five-step resolution plan that will help open the gap for more black citations in academic literature, which goes as follows: "Read Black Women's Work; Integrate Black women into the CORE of your syllabus; Acknowledge Black women's intellectual production; Make space for Black women to speak and Give Black women the space and time to breathe" (Cite Black Woman 2022). The Cite Black Women movement thus shows academics that black women deserve a spot in their educational community both as great thinkers and idea creators. Therefore, the purity and danger taboo that has borne black women from teaching needs to end and citing more black women are a great start.

When writing this essay, I was trying to fix the mistake I made in my final journal by neglecting to include black women's lived experiences in the workforce. However, I am thrilled that I decided to delve deeper into the working conditions and experiences black female workers endure because I was able to learn how the feminist movement in North America has historically left out black women in the fight for workplace equity. By conducting this research, I was also

able to see the connections weeks four and seventeen have on one another because it's evident that the feminist movement in North America was exclusive to white women, which then showcases why working women of the world face such harsh realities in the workforce. Rollins's reading first proved this scenario because she noticed white women's uneven power dynamics over their black domestic workers when conducting her research. White women represented the pure, innocent housewife, while their domestic worker was an invisible object used for the privilege of the housewife. Therefore, when reading both the works of Rollins and Gillis and Munford, it's easy to see the shortcomings of feminism. Rollins's original ethnography *Between Women: Domestics and Their Employers (Labor And Social Change)* were published in 1985, decades after the first wave of feminism (Wesley College). Therefore, it's fascinating that Gillis and Munford, in their article, were preoccupied with the wars between the second and third-wave feminists when Black women still didn't have a voice in the movement. The predicament is what this essay was about; the lack of space feminism has given to Black women and how the issues alive in feminism still have a hard time reflecting a Black women's lived experience. I have decided to use the work of Douglas as well, to explain this predicament and used the example of Black female academics as my primary example in my text regarding the exclusion of black bodies in feminism. However, this essay only scratches the surface of the issues with feminism because still many narratives and stories go unnoticed. Continuing the works of bell hooks and other feminist anthropologists, I hope to see more space opening for women of colour, not just in academia or the workforce but also in feminism. No woman should be left behind in a movement aimed at helping their lives.

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