Santangelo Williams

Black Radical Tradition

March 16, 2015

Through The Looking Glass

a look at the importance of intersectionality in activism

Today in the mainstream discourse of activism and freedom fighting a obstacle I am confronted with is what I like to call the “struggle olympics”. This is when individuals or groups with investments in various identities attempt to place their struggle and pain over others. This becomes complex when taking into account peoples various identities, for example a queer black woman, and even more complex when acknowledging people’s abilities to change certain identities, for example an upper class black male becoming a lower class black male. This comes from a subconscious and conscious search for equity by the general population: we all struggle, but who struggles the most? This train of thought is often seen as horizontal conflict and is commonly attributed to “those at the top” as a way to maintain power, and distract the masses. While this may be true a large part of this agency lies in the hands of the masses as well. In order to achieve any sense of equity, activists and freedom fighters must actively acknowledge and address all aspects of identity together and not separately. Intersectionality is the only way we as a community can succeed, and a failure to adopt it will lead to a failure to adopt equity..

In the book *The Black Jacobins*, by C.L.R. James, the reader is forced to look at revolution not only in the context of class, but also race. Conversations about class often refrain from any subjects of race because in doing so there is a loss of the “psychological wage of whiteness” . In this book we look at the French and Haitian revolution and how race and class are directly related. Within the French Revolution both whites and free blacks fought for equal representation and acknowledgement by their government, but failed to also fight for the abolishment of slavery. Through an intersectional lens this shows citizenship, capital and class was the driving force behind this revolution, not equity or equality.

This is stressed by James when discussing the Haitian revolution, white planters refused to work alongside free and enslaved blacks because of this loss of the psychological wage. Even within the black population there were free blacks, mulattoes, and enslaved blacks whose interests reflected their class.

In the book *Incidents of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs the reader is forced to look at slavery not only in a racial context but also a gendered one. When omitting gender in conversations of racism both the psychological and physical elements of racialized patriarchy are also ignored. This presents itself through two people, Harriet Jacobs, and her misstresss, Ms. Flint.

In looking at Harriet’s story there is no way to avoid the gendered racism of slavery. Through her multiple allusions to years of enduring sexual violence by Dr. Flint, Harriet stresses the importance of gender when speaking about race and vice versa because it completely changes what words like agency mean. “I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments” Understanding and engaging the gendered aspect of race also allows us to understand how oppression is viewed for an individual. For Harriet her oppressor isn’t just white but a white male. “In either case there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult,from violence, or even from death:all of these inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men”(pg. 26).

On the other side gendered racism also affects Harriet's mistresses. Opening up dialogues of race to become dialogues of gendered-race is detrimental to the battle of oppression. We are able to see parallels between Mrs. Flint and Harriet when this happens. Both are, for lack of a better term, sexual and psychological property to Dr. Flint. The sexual violence Dr. Flint uses on Harriet has a psychological effect on Mrs. Flint that fosters both a great jealousy and hatred for Harriet. Here gender and race play a huge role in who Mrs. Flint chooses to accuse. Due to patriarchy Mrs. Flint is forbidden from accusing her husband of actually being adulterous and so in turn she blames Harriet the victim. “He may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace but it is not so with a favorite slave. She is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous” The jealousy that roots from this mistreatment is even more important when considering how these same relationships play out over generations. The “Jezebel” caricature for example can be seen as an offspring of this relationship, as a way for the white consciousness to justify sexual violence committed to women of color.

Both C.L.R. James and Harriet Jacobs’ books when read with a intersectional lens reveal key parts to the entire structure of the oppression and struggle in each piece, these hidden part I would like to refer to as “phantom agents”. Subsequently I believe these agents are in the structure of current day activism and freedom fighting. The struggle olympics I referred to in the intro is the perfect example of this unwillingness to adopt intersectionality, which is only holding progress back. A great example of the power of intersectionality can be seen in the Black Radical Feminist movement. Black Feminists introduced the idea of intersectionality to deal with issue of race and gender (as seen in Incident of a Slave Girl), race and class ( as seen in The Black Jacobins), and even race and ability. Intersectionality helped bridge a gap between people with different and conflicting aspects of identity within the same groups (Maj).

Intersectionality’ addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women. The very fact of differences among women has become the leading subject of feminist theories in recent years. This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions. (Davis, 74)

While Davis is directly referring to feminism in this quote, on a larger scale this can be looked at within all practices, activism and freedom fighting included. A common debate against intersectionality is that it diverges from solidarity amongst a movement. What Davis argues is instead that these differences actually create a more real form of solidarity that is not dependent on ignoring the differences within each identity. This happens by confronting those phantom agents I acknowledged before. This happens when black male readers of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative realize Dr.Flint was not only benefiting from race but also his gender and sex. This also happens when white Marxists look at The Black Jacobins and realize you can not solely attack class and everything else will fall into place.

This brings me to the lack of intersectionality in mainstream activism. Within even the organization of protests and events there tend to be clear separations between class that remains unacknowledged. The organizers tend to be wealthy college-educated individuals who are trained in specific rhetoric that doesn’t translate over well to the masses. I am aware of this because I have been placed in both positions. The phantom agent here leaves those who are usually the people the protest affects feeling as though they are the out group.

To conclude, the use of intersectionality as a foundation is necessary in working toward equity and not just equality. This is demonstrated in both Incidents of a Slave Girl, The Black Jacobins and in the present day as well. Failing to acknowledge all of the elements that work to build an oppressive structure leads to a failed and incomplete job of dismantling that very structure.

Works Cited

Davis (2008), ‘Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful’, *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 67, pp. 67-85.

Jacobs, Harriet A., and Lydia Maria Child. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987. Print.

James, C. L. R. The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution. 2d ed. New York: Vintage, 1963. Print.