

## Parallels of Oppression

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Oppression within social movements has been well documented and highly criticized by those doubly subjugated, as well as by scholars the world over. This paper draws parallels between the redoubled marginalization of Black women, Black lesbians, interracial and bisexual people, and transfolks. *Transfolks* or *transgender* (trans) serves as an umbrella term that includes a spectrum of gender identities. Brent Bilodeau (2005) writes:

The term 'gender identity' describes an individual's sense of being male, female, or identifying between or outside of traditional gender norms. 'Transgender' refers to individuals whose gender identity conflicts with their sex assigned at birth and/or societal norms for their gender expression. The term may encompass a broad range of gender non-conforming identities, including male and female impersonators, drag kings and queens, male-to-female or MTF transsexuals, female-to-male or FTM transsexuals, cross-dressers and gender benders. The terminology to describe transgender experiences is rapidly evolving and includes phrases like 'gender variant,' 'genderqueer,' 'gender non-conforming,' 'boydyke,' 'trans-lesbian,' and 'ambiguously gendered' (p. 30).

While this definition is broad, it does neglect to include folks who identify as trannyfags (a transgender community term for a transman who is attracted to biological men and/or other transmen), transdykes (a transgender community term for a transwoman who is attracted to biological women and/or other transwomen), and Two Spirit (an American Indian/First Nations term for people who blend the masculine and the feminine) (Beemyn, 2006). It also fails to mention intersexed individuals who are often considered part of the transgender community as they may face similar challenges and oppression within social justice movements and from mainstream society. Thus, the terms *transfolks*, *transgender* and *trans* are considered to include all of the aforementioned identities in this paper.

Oppression within social movements, while resulting in specific and unique manifestations from one movement to another, is essentially paradigmatically identical. Therefore, articulations of the injury done by and insidious nature of subjugation within groups working for social justice have come from various communities. Analyses of internal colonization, additive identity paradigms, intersectionality, simultaneity of oppressions, identity-politics, hierarchy of oppressions, and narrow/essentialist understandings of gender serve as the theoretical foundation for drawing parallels between the oppression of Black women, Black lesbians, interracial and bisexual people and transfolks.

Trans marginalization within already marginalized communities and movements is unique in that it is not necessarily the product of an intersection of two subjugated identities. For the most part, analyses of marginalization within an already marginalized group—or internal colonization (Sandoval, 2000)—have been rooted in the intersection of two or more subjugated identities. For instance, June Jordan (1995) mounts her argument in *A New Politics of Sexuality* on the dual subjugation of *sexual minorities*, referring to both the female sex and those that are not heterosexual. She notes that persons who do not conform to binary categorization within marginalized communities are further subjugated and ostracized (for instance people who identify as interracial or bisexual). Similarly, Barbara Smith (1995) analyzes Black Feminists' marginalization as a simultaneity of oppressions founded in both racism from the white world and sexism from Black communities.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) notes that the marginalization of persons with intersecting subordinated identities is not accurately considered in an additive paradigm. "This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination...These problems of exclusion cannot be solved by simply including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). Crenshaw's analysis of the unique nature of Black women's oppression is applicable, in some ways, and antithetical in others, to the plight of transfolks seeking justice within the GLBTQIA rights and feminist movements/communities. Much like Black women were *lumped* into movements that did not effectively or sufficiently address their needs (the Black Power movement and the Feminist movements), transfolks have been lumped into the GLB rights movement. This is problematic as the primary focus and rhetoric of the GLB rights movement centers on sexual orientation and does not always consider gender identity. The *inclusion* of transfolks in the GLB rights movement contributes to the heterosexist conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity (i.e., if a person acts outside of their gender norms their sexual orientation is often questioned). Trans identities are gender identities that may or may not have anything to do with a person's sexual orientation.

The inadequacy of identity-politics has been emphasized by most internally colonized populations. Identity based movements inevitably leave people out, essentialize and simplify people's identities, fail to address the unique problems of certain identities, and conflate ostensibly independent identities. Single identity paradigms also disallow consideration of multiple oppressions. Just as identity-politics paradigms have left out most internally colonized populations, the GLBTQIA rights movement—founded in sexual orientation

identities—fails to address the needs of transfolks. Scholars from various internally colonized communities have criticized identity-politics and proposed alternative paradigms.

Barbara Smith (1995) takes a direct approach to outlining the ways in which single-identity paradigms fail to adequately address the specific problems faced by black women in *Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement*. She begins by deconstructing five myths about black womanhood that have been promulgated by black men and some black women as a reaction to the threat black feminist self-actualization poses to black and other Third-World people (p. 255). Particularly salient is the second myth: that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront. “This myth,” writes Smith (1995), “goes hand in hand with the one that the black woman is already liberated. The 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. Afro-Americans are no exception” (p. 256). She goes on to emphasize the need to move away from single-identity politics and toward a multi-issue approach. Smith points out the logistical need for multi-issue paradigms by stressing coalition building as integral to any/all anti-oppression work.

June Jordan (1995) was more circuitous in her critique of single-identity paradigms. She emphasizes the ways in which people who occupy spaces *between* categories traditionally understood as dichotomous, i.e. straight or gay, white or of color, etc., have been injured by such overly simplistic paradigms—many times by so-called *anti-oppressionists*. Jordan draws parallels between the oppressions experienced by interracial and biracial people, alluding to a Fanonian understanding of oppression dynamics.

Crenshaw (1989) provides analytical support for her assertion that single-identity paradigms have been inadequate if not injurious to black women in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. She begins by analyzing the specific ways in which black women have been systematically stripped of legitimate claims of multiple oppressions in three court cases—emphasizing that courts have dismissed claims of discrimination against black women on both the grounds that discrimination against black men nor white women could be adequately proven and that black women cannot represent black men and, thus, benefits of a court case won could not extend to black men. Crenshaw (1989) challenges the additive understanding of identity and oppression that functions as the foundation on which single-identity rhetoric is built when she writes, “sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (p. 149). She goes on to consider the insidious and harmful nature of homogenized

understandings of womanhood and rape—noting that single-identity rhetoric effectively writes black women out of both the black and women's rights movements. Crenshaw (1989) also examines the ways that black women are systematically erased, noting that larger systems of consideration are not capable of addressing multiple oppressions—perhaps purposefully. She writes, “Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides. Yet 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” (p. 33-34). By stripping black women of either/both their blackness and their womanhood ensures the erasure of their experiences.

Each of these authors stresses the inefficiency, privilege and inadequacy of understanding oppression as organized into a hierarchy. “We saw no reason to rank oppressions, or, as many forces in the black community would have us do, pretend that sexism, among all the ‘isms,’ was not happening to us...approaching politics with a comprehension of the simultaneity of oppressions has helped to create a political atmosphere particularly conducive to coalition building” writes Smith (1995, 260-261). Jordan considered binary paradigms as restrictive and hierarchical and stresses the need to “politicize the so-called middle ground” in order to invalidate such shortsighted and restrictive understandings of humanity and freedom (411). Crenshaw emphasizes that black women cannot simply be added as a category of analysis since the entire paradigm undercuts intersectionality. This is because the contemporary paradigm Crenshaw refers to understands oppression as hierarchical and additive versus intersecting.

But what are the implications of moving away from an additive paradigm and towards an intersectional paradigm that may not be applicable to trans identities? Unlike Black women, transfolks' marginalization within subordinated communities may or may not be due to the intersection of two or more marginalized identities. Transfolks are marginalized within GLBTQIA and Feminist communities simply because they are trans-identified versus occupying two marginalized identities (i.e., Black and female or Chicana and lesbian). Despite the ostensible incongruence between intersectionality/multiple oppressions theory and trans identities, the most prominent, overarching tenet of Crenshaw, Jordan and Smith's theories is that internally colonized people experience more than just the sum of their oppressed identities.

Each of these authors advocates for the development of strategy and collaborations that target liberation and empowerment for all persons versus identity-based politics. This is not to say that individual and group identities should disappear in conversation and strategy, but rather that room should be made for the opinions, strategies and voices of the internally colonized. Jordan writes, “I do not believe it is blasphemous to compare oppressions of sexuality to

oppressions of race and ethnicity: Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all besides sloganeering and temporary, shortsighted, and short-lived advancement for a few. Freedom is indivisible, and either we are working for freedom or you are working for the sake of your self-interests and I am working for mine" (1995, 409).

Just as Crenshaw outlined the harm done by limited understandings of womanhood onto Black women, so has Frances Beale (1995). Regarding white constructions of femininity Beale wrote, "Black women were never afforded any such phony luxuries. Though we have been browbeaten with this white image, the reality of the degrading and dehumanizing jobs that were relegated to us quickly dissipated this mirage of 'womanhood' (146). Similarly, limited conceptualizations of womanhood continue to plague feminist communities. Echoing the pleas of Sojourner Truth's landmark speech *Ar'n't I a Woman*, transfolks continue to fight for recognition and inclusion within feminist communities. White, cisgendered, feminist communities—in occupying the most visible front against gender inequity—have come to be viewed/view themselves as the gender police. This is particularly problematic for transfolks as they must fight for recognition and rights within both feminist and mainstream communities.

For instance, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival has, for several years, enacted a transphobic "Womyn born Womyn" policy which specifically excludes any person that was not born female or does not currently identify as female. This policy's narrow definition of womanhood can be viewed as comparable to the racist and classist 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptualizations of womanhood, which Truth admonished in her 1851 speech (Truth, 1995):

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!" And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked. 'And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power). I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" (p. 36).

Similarly transphobic policies and rhetoric exist within the GLBTQIA community. While these policies do not necessarily restrict gender expression explicitly, they certainly complicate a person's ability to express their gender identity safely.

In 2007 a major controversy broke out within GLBTQIA communities over whether to drop gender expression from the Employment Non-discrimination Act (ENDA) proposal. ENDA had been introduced to all but one Congress since 1994—never including gender identity protections—and had gained its best chance of passing with the 2006 Democratic majority. Despite the Democratic majority, many sponsors argued that ENDA would not pass unless gender identity protections were dropped. Openly gay Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank (2007) articulated such fears:

We are on the verge of an historic victory that supporters of civil rights have been working on for more than thirty years: the passage for the first time in American history by either house of Congress of legislation declaring it illegal to discriminate against people in employment based on their sexual orientation. Detracting from the sense of celebration many of us feel about that is regret that under the current political situation, we do not have sufficient support in the House to include in that bill explicit protection for people who are transgender. The question facing us – the LGBT community and the tens of millions of others who are active supporters of our fight against prejudice – is whether we should pass up the chance to adopt a very good bill because it has one major gap. I believe that it would be a grave error to let this opportunity to pass a sexual orientation nondiscrimination bill go forward, not simply because it is one of the most important advances we'll have made in securing civil rights for Americans in decades, but because moving forward on this bill now will also better serve the ultimate goal of including people who are transgender than simply accepting total defeat today (para. 2).

Transgender inclusion was eventually dropped from the bill, echoing *politically strategic* exclusions of the past—like white suffragettes' choice to fight for white women's voting rights versus voting rights for all women or Black men's exclusion of Black women in the fight for suffrage (Higginbotham, 2007).

While the specificities of exclusions within marginalized communities and social movements remain unique to each community/movement, it is clear that any fight based in identity-politics is bound to fail the most marginalized members of the group. Though establishing a common identity to rally around has been proven effective in catalyzing social action, attempting to enforce rigid categorization and narrow goals eventually leads to fragmentation and, potentially, to dissipation. In order to truly work towards a just society, wherein every individual and group is protected and empowered, a paradigmatic and rhetorical shift is required. Those working for social justice must move away from identity-politics and towards a paradigm that opposes oppression in all its

manifestations. This means working against systems that depend on the subjugation of any person (i.e., capitalism, two-party political systems) versus fighting for *equality* within such systems. In the words of Paulo Freire (2000):

It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can neither free others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught; and the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation. If the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human, they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction, by simply changing poles (p. 56).

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