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Black Lives Matter: Why Black Feminism?

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Introduction

Black Lives Matter is an organization and movement created in 2012 in response to George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin. This event created a platform for Black women to address the inequalities and injustices marginalized groups experience in America. Because of the inclusive nature and wide range of focuses in Black Lives Matter, it is evident that this organization and movement is based in Black feminism, rather than feminism. This distinction can be seen in the comparison between feminism and Black feminism frameworks in regards to the structure and actions of Black Lives Matter. In this essay, the author investigates why Black feminism, rather than feminism, is an adequate framework for Black Lives Matter. This is achieved through the following critical perspectives and strategies: racism, inclusion/exclusion, the role of Black queer women, the recognition of differences among women, the interlocking systems of oppression, and agenda making.

Racism within Feminism

In feminism, a strong sense of racism permeates throughout its foundational framework. This racism has not gone unnoticed by Black feminists. Collins argues that feminism has been interpreted as a "for whites only" movement (13). This interpretation is done by both Black and white women alike. In their collective statement, the Combahee River Collective acknowledges that racism in feminism is a major problem. They state: "One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is the racism in the white women's movement" (CRC 273)¹. Black feminists consider racism a major issue because of the status quo it has in feminism. Black feminists are "made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racisms, which require amongst other things that have a more than superficially comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture" (CRC 273). Many Black feminists realize that white women have not tried to change this status quo of racism in their discourse. Instead of addressing racism, white women in the feminist movement continue to base their discourse in it.

The racism that permeates the feminist movement is a tool used by white women to exclude Black women from the movement. Because of the racism in the feminist movement, discriminatory actions have been taken to exclude Black women. This is done through the creation of segregated institutions, organizations, and events (Collins 13). As "white only" institutions, events, and

¹ "CRC" refers to the Combahee River Collective

organization became present, Black and white women began to identify feminism as the “cultural property of white women” (Collins 13). Instead of correcting this notion, white women choose not address the notion that is in the minds of many women. This action of omission is extremely intentional. By failing to acknowledge racism in feminism, white women are able to keep ownership of it (Collins 15). As a consequence, Black women are excluded from feminist discourse through the use of the unchecked privilege of white supremacy by white feminists.

The basis of which white supremacy operates itself in feminism is due to its foundation in racism. As hooks states, “Racism abounds in the writing of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the mobility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries” (272). White supremacy presents itself the readings and writings that feminists today base their collective actions upon. With white supremacy and racism at the core of feminist discourse, feminists are influenced to uphold such values. As an influence and not a mandate, white women can choose not to implement racism in their movement. With the obvious forms of discrimination in the movement, white women have chosen to articulate racism and white supremacy in feminism (Collins 114). This choice is made upon ignorance rather than understanding. Many feminists do not understand that white supremacy is a tool used for exclusion (hooks 272). For white feminists, white supremacy is used to advance their agenda. For others, like Black feminists, white supremacy and racism excludes them and their agenda from feminism.

Contrary to feminism, Black feminism includes individuals of all races and ethnicities in their discourse and movement. The Combahee River Collective, as a group of Black feminists, asserts that Black feminism anti-racist” (265). Its ability to be anti-racist is due to Black feminists and their recognition of their place in society. As hooks states, “As a group Black women...our overall social status is lower than that of any other” (281). Black women’s social status is “lower than that of any other” because of their place in society. Black women occupy the bottom place in our society (hooks 281). This limits their ability to perform acts of exclusions, such as dictating who can be part of their movement. Black women are not in the place to do so. As Davis emphasizes throughout her book, “It is not the job of the Black woman to draw the color line” (11). Instead, it is the job of Black women to include all races in their movement and discourse.

Similarly, Black Lives Matter greatly focuses on inclusion. Individuals who are involved in the movement recognize that exclusivity can hurt a movement rather than help it (Chatelain 5). They understand this concept because of their bottom occupation in our society. Occupying the bottom, Black women in the movement understand that their liberation from oppression is connected with the liberation of others. As Lorde states, “I am not free while any woman is

unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free long as one person of Color remains chained” (Lorde 133). It is understood by Black feminists in the movement that they are not truly free until their brothers and sisters are free as well. The idea of brothers and sisters is not limited to those who look like them on the basis of race. It pertains to all individuals who experience some form of oppression. Therefore, the issues Black Lives Matter publicly addresses are not limited to those of Black men and women.

Black Queer Women and Black Feminism

As the status quo of racism remains unaddressed by white feminists, the exclusion of Black queer women occurs. Black queer women do not let their exclusion from feminism silence their voices. Instead, they use Black feminism as a platform to address their issues and experiences. Black queer women are only able to do so through the recognition of their place in feminism. As hooks states, “Groups of women who feel excluded from feminist discourse and praxis can make a place for themselves only if they first create via critiques an awareness of the factors that alienate them” (276). In this context, Black queer women can clearly identify what alienates them: their race and sexuality. By recognizing this, Black queer women are able to create and maintain a place where their voice can be heard.

For Black queer women, Black feminism allows for them to address issues of importance, such as the different forms of oppression they experience. As Collins recognizes, one form of oppression Black queer women address is heterosexism (128). They are able to “politically interrogate” this undermined oppression (CRC 266). For Black queer women, heterosexism is understood as oppression because of the way heterosexuality is viewed. In our society, heterosexuality is seen as the normative (Collins 128). This makes any other form of identified sexuality, including queer identification, “suspect” (Collins 128). By labeling queer identities as such, heterosexuals are able to “other” queer Black women. As a form of oppression, Black queer women have taken it upon themselves to address heterosexism through the inserts of queer politics into Black feminism.

As an organization, Black Lives Matter has inserted queer politics into their movement. They not only address the issues of the (heterosexual) Black man or woman, but also those of the (Black) queer man and woman. The recognition of queer individuals and their issues is accredited to the women that co-founded Black Lives Matter (Chatelain 2). As Black queer women, Patrisse Cullars and Alicia Garza see the purpose and importance of including queer politics into the movement. They understand that “men lives or cis-gender lives” are not the only ones of importance (Chatelain 5). This allows them to articulate throughout the

movement that Black queer lives are just as important as the lives of those who are privileged in our society. Because of this, Black Lives Matter is able to address issues, such as police brutality from all perspectives.

Feminism and Its Failure to Recognize Difference

White women who dominate feminist discourse do not recognize the differences amongst women. White women fail feminism in their “refusal to recognize differences and to examine the distortions which result from misnaming them” (Lorde 115). This implies that it is not the differences themselves that separate white women and women of color. Difference cannot be the factor that separates white women and women of color because the differences are normal. When differences are not recognized by white women, it gives feminists the power to assume that all women’s experiences are similar. As Lorde explains, this assumption creates “sense of homogeneity” in regards to women and their personal experiences (116). When white women believe this assumption, they are able to draw inaccurate inferences about the oppression of all women. The assumption that “all women are oppressed” assumes that all women experience oppression the same (hooks 273). This assumption about women’s oppression is based upon the belief that women share common factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference” (hooks 273). Many Black feminists recognize this assumption as incorrect. Contrary, white women who dominate feminist discourse hold validity to their assumption.

When white women believe in such an assumption, they are able to silence the Black woman’s voice through homogeneity. This is exemplified by Lorde in her following statement: “In feminism, the word sisterhood no longer exists” (Lorde 116). Sisterhood, as a term used for solidarity, shows that Black women and their thoughts are not present in feminism. This form of exclusion “makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing women” (Lorde 118). This is due to their refusal to recognize the difference between them and Black women. As hooks recognizes, “This excuses privileged white women to ignore the difference between their social status and the status the masses of women” (274). This presents white feminists with the inability to acknowledge Black women and their experience. It is due to this inability in which white feminists are able to exclude Black women through their words and actions.

Contrary to feminism, there is a strong recognition of and respect for differences amongst women in Black feminism. As Lorde states, “Some problems we share as women, some we do not” (119). Because of the recognition of difference, Black feminism is a space where personal experience is respected and valued. It relies on “person experiences of individual Black women’s lives” to shape its discourse (CRC 266). Because of this, Black feminism does two

important things for Black women. First, it provides Black women with a sense of validity in regards to their experiences. Second, it allows Black women to “look more deeply into their own experience...to build a politics that will change their lives and inevitable end their oppression” (CRC 266). In other words, it gives Black women the opportunity to end their oppression through the impression that their experiences have left on their lives.

Similarly, Black Lives Matter acknowledges how the Black woman’s experience with violence is different than the white women’s experience. For Black and white women alike, experiencing violence is nothing new (Crenshaw 1242). It is the ways in which Black women experience violence that make it different from white women. Black women experience violence because of their vulnerability due to their race, sex, and class (Crenshaw 1243). People do not recognize this intersectionality in the lives of Black women. Because of this, Black women’s experiences with violence is usually “ignored, overlooked, misrepresented, or silenced” (Crenshaw 1252). Therefore, Black women have to take it upon themselves to address these issues since no one else will do it for them. Black women are now fighting for their names (and issues) to be heard (Chatelain 3). It is because these women are on the front lines readying to address the issues Black women face that the stories of Black women being killed at the hands of police brutality (i.e. Sandra Bland) are recognized.

Feminism and Its Failure to Recognize Interlocking Systems of Oppression

As white women, feminists fail to recognize the interlocking systems of oppression. As hooks recognizes, “Privileged feminists tend not to understand the relationship between sex, race, and class oppression” (281). Feminism, as a discipline and movement is composed of white women who do not know or can begin to understand the work the multilayered stems of oppression (hooks 281). This is a result of failing to consider “intersectional identities” of women of color (Crenshaw 1243). White women fail to realize how different attributes in Black women’s lives affect the way they are oppressed. This failure to understand is a direct result of their place in society. Many privileged feminists are white, upper middle class women. The interlocking system of oppression do not apply to white women because two of their three attributes, race and class, make them privileged individuals in society. As a result, white feminists have the tendency to only identify one form of oppression: sexism. This affords them the ability to fail to understand how possibly race, sex, and class work in unison to affect women of color.

However, Black feminists recognize the interlocking systems of oppressions. For Black women, the “major systems of oppression are interlocking” (CRC 264). They are able to identify this because of their

recognition of their intersectional identities (Crenshaw 1243). Unlike white women, Black women do not have the choice to ignore how interlocking systems of oppression work. Because of their intersectional identities, Black women “are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds” (Crenshaw 1250). This is a result of the systems of oppression working together to oppress them as Black women. This shapes their life experiences on a daily basis. As the Combahee River Collective recognizes, the interlocking systems of oppression “condition” the lives of Black women (CRC 264). To ignore the systems of oppression, Black women deny or ignore their own selves.

Similarly, Black Lives Matter pays close attention to how the systems of oppression work together to oppress Black women and those who are marginalized. Black Lives Matters roots itself in acknowledging intersectionality with Black women (Chatelain 5). This is due to the recognition of intersectionality by those involved in the movement. As Black women, they understand how these systems operate in their lives and the lives of others (Chatelain 5). Because of this, Black Lives Matter is able to “force a conversation to happen about gender and racial politics” around our nation (Chatelain 4). By doing this, the movement forces people to acknowledge intersectionality in the lives of others and how interlocking systems of oppression operate in their lives. Ultimately, this conversation forces privileged white feminists to see how such systems of interlocking oppression can and does affect women of color, specifically Black women.

Priorities in Feminism and Black Feminism

As the result of white women’s refusal to include Black women in discourse of feminism, Black feminism and feminism have different priorities in regards to their agendas. The difference in their agendas is due to white women’s inability to recognize differences in “race, sexual preference, class, and age” (Lorde 116). This leads white feminists to rally around their own issues. As Lorde states, “By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus on their oppression as women” (Lorde 116). Their focus on their own issues provides the excuse for white feminists to not focus on the issues of women of color oppression. Specifically, Black women’s issues are not represented in the movement. This leads to a “lack of visibility of Black women or women of color in feminism (Davis 21).

Black women must make themselves visible by acknowledging their issues that white feminists fail to include in their discourse. As Davis states, “Black women experience a triple oppression” (17). It is the interlocking and simultaneous systems of oppression of racism, classism, and sexism. Because Black women are able to acknowledge this, they are “committed to working on

those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneously factors in oppression” (CRC 272). Their commitment to addressing issues regarding sex, race and class oppression is inclusive of all individuals. Black feminists make it their mission to address an array of issues (Davis 12). This openness allows them to be “considered with “any given situation that deals with women, Third World, and working people” (CRC 273). By addressing a multitude of issues, Black feminists remain true to their ideology of inclusiveness.

As a Black feminist movement, Black Lives Matter includes and addresses an array of issues from multitude perspectives. The issues addressed in the movement are not just those of the Black community, but also includes issues pertaining to marginalized communities in our society. In regards to the Black community, Black Lives Matter addresses the ways Black lives are cut short in life (Chatelain 5). One major example of this is their emphasis on killing of unarmed Black men (and women). In regards to other groups of individuals, Black Lives Matter also addresses issues that pertain to the marginalized in our society. This includes issues that relate to worker’s rights, women’s rights, socioeconomic injustices, queer inequalities and discrimination, and more (Chatelain 4). By creating an open space for all forms of oppression to be address, Black Lives Matter is successfully exercising their purpose: to bring equality and justice to all people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a Black feminist movement and organization, Black Lives Matter holds strong validity in our society. This is due to its context of taking place within Black feminism, rather than feminism. Black Lives Matter has aligned itself to follow very similar ideologies to that of Black feminism. First, it does not exclude women (or individuals in general) on the basis of race, sex, and/or class. This allows for the voices and issues of Black women to be heard, especially those of queer Black women. Second, Black Lives Matter acknowledges the difference between the experiences of white women and women of color. This is what allows Black Lives Matter to include and draw on the experiences of Black women in their movement. Third, Black Lives Matter acknowledges the intersectionality in women of color, and how interlocking systems of oppression work against Black women. Because of this, they are able to acknowledge and address issues and inequalities of marginalized individuals and their interlocking oppression. These three aspects of Black Lives Matter make it an inclusive organization. It is this inclusiveness that makes the movement powerful as it works to bring justice and equality not only to the Black community, but to all lives that have be oppressed or marginalized in our society.

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