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Gender Plus: Toward a More Inclusive Feminism

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Abstract

This paper explores the racism of mainstream feminism and the ways in which what we think of as feminism has not adequately addressed the needs of black women in the United States. It describes some of the ways in which black women's experiences of oppression in the United States differ from white women's. It then proposes a methodological tool for avoiding racism in feminist political theory, "Gender Plus," which calls for feminist theorists to consider at least one level of inquiry beyond gender when formalizing theory. This paper engages in "Gender Plus" by using race as an example level of inquiry beyond gender, and shows how acknowledging and considering the races of the women theorists study can aid in combating tendencies toward racism in feminist thought.

Keywords

feminism, racism, political theory, Social Sciences, Political Science, Nancy Hirschmann, Hirschmann, Nancy

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Political Science

Gender Plus: Toward a More Inclusive Feminism

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Part I: *The Problem with the Category “Woman”*

All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave (Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith 1982).

Feminists assert that while choices in life are constrained by various factors, women's choices are systematically more constrained than men's. Almost every society in the world is organized patriarchally, which is to say that men rather than women identifiably and systematically dominate society and politics. Men in patriarchal societies control government, business, religious organizations, and families. They are the policy makers, the arbiters, the capitalists, the priests, ministers, and rabbis, and the fathers. Thus the societal and political contexts, or the conditions under which human interaction and the competition over scarce resources take place, are organized and managed by men. By this definition, the United States is arguably a patriarchal society. For instance, under such management, women in the United States could not vote until 1920, could not legally terminate a pregnancy until 1973, could not seek refuge from domestic violence in a shelter until 1974, and could legally be raped by their husbands until the late 1970s (The National Center for Victims of Crime 2004). These injustices are symptomatic of the sexist oppression that occurs under patriarchy.

Feminism is a social and political movement that seeks to identify, interpret, and then redress the kind of oppression which systematically constrains women's choices more than men's, and which fosters injustices such as violence against women and a societal structure that allows that violence. Sexist oppression affects women, so in order to understand and reduce its effects, feminists must understand women. Doing so involves conceptualizing the social and political category, “woman.” What does it mean to be a woman besides

possessing the biological traits of a female? (Indeed, which biological traits *are* “female”?)

One feminist approach to this question points to the theoretical relevance of differences in perspective (see, for example, Collins 1986). A feminist perspective describes the world-view women share, arising from acknowledgment of experiences that are common among women, but, by and large, not among men. Hartsock (1983) argues that a world-view formed from shared experiences of oppression is “less partial and perverse” than the dominant ideology¹, in this case white men’s world-view, because it accounts for social phenomena that the dominant ideology ignores. One way to conceptualize this approach would be to imagine a stadium: concentric rows of seats rise from a middle platform. The platform represents the power center, thus the rows of seats farther down are closer to the power center, and the people who sit in those rows *have* more power. Farther up, the occupants have less power, but a broader view. The people in the back row can see the entire stadium, including the people in the rows in front of them and the platform, but they cannot see the main act as well; they see more broadly, but in less detail. They see more of the audience, and less of the main act. Therefore, they have less access to power, but more awareness of the power relationships among the audience members. Given a patriarchal system, men sit in the front rows of the stadium and women sit farther up, behind them. Women have less power, or a worse view of the stage, but their broader perspective affords them a more accurate view of the power structures of the world; although they cannot see the main act in detail, they have a better understanding of where the main act is taking place in relation to the audience, as well as where some members of the audience are sitting in relation to others.

The lack of power of women, as compared to men, constitutes a shared experience of

¹ Hartsock (1983) theorizes that a world-view arising from “shared experiences of oppression” constitutes “standpoint,” a special kind of perspective that is more accurate and complete than perspectives that do not benefit from such constitution, but the intricacies of standpoint theory are beyond the scope of this paper.

oppression among women (Hartsock 1983) and, although it results in political inferiority, it can also result in epistemological superiority insofar as it allows them a less limited view.

But do all women really share a lack of power to the same extent and have the same view?

The stadium imagery, thus far, seems to treat women and men as unified categories, but there are factors other than gender that divide people's perspectives epistemologically. Feminists have argued that reproduction, the biological abilities to give birth and to lactate; relegation to the home, or relegation to jobs such as nursing, teaching, social work, and secretarial work, that tend to be socially devalued and low-paying; and exclusion from rights afforded to men, are among the material experiences that U.S. women have shared historically and that have led to their common understanding of the world. But what do we mean by "women," really? Which women share the experience of relegation to the domestic sphere? Have all women in the United States been consigned to the home or to the same types of low-paying jobs and denied education in a shared historical fashion? Or are there systematic differences in how women have been treated within the gender category "woman"?

Reproductive freedom has long been an issue central to feminism. An historical examination of feminists' discussion regarding reproductive freedom, however, reveals that this issue is a good example of how black and white women have different perspectives on what "freedom" means for "women." White feminists have often pushed for access to abortion as necessary for women's liberation, while black women in the U.S. have been encouraged to abort their pregnancies, and have even experienced forced sterilization throughout the 20th century. Black women share the oppressive experience of wanting to be able to have children and to stay home and take care of them, as white middle- and upper-

class mothers have historically been able to do in the United States, but often not having the financial resources or support from the state necessary to do so. Angela Davis (1981) chronicles the historical differences between black women's and white women's experiences of reproductive oppression, in order to explain why black women did not join white feminists in the 1970s abortion rights advocacy movement. Black women had been aborting their pregnancies since the early days of slavery (Davis 1981, 204), in order desperately to save their unborn children from the horrors of their own daily lives (Davis 1981, 205), and therefore they generally do not associate abortion with freedom. Post-slavery, and into the 20th century, black women were disproportionately victims of illegal and dangerous abortions (Roberts 1997, 101) as well as legal yet unsafe temporary sterilization methods such as Norplant (Roberts 1997, 138) and Depo-Provera (Roberts 1997, 145). Black women have fought for access to safe methods of birth control, but fear government programs and incentives for poor women regarding such methods, as such encouragement curbs women's reproductive autonomy. White feminists who have promoted abortion rights and birth control access are reacting to white women's history of being encouraged, or often forced, to reproduce. As the birthrate among U.S. white women declined in the late 19th century, the concept of "race suicide" was introduced and deprecated among white national leaders, and was mentioned by President Theodore Roosevelt in his 1906 State of the Union address. He called the declining birthrate among American white women "the one sin for which the penalty is national death, race suicide" (Davis 1981, 209). This characterization was meant to encourage white women to fulfill their "duty" to maintain white people's numerical racial dominance. The illegality of abortion until 1973 often prevented women from terminating pregnancies that either threatened their health or that they could not afford to bring to term;

poor women in desperation were often faced with the choice between dangerous, unregulated, illegal abortions, and the health risks or financial burden of bearing and rearing a child. As Davis argues, black women confronted with this dilemma were more often ushered toward terminating their pregnancies, while white women confronted with similar dilemmas were ushered toward carrying their pregnancies to term. The racial-political culture of the U.S. was, and has been, one that frames bearing children as white women's duty, and black women's privilege.

In both cases, women's reproductive autonomy has been diminished, but the Women's Liberation movement has not been effective at drawing in black women, because of its specific way of defining reproductive freedom. When white feminists of the Women's Liberation movement promoted abortion rights and access to birth control as the key to women's freedom to pursue higher education and career opportunities, they ignored black women's history of having to abort and prevent pregnancies, which had not led them to greater access to higher education and more desirable jobs. Although abortion was legalized with the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, Congress withdrew federal funding for abortions with the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1977. Black women, along with poor white women, were thus effectively stripped of the right to legal abortion. Meanwhile, surgical sterilizations were easily accessible, and remained federally-funded. Once again, black women had better access to unsafe abortions than to safe ones in legal clinics, and moreover, politicians saw no injustice in funding clinics that disproportionately sterilized black women. Poor black women were often forced to choose permanent infertility (Davis 1981, 206) as a condition for medical treatment, or in other cases, they were sterilized by their doctors without being told ahead of time. According to Roberts, in 1955 all 23

sterilizations in the South Carolina State Hospital that year were performed on black women, and in 1965, “60 percent of the Black women in Sunflower County, Mississippi, were subjected to postpartum sterilizations at Sunflower County Hospital without their permission” (1997, 90). In 1972, hospital records of South Carolina’s Aiken County “showed that of 34 deliveries paid for by Medicaid [that year], eighteen included sterilization and that all eighteen were Black women” (Aptheker 1974, 39). Also in 1972, in Massachusetts, a group of medical students reported to the *Boston Globe* repeated cases of sterilizations of black women:

Boston City Hospital was performing excessive and medically unnecessary hysterectomies on Black patients...surgeries were performed for “training purposes”; radical and dangerous procedures were used when alternatives were available; medical records did not reflect what had really been done to patients; patients were pressured into signing consent forms without adequate explanation; and doctors treated patients callously, adding to the women’s anguish (Roberts 1997, 91).

There is evidence that forced sterilization of black women was a federal government effort: many black girls were force-sterilized in birth control clinics funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Davis 1981, 216). In a 1973 class action law suit filed in federal court, “Judge Gerhard Gesell found that an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 poor women...had been sterilized annually under federally funded programs. A study discovered that nearly half of the women sterilized were Black” (Roberts 1997, 93).

Although white feminists’ aim was reproductive freedom for women, they cast that freedom specifically in terms of abortion, and thus took a universal goal with which all human beings could identify, and which men take for granted—bodily autonomy—and turned it into an historically-specific demand: safe and legal abortion. By narrowing their focus, they failed to see that they thereby excluded many categories of women. Davis argues

that, although autonomy for women requires that they be able to control their reproduction, the “feminist” movements for women’s liberation and reproductive freedom have not effectively incorporated the needs and concerns of black women. White feminists have either not understood, or perhaps not had knowledge of, the ways in which black women’s historical experiences with reproductive freedom have differed from their own. Black women’s reproductive autonomy has suffered in that black women have often been forced or encouraged to halt their reproduction. The root of the problem is the systemic racism within reproductive policy in the United States; application of the laws that govern access to birth control and abortions has a racist orientation, such that women’s choices are often limited unjustly, and such that those injustices vary by race. Central to the racial divisions in feminism is the fact that black women’s and white women’s choices have historically been limited in different ways, and that black women’s and white women’s perspectives, thus, differ. Those differences as well as white feminists’ failure to acknowledge or to understand them, have impeded unification across racial lines in the feminist movement.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) points to another example of the ways in which white feminists have excluded black women by taking a universal goal and making it too historically specific, and of the ways in which black women’s and white women’s viewpoints differ. While white feminists have pushed for the right and opportunity to work outside the home, black women throughout U.S. history have been forced to work outside the home, and many want the right and opportunity to stay home and care for their children. In the post-Civil War era, black women shifted from slavery to domestic work in white families’ homes, and from this particular experience arose an insight into race and gender relations that black women in the U.S. share.

Collins challenges the validity of Simone de Beauvoir's application of the Hegelian self/other dialectic to the genders in de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir argues that women are locked in a state of immanence and are socially constructed as the "other" in relation to men's "selves." Men are socially constructed to transcend the immanent environment of the home and to venture out, discover the world, and make their own decisions, while women are disabled from determining who they are, because they are produced not to be beings who discover the world for themselves, nor to make their own choices. For Collins, the duality of "self" versus "other" is problematic. Black women are socially constructed as the "other" to the "selves" of white men, black men, and white women. Their experiences are not determined merely by the fact that their gender and their race cause them to experience subordination, or "otherness" in two different arenas; rather, as Collins describes it, black women experience interlocking oppression, because of the fact that they are *black women*, not *black* and happen to be women, or *women* who happen to be black. What de Beauvoir fails to see is that all women have a race and a gender, both of which affect their experiences of oppression. Just as white women's choices regarding contraception and abortion in the U.S. have been limited in certain ways, black women's reproductive choices have been limited in other ways, and the social and political effects of racism and classism seem to account for those differences. Collins proposes that, instead of "otherness," black women's collective, historical experience with domestic work in white people's homes creates, to use Hartsock's (1983) phrasing, a "less partial and less perverse" perspective. She uses a metaphor described by a 73-year-old black woman, Nancy White, in a 1980 interview with John Gwaltney, to elucidate the theoretical relevance of difference in perspective as applied to black women and white women (Collins, 1986, S17):

My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person (Gwaltney 1980, 148).

Black women's status as domestic employees in white homes gave them a familiarity with white families and white people, but the social distinctions of race and gender were maintained such that black women were still outsiders among white people while experiencing life within white homes. Black women's viewpoint is an insight into themselves and their experiences, what it is to be a black woman in the U.S., *as well as* into the experiences of those for whom they have worked, what it is to be a white woman or a white man in the U.S. As outsiders, they gain a somewhat impartial perspective on gender relations among white people, and as outsiders within, black women can combine their impartiality with the knowledge they glean from the white female or white male experience from being present in private, white spheres.

The salient point for feminists to draw from the argument that black women's collective perspective is less partial and perverse than white women's is not that black women are necessarily "more" oppressed, but rather that their oppression takes different forms, forms that can in fact be inflicted by white women. Accordingly, if feminism is to be truly "universal," it must attend to black women, who have something important to contribute to the development of feminism.

Yet black women's collective viewpoint and the acknowledgement of black women's historical oppression has not been welcomed in the "women's"² movement. Bell hooks

² I will purposely put "women" in quotation marks when I am using the term in a way to illustrate the false universalization of the claim, i.e. when white women feminists talk about "women" as if they mean all women, when in fact, they mean more particularly, white and middle-class women.

(1981) shows that a central corollary of the development of “feminism” has been a perpetuation of the racial hierarchies of U.S. society. White women involved in “women’s” liberation in the 20th century saw only what stood between themselves and the center of power—white men. They strove for equality for themselves, not with all men, but with white men. By making white men their opponents in the struggle for liberation, white feminists were able to distance themselves from racism by allying it with white male-dominated patriarchy. This allowed them to appear to include black women without having actually to consider the ways in which their very efforts at promoting “feminism” betrayed their deep-seated racism toward black women. Consequently, white women activists in the development of feminism were not able to gain real support from black women, nor were they really pursuing their purported goal—the expansion of rights for all women. According to hooks,

If the white women who organized the contemporary movement toward feminism were at all remotely aware of the racial politics in American history, they would have known that overcoming barriers that separate women from one another would entail confronting the reality of racism, and not just racism as a general evil in society but the race hatred they might harbor in their own psyches (1981, 122).

White feminists have been slow to recognize the differences between the history of the oppression of black women and their own oppression in the U.S. Hooks argues furthermore, that white feminists have claimed to champion anti-racism but have in fact, not only not fought against racism, but have used racial hierarchy to their advantage. White feminist abolitionists fought against the immorality of slavery, but not the racist ideology that upheld it (hooks 1981, 125). In the struggle for women’s right to vote, white suffragists did not promote that right for black women. Some, in fact, argued that the enfranchisement of white women would support the perpetuation of white supremacy in their appeal to southern white

women (hooks 1981, 127). In the early decades of the 20th century, white women activists did not advocate better jobs for black women, but appeared to consider black women a threat in their pursuit of industrial employment (hooks 1981, 132). In the “women’s” movement of the 1960’s and 70’s, white women writers such as Helen Hacker and Catherine Stimpson likened the plight of “women” to that of “blacks” (hooks 1981, 139), thus suggesting the nonexistence of black women, or more accurately, the exclusion of black women from the category “woman” in American society.

Hooks, in fact, points out that the very existence of a debate over whether or not racism is a feminist issue demonstrates that white women who identify themselves as feminists have been just as socialized as everyone else to accept the premises of racism (1981, 122). If white feminists do not examine race as a determining factor in the experience of womanhood in American society, hooks seems to argue, then they will continue to perpetuate the racial caste system from which they benefit, and “feminism” will never become inclusive enough to make a difference in the lives of black women in the U.S.

I agree with hooks’ reading of American feminism, and argue, then, that a *feminist* perspective does not yet exist. Moreover, it only has the potential to exist insofar as women share experiences of oppression across racial categories. Since women’s experiences of oppression are gendered as well as raced, it appears that feminists do not yet know what experiences are shared among all women. Black feminists assert that black women’s choices are systematically constrained in different ways from white women’s, and in different ways from black men’s, but because they highlight these differences in order to find and speak with their own voices about their own experiences with oppression, black feminists receive criticism from both white feminists and from some black men.

White feminists have responded to black feminist assertions with concern over what they mean for feminism, which claims to be a universal movement that takes up the social and political concerns of all women. These white feminists argue that making politically salient the differences between black women's and white women's experiences of oppression undermines the political power of feminism, and that the reason feminism has not really taken off as a successful social and political movement is that it is so splintered. These critics, however, defend the political convenience of universality at the expense of black women's social and political concerns. They ignore race in order to *build* rather than to try to understand the concept "woman." The product, "woman" is presented as a person with female organs but no race, but is in actuality a white woman who experiences forms of oppression which other white women experience, but which are not generally shared across race. Ignoring race means imagining an impossibility, a raceless human being, or it means ignoring the members of races which are socially and politically subordinate. The former does not advance the political salience of feminism, and the latter merely advances the political salience of *white feminism*. This criticism of black feminism, therefore, serves the particular interests of the white women; it calls white women's experiences of oppression the universal female experiences of oppression. In effect, what we think of as "feminism" silences black women (as well as any other women who are not white).

That these white feminists criticize black feminism in this way poses the question: why would so-called "feminists," who aim to eradicate the systematic oppression of women, disempower entire groups of women? A possible answer is hooks' assertion that white feminists are trying to preserve their race privilege. There could be some merit to her argument because white feminists describe their own experiences of oppression as

“women’s” experiences of oppression; they want black women to join their movement in order for the movement to gain political salience, but they do not seem to want to understand the experiences of black women, given that to do so would mean understanding racial politics in America as well as their own racism. White feminists appear to be willing to compromise the needs and concerns of black women in order to avoid compromising the focus of the “feminist” movement, and to avoid questioning themselves. What these white feminists do not recognize is that silencing the differences among women due to race preserves white women’s race privilege. The reason this effect is unrecognized is the propensity of white people to suppress the fact that they have a race, and that their race constitutes a social and political advantage; the general silencing of race differences makes white people’s race invisible to them, and it makes the privilege they derive from it invisible as well—it assumes their advantages to be a social and political given. White feminists, therefore, have much to gain for themselves by keeping their race and their race privilege invisible, but doing so hampers the cause of black women and of other non-white women, and it also hampers what feminism purports to be—the eradication of sexism and an expansion of rights and freedoms for all women. They have failed to understand how sexism really operates in the lives of women, and can only begin to reverse that failure by examining how gender-based oppression is raced.

Black feminists also receive a similar form of criticism from some black men. Even as black women try to liberate themselves from the racism inherent in white feminism, they must grapple with the sexism of the racial struggle. Some black male critics object to black feminist assertions that black women experience oppression differently from how they do, by arguing that race is simply separate from gender, and that there are experiences black people

share that transcend gender. Furthermore, black men have argued that black feminism is in fact “counter-productive to the historical goal of the Black struggle,” (Collins 2000, 8).

These black men have sought to unite all U.S. black people under a universalized conception of “black person”; they have tried to build a black perspective. “Black person” is presented as a human form with a race and no gender, but is actually a black man, whose experiences of oppression these critics have conflated with *black people’s* experiences of oppression.

Some black men have perpetuated this conflation in order to maintain their sexist domination of black women. As bell hooks puts it,

The labeling of the white male patriarch as a “chauvinist pig” provided a convenient scapegoat for black male sexists. They could join with white and black women to protest against white male oppression and divert attention away from their sexism, their support of patriarchy, and their sexist exploitation of women. Black leaders, male and female, have been unwilling to acknowledge black male sexist oppression of black women because they do not want to acknowledge that racism is not the only oppressive force in our lives (1981, 87-88).

Just as white feminists buttress their racial advantage by deemphasizing race and racism, black men reinforce their sex advantage by deemphasizing gender and sexism. Yet, if we really examine black men’s experiences, we will find that they are frequently gendered as well as raced; black men obscure the truth of their own plight as well as that of black women when they ignore gender. The ways in which black men are socially constructed as over against white men are distinct from the ways in which black women are socially constructed; their experiences of oppression are therefore shaped due to their gender as well as to their race. In 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, to a white man, she was protesting the Jim Crow segregation laws that affected black men and women alike. But if we consider what it means for a black woman to be expected to give up her seat to a white man, when white men on public buses frequently give

up their seats to white women, we see that gender is relevant to her experience with Jim Crow segregation. Parks' gender was socially constructed differently from that of the white women around her. She was a woman who was not given the sexist consideration that a white woman would have been given; when asked to move to the back of the bus, white men treated her just like they would have treated a black man. Although it may seem that her gender was ignored in this instance, and that it was therefore irrelevant to her treatment, it is pertinent to the construction of black women that, through racism, their gender is capable of being ignored. Even though segregation laws had equal *de jure* application to black men and women, and though they were not technically gendered, gender was often relevant to the *de facto* experience of living under those laws. Rosa Parks' femininity was socially constructed differently from that of the white women around her; the fact that she was a black woman yet expected to give up her seat to a white man implies that gender, as it applied to her, informed her experience of racist oppression.

Collins (2005) explains the development of this black male criticism by showing that institutionalized racial violence against black men and black women has differed across gender: lynching has targeted black men while rape has targeted black women. In the movement for freedom from racist oppression, black men have claimed to bear the greater burden of race by arguing that lynching is both completely different from and worse than rape. Collins argues instead that lynching and rape are more accurately different forms of the same kind of social control (2005, 218):

African American politics have been profoundly influenced by a Black gender ideology that ranks race and gender in this fashion. Lynching and rape have not been given equal weight and, as a result, social issues seen as affecting Black men, in this case lynching, have taken precedence over those that seemingly affect only Black women (rape).

In the Anita Hill hearings, Clarence Thomas “recognize[ed] the historical importance placed on lynching and the relative neglect of rape” and capitalized on the black gender ideology that consistently advances the suffering of black men as more central to the suffering of *black people* than the suffering of black women; he knew that emphasizing race would win him more support than it would win Hill (Collins 2005, 223). The significance placed on lynching rather than rape underscores how the experience of racist oppression is gendered. Black men have universalized their own suffering with the suffering of all black people in the U.S. and have thus silenced the suffering of black women. Just as black women’s femininity is constructed differently from white women’s due to their race, black women’s race is also constructed differently from black men’s due to their gender.

I propose that looking at gender *plus* race can aid feminists in understanding women and sexism. I also believe that looking at gender as well as race can aid activists and students in understanding racism, but the focus of this paper will be on the ways in which raced experiences inform feminism. The social and political category “woman” does not exist as we understand it. What has socially and politically been understood as “woman” is in fact a product of the dominant *racial* ideology which ignores, and thereby silences, the experiences of black women. When we think of what it is to be a woman in the United States, we most often think of what it is to be a white woman. Just as “feminists” conflate “white woman” with “woman” when they discuss women’s shared experiences of oppression, such as being made to stay home, and many black men conflate “black man” with “black person” when they point to such oppressive acts as lynching, white feminists also conflate “white man” with “man” when they discuss “men” as holding positions of power in patriarchal societal structures. White men, then, dominate white women, black women, and black men. White

feminists and some black male critics silence black women by submerging black women's experiences of oppression and ignoring how their own experiences of oppression are raced as well as gendered. Black women, in turn, need a social and political movement of their own which can use a black feminist perspective to conceptualize black women's collective experiences of oppression, and in turn serve as the basis for the redress of black women's historical and present-day grievances. Given that both white women and black men have silenced and oppressed black women, within the stadium imagery we can picture black women in the upper tiers of the stadium, behind black men and white women, and far behind white men. Black women, therefore, have a less perverse world-view than these other groups, because they can see salient factors that have played a role in determining their material, historical experiences; they have a more complete view of the stadium and of how others relate to the center of power, given their historical status as "outsiders within," yet they cannot enact that vision because there are too many tiers between them and the center of power, and they remain outsiders. This greater insight, potentially, can inform "feminism" by expanding its boundaries. Feminism as a universal movement that fights for all women does not yet exist, and furthermore, we do not yet know if it can. The only way to find out is to take advantage of the opportunity to learn from less perverse and less partial worldviews, and we can start with those of black women.

The idea of Gender Plus warns against deemphasizing, or silencing, salient political cleavages that intersect with sexism and form different and particular experiences of oppression in women's lives. I shall explore one level of Gender Plus—*race*. More particularly, I shall examine the notion of race as applied to African-Americans, and how it affects sexist oppression in African-American women's lives. As we bring to light salient

political cleavages in order better to understand experiences of oppression, it becomes clear that the more we recognize, the more complete our understanding of those experiences. I shall limit myself to race, however, in order to show how the experiences of black women in the U.S. demonstrate that the study of gender and sexist oppression must at least include one further level of inquiry. Race has been fundamental to the social construction of black women; issues of class, sexuality, religion, and others have, of course, informed black women's experiences of oppression, but black feminist theorist Collins implies that race is more salient to black women's collective perspective than class:

For most, middle-class Black achievement is only one generation away from the racism of the past, and its effects are still felt. This racial consensus has political effects in that African American voting behavior demonstrates a commitment to racial solidarity. Despite the growth of a new Black middle class, African Americans are more likely to vote as a racial bloc than they are to vote their social class interests...most African Americans recognize that class differences *among* African Americans are now more pronounced. But when it comes to electoral politics, they continue to choose race over class, that is, when they perceive they have a choice at all (Collins 2005, 47).

Issues of class have the potential to become more and more salient for the experiences of black people in the United States, and investigation into how class, sexuality, religion, etc., inform those experiences, would also give feminism more information about how gender-based oppression operates in varying forms. With this project, I take one step to show that feminists must acknowledge at least one other factor besides gender to comprehend what it is to be a woman in the U.S.'s patriarchal society. Gender Plus reveals that the understanding of gender is always incomplete, but adding at least one factor to the study of gender-based oppression renders that study less partial and perverse.

Part II: *Gender Plus*

Unless I know something more about two women than the fact that they are women, I can't say anything about what they might have in common (Elizabeth Spelman 1988).

Beyond simply ignoring the effects of racism, some white feminists have argued that feminist thought should not be concerned with oppression that comes in any form other than sexism. In other words, feminists must examine the harm done to “women as women” and not to women as women of color or to women as lesbians, for example, because looking only at sexism unqualified by racism or heterosexism allows a clearer picture of how gender-based oppression operates (see Richards 1980 and Cantarella 1987). There is an argument to be made here. Feminism cannot take on everything; it was designed not to save the whole world, but to identify, interpret, analyze, and reduce and resist sexist oppression. Common sense would seem to suggest that a movement needs an unambiguous and concise focus in order to effect real change. Thus, the epistemological need to single out sexism in order to understand how it functions follows as reasonable. If women are to answer the call to feminism and be willing to allocate energy, time, and resources to carry out the movement's objective, they must be convinced that they know what they are fighting. As Janet Radcliffe Richards puts it,

Feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit, but with a type of injustice it wants to eliminate...it is far more reasonable to support a movement against injustice than a movement for women (1980, 5).

Richards argues that feminism cannot support or advocate women and their needs in every circumstance; the objective is justice and women are capable of being in the wrong. Neither can feminism be “a movement of women,” for that matter, because men, too, can be

feminists. Rather, feminism must seek to understand and combat sexism. A concentration on sexism does not have to suggest that it is more central to the human struggle than other kinds of oppression; in fact, focusing on sexism does not have to entail a position at all on racism, heterosexism, or classism. Feminists, by this line of reasoning, can say, “We are looking at gender-based oppression in order to help those affected by it, period.”

Yet, the “sexism-only” approach to feminism is problematic. Given the assumption of feminism that all women face sexist oppression, the goal must be to eradicate that oppression for everyone who experiences it. When feminist theorists propose to look at sexism as a sole variable, their objective appears to be controlling for other variables in order to elucidate what sexism does and how. Instead, however, “sexism-only feminism” narrows feminism’s scope to a particular set of cases that are not representative of all women. They advocate a piecemeal strategy focused on specific problems and instances of injustice, insofar as they seek to single out experiences and trends that derive specifically from sexism, as over against those that derive from other forms of injustice. In the abstract, this appears to be a perfectly legitimate, effective strategy. Elizabeth Spelman sums up this part of Richards’ argument as follows:

The most paradigmatic examples of sexism are to be found in the lives of women who are subject only to sexism and not to other forms of oppression, for the treatment of these women has to do only with their gender and nothing to do with their class, race, nationality, servile status, etc. (1988, 52).

In operation, this piecemeal strategy seeks to isolate experiences of sexist oppression by studying the lives of women who experience only sexist oppression and not other forms of oppression, women who are oppressed “as women” (Spelman 1988, 51). Spelman finds this

approach problematic in that it mistakenly presupposes the possibility of isolating gender and sexism from race, for example:

Now it is important to see that [this] proposition...is flawed: women who are not oppressed on account of their “race” are nevertheless not without a “racial” identity, and this identity has as much to do with their position as their gender—indeed, it is part of what shapes their gender identity (Spelman 1988, 52).

The fact that some women are not subjected to racist oppression on account of their race does not make those women raceless; in the United States, it merely makes them white (for the most part). Rather, it is the fact that white women are not subjected to racist oppression on account of their race, that shapes their experiences as different from those of women who are subjected to racist oppression on account of their races. It is what makes them “white women” and not raceless women. That “sexism-only feminism” assumes, by this logic, that there are raceless women, and that it assumes from that, that those are the women who are oppressed “as women,” betrays its vulnerability to conflating certain women with all women. If some women can, in themselves, function as the control group, then their identities can be said to be free of extra variables. But no woman is raceless; all women vary by their races. Similarly, no woman is free of a class standing or of a sexuality. More particularly, the “sexism-only” approach is vulnerable to conflating white women with all women insofar as it conflates women who are oppressed only as women—i.e. women who only experience sexist oppression—with the term “women” in the fundamental sense. Indeed, it is vulnerable to conflating white, middle- or upper-class, heterosexual women with all women. It defines sexism in a way that attends only to those women’s experiences. “Sexism-only feminism” thus privileges groups of women who enjoy a racial advantage rather than those who

experience race-based oppression, and it is thus ill-equipped to end the sexism experienced by non-white women.

A similar point can also be drawn from Collins' (1986) discussion of white, middle-class women as the "master's dog" and black women as his "mule." She suggests that white, middle-class women are subject to a particular form of oppression by virtue of their race and class; by being the master's "pet," his "dog" rather than his "mule," they become implicated in the very system that oppresses them. Indeed, it is this significant difference between the position of white women and that of black women that is constitutive of white women's race privilege, and that, furthermore, gives white women the social and political power to ignore the effects of race and to take their own experiences as representative of those of all women. By this line of thinking, "sexism-only feminism" runs the risk of turning into a form of "white feminism," the former being, in practice, an attempt at a theoretical justification for the latter. Spelman's and Collins' arguments that race shapes the experience of gender is alone enough to invalidate "sexism-only" methodology, however. The historical differences between black women's and white women's experiences with oppression attest further to the notion that sexism does not exist outside of racism or outside of race privilege.

Neither of these approaches furthers the understanding or elimination of the sexism that black women in the U.S. experience, and both essentialize "womanness." "Sexism-only feminism" inherently makes the claim that there is something in the experience of sexism that is the same for all women, that any two women will suffer sexism in the same way. It thus becomes unnecessary to distinguish between any two women. "White feminism," meanwhile, ignores the materially specific differences generated by experiences of sexism which differ across race, and in turn creates an artificial "womanness" which is actually

“white womanness.” By proposing an essential “womanness,” these perspectives not only confine womanhood to a narrow, misrepresentative space, but they also suggest a concept that is on its face problematic. Spelman describes this problem as having “the effect of making women inessential in a variety of ways” (1988, 158). Essentializing “woman,” leaves *women*—that is, flesh and blood women who do not, indeed cannot ever, match the idealization such essentialism produces—out of the category, and such women thus become theoretically excluded from “womanhood.” As Spelman points out, an essential “womanness” implies that there is something that all women share that makes them women, which, in turn, suggests that having any particular information about any one woman other than that of her gender is superfluous. To understand what she is and who she is in the world, one need not know anything about the specific circumstances of a woman’s life or experiences; such information is presented as irrelevant to her being a woman, by this view (Spelman 1988, 158). Women become inessential through this logic because each individual woman does not add any further understanding to the concept “woman.” One problem I find with eclipsing such differences is that certain groups of women are systematically made inessential in more instances than are others. Within “white feminism,” for example, black, Latina, and biracial women have been consistently made inessential to the category “woman,” in that “white feminism’s” approach to sexism has ignored race as part of the sexist experience. Similarly, the “sexism-only” approach has made poor women and lesbians inessential to the category “woman” by ignoring class and sexuality as part of the sexist experience. Their stories have not been allowed to shape our conception of womanhood and more particularly, of women’s experience with sexism. When these groups of women are shut out from the dominant discourse regarding womanhood, their experiences with sexism

are not given the credence they deserve. Furthermore, an incomplete conception of sexism arises; we do not and will not understand sexism the way *women* suffer from it if we claim that any one woman will give us a picture of how sexism is experienced that is representative for all women.

I therefore propose a new feminist methodology: Gender Plus. The systematic (though perhaps unintentional) exclusion of black women from the category “woman” has led to a misrepresentative focus of feminism on white women, which has in turn privileged white women’s concerns and marginalized black women’s concerns. I take issue particularly with the fact that “white feminism” often ends up being limited to the study of white women and their experiences with sexist oppression, but has not openly admitted, or even noted, this fact. In order for Gender Plus to work, both criteria have to be met: at least one level of inquiry beyond gender must be considered in the study of women and sexist oppression, and its consideration must be clearly communicated. If the latter criterion is not met, if a “feminist” theory claims to be about all women, but is really only about white women, it is on some level false, argue Lugones and Spelman: such a theory is “probably ethnocentric, and of dubious usefulness except to those whose position in the world it strengthens” (1986, 26). Feminist theorizing must comprise the voices, experiences, and perspectives of women who have been thus far marginalized by feminist thought. A feminist politics that is more honest with itself will level the playing field by more accurately evaluating each feminist theory’s limitations and scope. Lugones and Spelman envision feminist organization, movement, and theory as needing either explicit qualifiers or real understanding of women across cultures and situations:

The deck is stacked when one group takes it upon itself to develop the theory and then have others criticize it. Categories are quick to congeal,

and the experiences of women whose lives do not fit the categories will appear as anomalous when in fact the theory should have grown out of them as much as others from the beginning. This, of course, is why any organization or conference having to do with “women”—with no qualification—that seriously does not want to be “solipsistic” will from the beginning be multi-cultural or state the appropriate qualifications (Lugones and Spelman 1986, 27).

If feminism really takes as its task the comprehension of women, it must take steps to understand variance in women’s contexts and cultures, before it can theorize about all women. This can be accomplished either by studying those groups separately and clearly stating what separates one group of women from another, or by studying a “multi-cultural” conglomerate of women and clearly stating which cultures are represented. Both of these methods accomplish Gender Plus in that the feminists embrace and acknowledge a level of inquiry beyond race and do so explicitly.

The language of the term “Gender Plus” could be construed to imply an interpretation of a pool of identifiers, such as gender, race, and class, as the sum of characteristics added together. Similarly, it could be construed to imply an interpretation of forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism, and classism, as operating independently and existing together in women’s lives as additive layers. Rather, “Gender Plus” seeks to highlight the interactions of these vectors of identity and of oppression, and to communicate their intersection and mutual construction. As Charlotte Bunch puts it,

the variations on female oppression that women suffer according to race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, age, nationality, physical disability, and so on...are not simply added onto the oppression of women by sex, but shape the forms by which we experience that subordination. Thus, we cannot simply add up the types of oppression that a woman suffers one-by-one as independent factors but must look at how they are interrelated (1987, 337).

Along a similar line of reasoning, Kimberle Crenshaw asserts that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). The “Plus” points to the recommendation that feminist theorists acknowledge at least one analogous factor that co-exists with, and mutually constructs with gender.

I advocate the consideration of women as each a whole person, each an individual with specific, interrelated struggles. Since some categorization is crucial for identifying trends in how oppression is manifested, and thus for defining forms of oppression, feminist thought can realistically only *approach* accounting for the differences among women. The more details we know about a person the more we can understand her experience with oppression, but we must also weigh against this the impracticality of knowing everything there is to know about all of the women we choose to study. Therefore, feminist thought should consider at least one further factor in its inquiry and explicitly identify that factor. Gender Plus presupposes the notion that sexism manifests itself in ways that vary with the other types of oppression a woman experiences. It asks for more: it asks for pertinent information to be considered in the study of women, but acknowledges that too small a scope would hamper a study’s relevance to feminist thought. Therefore, in my discussion on Gender Plus, I will take race as a further factor beyond gender, and explore some of the ways in which race and gender, and sexism and racism interact to produce interconnected, or intersectional realities in women’s experiences. More specifically, I will focus on race and gender in the experiences of black women in the United States.

One could argue, of course, that feminist theorists already do what I am recommending, at least in part. That is, “white feminists” studying women do tacitly take race into account insofar as they discuss their own experiences of whiteness. But by failing

to acknowledge their focus, they undercut the coherence of their analyses; by acting as if “white women” are “just” women, rather than acknowledging that they are talking about “white women,” they deny that race is part of the analysis. Gender Plus requires a self-conscious and self-critical use of another identity category besides gender. Its approach will in some ways limit the scale of analysis, but it does so conscientiously, whereas “white feminists” and “sexism-only feminists” have not acknowledged the boundaries of their scope or the limited relevance their work has for the many groups of thus inessentialized women. Black feminist thought, on the other hand, does both, and therefore fully accomplishes Gender Plus; it examines, self-consciously and purposively, race as well as gender—particularly the race of black women—and also acknowledges that its primary scope of inquiry is how sexism and racism intertwine to produce black women’s experiences of oppression. It does not claim to study how all women experience sexism. Black feminism, in fact, allows for the study of “white feminism” whereas “white feminism,” understanding itself as “feminism,” has viewed black feminism as a setback in the movement to unite “women” against sexist oppression (all the while misinterpreting white women’s experiences with sexism as all women’s experiences with sexism). By accurately describing its focus, black feminism invites “white feminists” to do the same—to continue to study how white women experience oppression. Black feminism and Gender Plus also invite feminist theorists to choose as their “plus” any factor or form of oppression they perceive to be operating in concert with gender-based oppression in women’s lives. Yet black feminism and Gender Plus also expect “white feminism” to follow black feminism’s example and label itself accurately. I do not quarrel with the usefulness of what the white feminist movement has accomplished thus far. It has made great strides for white women, a group that certainly

has experience with sexist oppression, and also for many black women as well, who are able to access laws against sexual harassment and domestic violence, albeit often with greater difficulty.

While Gender Plus functions as a broad methodology, a call for a further level of inquiry without specifying what sort of level, as stated above, my focus in the elaboration of my theory of Gender Plus will be race, particularly that of black women. I am arguing that race has significantly shaped the histories of the oppression of black women and of white women, and that the experiences produced by racial forces differ enough to necessitate acknowledging those differences in the course of feminist exploration. Gender Plus theory, however, does much more than add the dimension *race* to the study of women and gender-based oppression. I have chosen to use black feminism and its race dimension to demonstrate how the method of Gender Plus can and must inform feminism. I invite feminists to choose the level of inquiry they find particularly pertinent to women's experiences of oppression and urge that the choice be made explicit. As argued above, black feminists have overtly chosen to examine race with gender, while "white feminists" have unknowingly made the same choice. Lesbian feminists explore the forces of heterosexism in conjunction with sexism and do so openly, while "feminists" have tended to focus on the struggles of heterosexual women while not being conscious of, or while not admitting that focus. Feminists may also choose to investigate the effects classism has on the experience of gender-based oppression. Gender Plus denotes greater specificity than what has often come before from theorists positing themselves as "feminists." It does not fear the creation of divisions within the category "woman" because such divisions already exist; it rather takes the first step in understanding differences, and in discovering the ways in which that

understanding illuminates the difficulties women face. Spelman, in her warning against the essentialization of the category “woman,” and the resulting inessentialization of groups of women, sees what I am calling Gender Plus as necessary:

Being a woman, as we surely know by now from cross-cultural studies, is something that is constructed by societies and differs from one society to another. Hence unless I know something more about two women than the fact that they are women, I can’t say anything about what they might have in common (1988, 136).

While women will not come together as a whole category until Gender Plus is achieved in feminist discourse, and feminists can begin to study what women might have in common across races or sexualities or classes, nothing is lost, because this theory does not disband women. Rather, it acknowledges that the category “woman” does not include all women yet, that certain groups of women have been systematically left out. Indeed, the very forces that have oppressed those women within “feminism” are those that must be accounted for in Gender Plus methodology.

Spelman proposes an imagery schema that can be used as a framework for enacting Gender Plus in practice: banks of doors form consecutive barriers, each labeled with an identifier such as “woman,” “man,” “Afro-American,” “Asian-American,” etc. (1988, 144). The doors are divided into banks according to the type of identifier they label, such as gender preceding race preceding class, etc. Whether the gender doors precede the race doors or vice versa, is at issue for this theorization of Gender Plus. If first, everyone is made to cross through either a door marked “woman” or a door marked “man” before crossing through a race category door, the implication is that there exists a category “woman” outside of racial differences. If, on the other hand, the race doors come before the gender doors, then people must divide themselves along racial lines before gender lines; this suggests that a category

“African-American” can exist before considerations of gender come into play. For feminists studying women and experiences of gender-based oppression, the schema in which gender precedes race is more applicable, but it must be approached with care. While there may be something that all women have in common which distinguishes them from men, feminists have not yet identified it because they have not extended their scope to include the next bank of doors, the further level of inquiry. Once women are all grouped together, there remain features which distinguish among them, and many of these are important for understanding their experiences of oppression. Gender Plus methodology begins with women and then discovers more about those women by studying divisions among them, for example, along racial lines, in order to understand better the struggles they face. If life presents different challenges beyond the “woman” and “Euro-American” doors from beyond the “woman” and “Afro-American” doors, then feminists will be a step closer to recognizing how the forces of sexism, racism, and racial advantage have impact on the lives of women. Dorothy Roberts, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks have taken this step and have explored many of the ways in which those forces affect black women’s experiences of oppression, and their doing so demonstrates that Gender Plus methodology enables a less partial and less perverse study of women and gender-based oppression.

Gender Plus takes the first step in the self-conscious, transparent inquiry into women’s lives and how women experience oppression. It does not presume to outline a politics through which women of varying races, sexualities, or classes come back together to unify their voices at the end of this interim. It highlights the importance, in fact, of *not* presuming what will happen when white feminist theorists begin calling themselves just that, and framing their investigations into the lives of white women as limited, specific studies

toward learning how sexism and race privilege interact to produce that group's experiences. Differences in experience that are due to the intersection of one's sex and one's race, for example, must be made clear before a holistic feminism can be pursued; Gender Plus only rolls back the study of women to the extent that it seeks to leave no flesh and blood women behind. It includes more women into the category "woman" and into the study of feminism.

Gender Plus requires that theorists investigate contexts that are more specific than "all women," and that they recognize the limitations of the contexts they choose before they draw conclusions. It posits the idea that conclusions that will then be drawn will be less partial and less perverse than if theorists were to claim to study all women, and, in turn, it will contribute more to feminism. The aim of feminism cannot be achieved without Gender Plus because it mitigates socially constructed biases by bringing deemphasized issues to the surface, especially when those issues have served to further the advantage of one group of women over another.

Another way to view the purpose of Gender Plus is through comparison with Nancie Caraway's (1991) multicultural feminism. She envisions a sort of arena in which feminists of different backgrounds can learn from each other's stories and question each other as equals and colleagues (1991, 199). Acknowledging that feminists' interests and concerns are as varied as all women's, and that those differences have led to divisions among feminists, Caraway aims for what she refers to as a more mature camaraderie, "solidarity," than the often-aspired-to ideal of "sisterhood" (1991, 201). For this endeavor, Caraway identifies "the first principle of multicultural feminism: accountability" (1991, 179). This principle is necessary for feminists engaging in debate with other feminists of backgrounds different from their own, because part of the process of learning from one another can be initial

misreadings of others' experiences. Caraway adds that "in a culture of white privilege, this condition [of accountability] imposes a greater burden on white feminists to take the first step toward making things right" (1991, 179). Gender Plus hopes for a similar type of exchange among feminists and *feminisms* associated with "pluses," such as black feminism, Latina feminism, lesbian feminism, etc., and also looks for "white feminists" to take the step of following black feminism's example, and describe their own scope and purpose more accurately. Iris Young criticizes the desire for community, arguing that it should be distrusted because "it denies difference in the concrete sense of making it difficult for people to respect those with whom they do not identify," and that therefore "the desire for mutual understanding and reciprocity underlying the ideal of community is similar to the desire for identification that underlies racial and ethnic chauvinism" (1990, 311). Analogous to this argument is Caraway's criticism of "sisterhood," that it has "been marked by...tendencies...which have disadvantaged women of color" (1991, 199). "White feminists" have sought to use the term "sisterhood" in order to gain political support for feminism among women of color and thereby to construct community. They have hoped to convey the notion that all women are in the struggle against sexism together, but the term "sisterhood," and the way in which "community" has grown out of it, has actually functioned as a cover-up for the tendency of "white feminists" to emphasize their own concerns over against those of women of color. While Audre Lorde sees great importance and potential in "community," she, too, warns against imposed or assumed homogeneity, both of which can be detrimental: "Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not

exist” (1981, 99). Similarly, Tessie Liu describes how the assertion of “community” or of “sisterhood” is a “quick achievement of solidarity [which] comes at the expense of a real examination of the nature of the connections that actually do exist, by virtue of the fact that we occupy different positions in [the] world” (1994, 574). These theorists emphasize the importance of acknowledging the reality of differences as fundamental to an inclusive, and thereby more effective movement.

Caraway’s multicultural feminism, like Gender Plus, has the goal of a more inclusive, less partial feminism. However, Caraway does not go far enough. She breaks down and examines the concept “sisterhood” to show how it has really functioned politically, and calls for a method of interaction in which feminists retain the differences that make them who they are, while relating to one another as colleagues, but she does not prescribe a way for feminists to ensure that they are equipped to interact effectively with feminists of different backgrounds. She cites theories of Bettina Aptheker (1989) and Elsa Barkley Brown (1989) as ways of imagining struggles that one has not experienced oneself, but that one’s peer feminists have experienced. Aptheker describes a framework through which a white feminist can consider the experiences of women of color, and do so outside of a white-centered context:

I wanted a grounding upon which the center could pivot to include the experiences of Afro-American, Asian-American, Native American, Latina, Chicana, and Euro-American women, and the diversity within and between them. Essential to my purpose was the shedding of a whitened center in conception and design...I also sought connection, as long as the connection remained respectful of the difference and became a point of illumination rather than a mush of obfuscation in a white, ethnocentric, heterocentric landscape (1989, 12).

Her method of “pivoting the center” does not make meaningless “white feminists” concerns or contributions. Rather, it makes room for the very multicultural solidarity to which

Caraway aspires; women of varying experiences and outlooks can come together and share in a space safe from the power dynamics of racism and race privilege. Brown utilizes Aptheker's framework in her study of how to teach a more aware, more inclusive women's history:

I do not mean that white or male students can learn to feel what it is like to be a Black woman. Rather, I believe that all people can learn to center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own. Thus, one has no need to 'decenter' anyone in order to center someone else, one has only to constantly, appropriately, 'pivot the center' (1989, 922).

Brown points to the equality of exchange inherent in "pivoting the center." There is a space which used to be occupied by white women of race privilege, but that, once pivoted, becomes neutral. In other words, awareness, acceptance, and understanding do not have to be zero-sum games. In Brown's example, black women, too, can occupy the center, and those seeking to learn from black women's experiences create a space in their minds in which they imagine those experiences without fitting them into biased frameworks.

These notions of "pivoting the center" and imagining another's experiences without judgment or comparison are useful ways of describing what will be made possible with Gender Plus. They and Caraway's multicultural feminist politics of solidarity are meaningful ends, but absent from their discussion is a clear means to those ends. Gender Plus fills that void. Imagining oppression that one has not experienced, or in which one has perhaps been complicit, and doing so in a diverse collective of women is an articulation of the process toward a feminism that does not systematically exclude or obfuscate the experiences of particular groups of women. Gender Plus will in practice ensure that such a neutral space can be located through pivoting the center. Its prerequisite that feminist theorists discover and master an understanding of women's experiences of oppression by narrowing their focus

slightly and explicitly is the first step toward leveling the playing field in feminist discourse. “White feminism,” for example, will exist as it is and will no longer purport to be “feminism.” It will follow that “white feminism” is as important to an understanding of a more holistic feminism as black feminism and Chicana feminism. Only when Gender Plus is achieved can a neutral center be found, and can feminists of varying cultures and perspectives come together and debate within it.

Gender Plus has two objectives regarding feminism. Besides working toward greater discursive inclusiveness, it also functions to expand feminism’s knowledge of women. It can both stunt the racism fed by an emphasis on white women’s experiences, for example, and expand knowledge of *women’s* experiences. The practice of this methodology can curb a social ill in the context of feminism and not just allow, but enact, a greater understanding of women and their experiences of oppression. Black feminist theorists who engage in Gender Plus both clarify the functions of racism and sexism in the world as well as in feminism, and augment what is known about how women experience oppression. In the following chapter, I will explore how some black feminists have gone about enacting Gender Plus.

Part III: *Black Feminism and Intersectionality*

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face (The Combahee River Collective 1981).

Black feminism gives voice to many of the salient issues and struggles faced by black women, who have been silenced historically by both the feminist movement and the antiracist movement. Black feminism also brings to light some heretofore hidden assumptions of feminism. For instance, gender ideology, one of the very notions upon which “white feminism” rests, is called into question by a black feminist reading. Feminism’s fight against sexism assumes that women are socially constructed in such a way that allows for their subordination, and that men are socially constructed in such a way that allows for their dominance. Collins (2005) shows that gender ideology is more complex than that. She argues that there is a dominant gender ideology and that there is also a black gender ideology which, by its very definition, provides for the subordination of both black men and women. Collins describes the dominant ideology with the terms “hegemonic masculinity” and “hegemonic femininity.” For men, hegemonic masculinity consists in being “strong” and in having power over both women and various groups of men. It is relational in nature, in that it is defined in “opposition to women, boys, poor and working class men of all races and ethnicities, gay men, and Black men” (Collins 2005, 186). Hegemonic masculinity depends not only on the existence of these other groups, but also on their social and political subordination to hegemonic males. A social hierarchy of dominant and subordinated males,

or “successful and failed manhood” (Collins 2005, 187), is stacked by racial categories through racist bias, insofar as a central part of being a hegemonic male is enjoying racial privilege, i.e., not experiencing oppression due to racism. This positions white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual men at the top of the gender hierarchy. Below them, in power, influence, and masculinity, are all remaining men. Furthermore, the way in which we understand the relationships among masculinities is predicated by “*all* women occupy[ing] the category of devalued Other” (2005, 187), Collins argues.

For women, hegemonic femininity first exists as a complement to hegemonic masculinity: while hegemonic masculinity calls for strong, provider and protector males, hegemonic femininity calls for weak, demure and vulnerable females (Collins 2005, 194). There is a second dimension to hegemonic femininity, however. Collins argues that femininity is not something to be earned like masculinity (by “having sex with a woman, bringing home a paycheck, or demonstrating athletic prowess,” [Collins 2005, 194]), but is rather something to display, something more passive in nature, and that it is centrally concerned with women’s bodies³. She contends that the physical aspects of hegemonic femininity make femininity, as it is understood in this construct, impossible for most black women to achieve: “[h]istorically, in the American context, young women with milky White skin, long blond hair, and slim figures were deemed to be the most beautiful and therefore the most feminine women” (2005, 194). Fundamental to this ideology of femininity, then, is the exclusion of black women. Besides the physical attributes associated with this notion of femininity, the attitudinal attributes also have a racial slant: “because they were employed outside the home and brought home their own independent income, [black women]

³ This argument by Collins does not acknowledge the ways in which women can be seen to “earn” femininity by giving birth, by mothering, and by providing care in contexts other than mothering. Femininity is thus not completely passive, but can legitimately be described as “centrally concerned with women’s bodies.”

seemingly usurped Black male authority within Black families” (Collins 2005, 199). A demure demeanor and attitudinal subordination vis-à-vis males implies a lack of authority. Black women have not had that lack of authority, given their history of supporting themselves economically.

The dominant notions of femininity in American culture have many more dimensions than just gender. This notion of race and gender follows from the racial dimension of gender in the hegemonic concept of femininity; differences in how women experience daily life, such as whether they work, or have to work, or stay home, are often raced. In this way, gender is racialized. It is useful to consider one or several of these other dimensions—race, class, sexuality, etc.—in concert with gender in the study of gender ideology, and in creating feminist scholarship; doing so can bring to the surface the complexity that already exists in the reality of femininity. This black feminist work by Collins frames the concept of femininity in such a way as to illuminate the biases that infuse its hegemonic ideology and, in turn, create it as an exclusive concept.

As a less perverse alternative to hegemonic femininity and masculinity, Collins calls for the development of a “progressive Black sexual politics” that “reject[s] sexism and heterosexism and that...[is] sensitive to economic, political, and social contours of the new racism” (2005, 184). With the term “the new racism,” Collins refers to the racism of the post-Civil Rights era in the U.S., a racism that is *de facto* rather than *de jure*, but that is nearly institutionalized, given its consistency. It is more subtle and less acknowledged, but it remains damaging to African-Americans. “The new racism” permeates U.S. culture and can be characterized by a “radical form of passivity” called “dis-engagement,” in which whites see only through the lens of their own culture, yet assume theirs is the only culture (Lugones

1990, 51); ethnocentric racism objectifies and subordinates black people while making that subordination invisible. This form of racism is “new” because it reflects traditional forms of racism, such as colonialism and slavery, but its manifestations are modern, such as “poor housing, poor health, illiteracy, [and] unemployment” (Collins 2005, 55). Central to an antiracist movement today is a new black sexual politics that opposes the damaging forces of the new racism, one of which is subordination—of women in some instances, and of men in some instances. Furthermore, such a black sexual politics rejects fundamentally the problematic exclusion of black men and women by the notion of hegemonic masculinity and femininity: the “weak men, strong women” thesis seems to accuse black women of resisting dominant gender ideology, and black men of not being able to subordinate black women (Collins 2005, 182). Indeed, many antiracist policies of recent decades have centered on a need for African-Americans to assimilate to middle-class, white, hegemonic gender ideology, in other words, a need to strengthen “weak” black men and an implied need to weaken “strong” black women (Collins 2005, 183). Insofar as “Black femininity is constructed in relation to the tenets of hegemonic masculinity that subordinates all femininities to masculinity” (Collins 2005, 187), social and cultural concern about black men and women operating outside of hegemonic gender norms arise from sexist and racist biases, and they serve to undermine “one of the few positive images used to describe Black femininity” (Collins 2005, 205). Therefore, a more careful study shows that it is necessary to develop a progressive black sexual politics that has as its central tenet the subordination of no one (Collins 2005, 7).

Such a politics will also take into account the day-to-day issues of femininity that concern black women, and that are often quite different from those that concern white

women. In another work, Collins discusses how some of the first black feminists to organize, such as those of the National Black Feminist Organization of the early 1970s, came together to discuss:

the politics of appearance, especially the effects of skin color and hair texture on Black women's self-images and how others treated them,...the greater mobility of White women in job settings, the lack of housing, the prevalence of rape and crime in Black communities, the burdens of the matriarchy thesis, and the myths of Black women's promiscuity (2006, 166).

Black femininity is socially constructed on the outskirts of hegemonic femininity, a positioning which arises out of racist notions of what is appealing in the female sex. The issues of femininity that black women face, therefore, often have to do with that exclusion and that racism. If hegemonic femininity denotes a certain hair and skin type that black women do not have, then their experiences with those aspects of femininity are likely to be pertinent both to their experiences with sexism and their experiences with racism; hair texture and skin type thus become black feminist issues. The same is true of the matriarchy thesis and of black women's promiscuity. Both are theorized in opposition to hegemonic femininity. The lack of housing and the prevalence of rape and crime in black communities are linked to economic and political aspects of the "new racism," and become central concerns for the women living under those conditions. Each of these issues is important to a black sexual politics that subordinates no one in that each is related to the intersection of the oppressive forces of sexism and racism in black women's lives.

A progressive black sexual politics arises not from the bias of race privilege, but from the less perverse perspective of black women. More fully aware that pervasive American notions of gender are simply another face of an exclusionist dominant gender ideology, black feminists can rethink what is so often taken as given—that femininity

consists in economic dependence, whiteness, and political subordination, and that masculinity consists in economic independence, whiteness, and political dominance. Then, they can use realities of black women's experiences to develop a more self-aware, positive, inclusive politics. Collins has engaged in Gender Plus, as I am calling it, by analyzing the forces of race and gender which are present and active in the dominant gender ideology, interpreting them, and acknowledging their roles in the oppression of women.

Similarly, Crenshaw (1991) seeks to bring to light a set of circumstances in which both race and gender biases effectively marginalize women of color. The concept she calls "intersectionality" describes the interrelatedness and mutual construction of race and gender. It points to "the multidimensionality of Black women's experience," for which the "single-axis framework that is...reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics" is insufficient, and which that framework can distort (Crenshaw 1989, 139). Through a study of intersectionality, and of battering and rape of women of color, she draws the conclusion that such experiences of women of color are affected by intersecting forces of race and gender, and furthermore, that antiracist and feminist policies have not effectively challenged those forces as a combination. Crenshaw argues that, while racist and sexist forces regularly intersect in the lives of women, they are not regularly recognized as doing so in antiracist or in feminist efforts (1991, 1242). Indeed, she cites, as does hooks, the same tendency toward the exclusion of black women from the groups "black people," and "women," characteristic of discourse that pits the two groups as separate entities without overlap: "when...[antiracist and feminist] practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (Crenshaw 1991, 1242).

The marginalization of women of color in the arena of battering and rape manifests itself in a variety of ways. Of particular pertinence to this article is a societal resistance to raising awareness about violence against women of color. Even among victims' advocates—activists, police—concern has been expressed that making known statistics regarding these crimes in minority communities could have several negative consequences for minorities in general, and *for the victims themselves* (Crenshaw 1991, 1253). Crenshaw encountered the following responses when she sought such statistics from the Los Angeles Police Department:

Domestic violence activists both within and outside the Department feared that statistics reflecting the extent of domestic violence in minority communities might be selectively interpreted and publicized so as to undermine long-term efforts to force the Department to address domestic violence as a serious problem.

[A]ctivists were worried that the statistics might permit opponents to dismiss domestic violence as a minority problem and, therefore, not deserving of aggressive action.

Representatives from various minority communities opposed the release of these statistics. They were concerned, apparently, that data would unfairly represent Black and Brown communities as unusually violent, potentially reinforcing stereotypes that might be used in attempts to justify oppressive police tactics and other discriminatory practices (1991, 1253).

People already dedicated to prosecuting and eradicating domestic violence, as well as people employed to uphold the law against domestic violence, exhibit here a reluctance to contribute to increased awareness and analysis of domestic violence against women of color. Sexism and racism together operate in both of these positions, and in the assumed outcome of the release of any statistics. The position of the activists, both within and outside the L.A.P.D., points to the probability that information regarding domestic violence in minority communities will be readily misunderstood or misapplied. Activists argue that it could

undercut the already shaky credence given to domestic violence as a serious problem, but such an argument neglects the fact that the lack of awareness and understanding of the issues associated with domestic violence among minorities is itself problematic. The very reason Crenshaw sought this information was presented as justification for its denial.

The activists take a second position, which argues that racist bias tends to generalize the behaviors of one member of a racial group to all members of that racial group. They claim that such a concern justifies avoiding the acknowledgment that domestic violence even exists in minority communities, for fear that the acknowledgment itself could have the potential to serve as fodder for this common practice of stereotyping. Furthermore, this position takes as a given that such a stereotype would depreciate the very importance of combating domestic violence. The fact that racist bias might express itself in response to information about crime in minority communities does not justify suppressing that information; racism cannot be used as a reason not to prosecute crimes committed by people of color. Law enforcement must consistently prosecute violent crimes in any organized society, and ignoring those crimes also ignores their victims, often themselves people of color.

Moreover, it is sexist on its face to suggest that any perspective on domestic violence could decrease the very need to address it. Domestic violence remains a violent crime, and the fact that women are most commonly its victims seems, by this view, to open it up to the possibility that it be deemed unimportant. The more particular suggestion that a “minority problem,” or in this case a crime whose victims tend to be people of color, deserves less attention, is racist. Perhaps the domestic violence activists could respond by saying that if police and legislators think domestic violence is a “black problem,” they will be less likely to

devote funding and resources to fighting it; rather, if they can be convinced that it is a “white problem,” domestic violence might get more attention as a serious issue among those best equipped to fight it. This response points to a different way in which racism operates within the issue of domestic violence. Suppressing information about a crime because its victims tend to be women is sexist, and suppressing information about a crime whose victims tend to be non-white, is racist. Women of color who are victims of domestic violence live at the intersection of sexist forces that impede effective law enforcement against crimes against women, and of racist forces that impede effective law enforcement against crimes chiefly perpetrated against people of color.

These issues of race and domestic violence testify that even the best intentioned whites exhibit racism without even realizing it. The lack of realization is made possible by the ostensible focus on “women,” without regard to race, in the movement to end domestic violence, which in effect translates into a focus on white women. The representatives from minority communities exhibit the sexism characteristic of some antiracist practices, which marginalize women of color. Central to their position is an assumption that racism affects the perpetrators of these crimes rather than the victims. Crenshaw sought data specifically from minority precincts because, according to G. Chezia Carraway, rarely do statistics about violence against women break down data by race (Carraway 1991, 1305), and Crenshaw reasoned that studying data by precinct would give her an idea of arrests by racial group, since Los Angeles is comparatively racially segregated (Crenshaw 1991, 1252). Given that “nine out of ten violent victimizations of African-American women [are] committed by African-American men” (Maxwell et al. 2003, 534), holding a position that affects how violence against women by men of color is handled, affects to almost the same extent, how

violent experiences of women of color are handled. Suppressing information, or neglecting to collect information, about violence against women by men of color effectively deemphasizes many of the violent experiences of women of color. This is a kind of racism in itself, one that is informed and shaped by, and one that also informs and shapes, the sexism that devalues a serious approach to violent crimes against women. This position argues that certain crimes can legitimately be ignored because addressing them might negatively affect the perpetrators; it therefore undermines the gravity of the victims' experiences, which should take priority. Furthermore, it assumes that the victims are not already subjected to racism in the criminal justice system, an assumption that is demonstrably invalid. For example, Bullock (1961) found that typically intra-racial crimes, such as sexual assault, committed by African-Americans, are adjudicated less severely than typically interracial crimes, such as robbery, committed by African-Americans. In other words, African-Americans who commit crimes against other African-Americans receive more lenience from the criminal justice system than African-Americans who commit crimes against people of other races. Similarly, Maxwell et al. found that

African-Americans convicted for rape serving time in state prisons were more likely to state that their victims were White (68 percent) than African-American (28 percent)...Given that only 15 percent of White sexual assault victims reported the race of their offender as African-American...and that the majority of African-American sex offenders were serving time for victimizing White women, the evidence seems to suggest that African-American sexual assault victims receive less protection from the criminal justice system than White victims (2003, 534).

This suggests, first, that the victim's race can have an impact on the outcome of violent crime adjudication, and second, that the criminal justice system particularly devalues black women. Incidents from 1989 support these statistics. In April, a white woman jogging in Central Park was brutally raped and beaten. The horrific crime received widespread media coverage

and the perpetrators were generally thought to be a group of black and Latino adolescent boys. The races of the victim and the rapists seem to have had an impact on media coverage and the societal panic that followed, because less than two weeks later, a black woman was raped and thrown from the roof of a 4-story apartment building in Brooklyn (Carraway 1991, 1304), and no comparable reaction followed. And during the same week that the jogger was raped in Central Park, 28 other rapes were reported in New York City (Terry 1989). In most of these cases, the victims were women of color, and none of these received the kind of media attention that the jogger did. According to Carraway, most rape victims are the same race as their attackers (1991, 1303). Therefore, one explanation for the lack of media coverage of the black woman in Brooklyn, and of the other 28, is the race of the victims relative to the race of their attackers. Many of the suspected boys of color in the jogger case served lengthy jail sentences before a serial rapist came forward 12 years later and confessed to having committed the crime (Collins 2005, 103).

In this instance, minority community advocates were almost certainly concerned with the media coverage of the jogger rape and the suspects. Collins argues that terms used in the media to refer to the suspects, such as “roving bands” and “wolf pack” (2005, 103), inflamed stereotypical images of “the black male rapist.” Donald Trump’s full page ad in the New York Times following the crime demanded that New York “Bring Back the Death Penalty, Bring Back Our Police” and was seen as a parallel to past sensationalizing of violent crimes that frequently ended in lynchings of black suspects (Crenshaw 1991, 1267). While these images and their ensuing horrors are extremely troubling, Crenshaw argues that antiracist policies committed to fighting them can have the effect of devaluing black women:

Antiracist critiques of rape law focus on how the law operates primarily to condemn rapes of white women by Black men. While the heightened

concern with protecting white women against Black men has been primarily criticized as a form of discrimination against Black men, it just as surely reflects devaluation of Black women...To the extent rape of Black women is thought to dramatize racism, it is usually cast as an assault on Black manhood, demonstrating his inability to protect Black women. The direct assault on Black womanhood is less frequently seen as an assault on the Black community (1991, 1272-73).

The origin and persistence of the “black male rapist” myth have stemmed from a fear for the safety of white women, and have ignored four important realities: first, although this myth was used as a tool to rally whites around the practice of lynching, rape was only rarely alleged in those cases (Crenshaw 1991, 1272); second, as Carraway points out, in the vast majority of rape cases, the victim and the rapist are the same race (Carraway 1991, 1303); third, “statistics show that Black women are more likely to be raped than Black men are to be falsely accused of it” (Crenshaw 1991, 1274); and fourth, black women are significantly more likely to be raped than white women (Ostrow, 1985). In other words, black men who have raped women have more likely than not raped black women, but it is not these narratives that draw a response from minority activists, antirape activists, society more generally, or the criminal justice system.

Women of color’s experiences with violence are, argues Crenshaw, in many instances “erased” by the intersecting forces of racism and sexism. The erasure of these experiences also seems to result from a consensus of odd political bedfellows; people of color and domestic violence activists (those advocating the suppression of the Los Angeles statistics) join with those who arrest, charge, try, and sentence violent criminals in discounting the voices and experiences of women of color. Are not *women* the very people domestic violence activists and the criminal justice system aim to protect in these cases? Are not *people of color* the very people whose rights and liberties minority community activists seek

to defend? Would it not, then, be logical to assume that *women of color* might benefit from the support and advocacy of many different groups? It is instead the case that, when women of color, people who fit into both of these categories, comprise the group in need of protection and defense, the support collapses. We may attribute this phenomenon, again, to the presence of a racist bias in the feminist movement and the attendant presence of a sexist bias in the antiracist movement, and also to the presence of both racism and sexism in the criminal justice system, and in society more generally. As G. Chezia Carraway (1991) argues, however, there is hope in the work being done to make more visible the violence against women of color. Such efforts insist on finding, and making public, information about the experiences of women of color, and thus they oppose the forces that marginalize those experiences.

After analyzing and interpreting experiences that have been thus far marginalized, black feminists create theories that account for the intersecting forces which produce the context and substance of black women's experiences. This phase is crucial, because "[w]hat is considered theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women-of-color," argues Anzaldúa (1990, xxv). Black women need theories "that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis" (Anzaldúa 1990, xxv). Anzaldúa endorses what I am calling Gender Plus insofar as she calls for further levels of analysis beyond gender. Theories relevant for women of color, and for black feminism, must seek to understand the forces that shape their lives. Like Crenshaw, Collins sees the oppression of U.S. black women as the intersection of mutually constructing forces (Collins 2000, 5). Race-based, gender-based, class-based forms of oppression highlight societal responses to aspects of black women's identities. How society treats black

women is intimately tied to who they are. In “A Black Feminist Statement,” The Combahee River Collective writes about the study of black feminism and its ties to identity politics: “[w]e believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity” (1981, 212). Intersecting identities can result in intersecting oppressions, insofar as those identities are each associated with a form of oppression. Everyone has a race, a gender, a class, a sexuality, etc., but only for specific groups of people do those identities make them targets of oppression. For black women in the United States, their race, their gender, often their class, and for some, their sexuality, all make them targets of different forms of oppression. Experiences of oppression, however, are complex, and separating one form of oppression from another is often impossible. Is it racism or sexism that devalues black women in the eyes of the criminal justice system? If both are at work, which one is responsible for which aspects of the devaluation experience? While the sexism of some antiracist policies and the racism of some feminist policies can explain the actions of their respective advocates, they become blurred and interconnected within black women’s experiences.

The exclusion and subordination of black women through the dominant conception of femininity, and the devaluation of black women by the criminal justice system, are two examples of the ways in which black women’s experiences differ markedly from those of white women. Another example is the history of the birth control movement in the U.S., discussed in brief in Part I, and its close ties to the racist foundations of the eugenics movement.

Dorothy Roberts shows that the birth control movement arose in the United States as a feminist cause which promoted reproductive freedom and autonomy for women (1997, 52).

From the turn of the century through the 1920s when this movement had its beginnings, however, it met with opposition from many Americans who continued to associate reproduction with the duties of womanhood; reproductive autonomy was considered radical and even rebellious, and did not receive the necessary popular support to serve as the ideological basis for the dissemination of birth control. Instead, the movement's leader, Margaret Sanger, turned to "the more gender-neutral goal of family planning and population control" (Roberts 1997, 58). Ideologically, this connected the birth control movement with the eugenics movement of the era, and The American Birth Control League began to promote the use of birth control among the "socially unfit" (Roberts 1997, 75). The link to eugenics gave the birth control movement a racist quality, argues Roberts; although eugenics was most commonly directed at whites, the principles of eugenics were racist in origin. The theories used to justify Nazi sterilization of German Jews in the 1930s, and European and American enslavement and colonization of Africans, or "the science of improving stock" (Roberts 1997, 59), were the same theories used to justify the practice of eugenics in the United States (Roberts 1997, 61). Black Americans involved in the birth control movement viewed its purpose very differently. Indeed, birth control as a means for racial improvement had a different meaning for blacks than for whites:

The leading Blacks in the birth control movement never presented contraception as a means of eliminating hereditary defects; rather, birth control addressed problems such as high maternal and infant mortality rates that resulted from social and economic barriers. [W. E. B.] Du Bois and other Blacks active in the birth control movement adamantly opposed sterilization, the chief tool of eugenicists (Roberts 1997, 86).

In some cases, white women activists in the birth control movement sought to gain political ground among white Americans by allying themselves with eugenicist ideals, and sought to promote such ideals in ways that regarded black women as part of the "socially unfit." Black

women activists in the birth control movement, on the other hand, faced the task of convincing black Americans that birth control was not aimed at “racial suicide” by decreasing their numbers, but could rather serve to aid poor, black women in exerting more control over their lives under the harsh conditions of poverty and substandard health care.

It can perhaps be concluded that when activists first pushed for birth control as a means of reproductive freedom, they had in mind reproductive freedom for white women of the middle and upper classes, who also otherwise fit the bill for being considered socially fit (i.e. of a certain level of intelligence as well as mental and physical health). And when such activists altered the ideological framework for the promotion of birth control, they embraced a racist, classist, and otherwise prejudiced ideology, which would facilitate the success of the movement. Black women activists’ experiences with the birth control movement in this era, then, were in part shaped by their own views of what contraception could mean for black women and the particular struggles they faced, but also in part by the eugenicist politics of the movement, which were in turn an expression of racism and classism, etc., because much of the movement’s leadership continued to be predominantly white.

The eugenicist tie to the birth control movement, and the disproportionate sterilization of black women in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (see Part I, pp. 6-7), argues Roberts, are symptomatic of a greater problem: “the devaluation of *Black* reproduction” (1997, 246). Roberts adds another trend to this list: the promotion of temporary sterilization among black women.

In more recent decades, methods of contraception have been developed that are longer-acting and do not have to be administered for each sexual encounter or even daily. In 1990, the FDA approved Norplant for marketing. It is a contraceptive drug in the form of 6

small tubes that are surgically inserted into a woman's arm and remain there for 5 years, slowly releasing progestin into the blood stream (Roberts 1997, 105). Its 99% efficacy rate makes it essentially a form of temporary sterilization (Roberts 1997, 106). Roberts contends that state sponsored programs, such as Medicaid and AFDC, specifically targeted black women for Norplant implantations in the 1990s:

Although most families on welfare are not Black, Blacks disproportionately rely on welfare to support their children. Black women are only 6 percent of the population, but they represent a third of AFDC recipients. The concentration of Black welfare recipients is even greater in the nation's inner cities, where Norplant has primarily been dispensed. For example, in Baltimore, the site of a government campaign to distribute Norplant, 86 percent of women receiving welfare are Black...Welfare programs have a greater direct impact on the status of Black people as a whole [than on that of white people as a whole] (Roberts 1997, 111).

These efforts came at a time when state and federal elected officials sought to cut rather than expand programs for the poor (Roberts 1997, 108). Although Norplant's initial appeal seemed to be greater reproductive freedom given its low maintenance requirements, the state designed a new social welfare policy to *encourage* its use among recipients by making it free through Medicaid. In that "class distinctions are racialized, race and class are inextricably linked in the development of welfare policy" (Roberts 1997, 110). Thus, when legislators supported distribution of this form of contraception among the nation's poor, their appeal was likely laced with racist notions that overestimate the percentage of women on welfare who are black (while, at one third, the percentage is disproportionate, more welfare recipients are white than black), and assume that poor, black women are insufficient mothers. This argument, like those used in favor of birth control dissemination among poor, black women, is arguably also linked historically to the philosophy of the U.S. eugenics movement (Roberts 1997, 142). From these assumptions, argues Roberts, policy makers then ushered black

women's bodies into socially and politically regulated space; they debated over how best to go about instituting such regulation—incentives or mandates—but did not include questions of black women's autonomy over their own bodies and their own reproduction in the discussion (1997, 138). The implication that reproduction should be regulated at the hands of the state is generally a sexist notion, and flies in the face of women's reproductive autonomy. While there is something to the argument that some government incentives reasonably encourage people to act in the public interest, the assumption that curbing poor, black women's reproduction will solve social problems, such as poverty, misinterprets the structural source of such problems (Roberts 1997, 137-38); black people are not disproportionately poor because of the number of children they have. Indeed, from data compiled during the summer of 1993, statistics show that black women recipients of AFDC “do not have significantly more children than their white counterparts” (Bureau of the Census Statistical Brief, 1995).

State policies regarding the distribution of Norplant were both racist and ineffectively directed. Public health care workers particularly encouraged the use of Norplant in areas with high density black populations. Doing so, policy makers argued, was an effective means of reducing overall state support of children whose parents could not afford to care for them, and the perpetuation of social problems prevalent among black Americans. To enact policies specifically designed for the purpose of decreasing, or temporarily halting, the fertility of black women, is an expression of intersectional oppression. State control over reproduction is in direct conflict with reproductive autonomy; the assumption that social problems such as poverty are caused by actions of poor, black people themselves instead of structural forces, unfoundedly attributes blame to black victims; and targeting poor people as

subjects for temporary sterilization denotes the classism and racism central to the eugenics movement.

Just as Roberts asserts that policy makers mistakenly assume black women's reproduction to be the cause of social ills predominant in black communities, Collins (2005) argues that hegemonic gender ideology gives root to the faulty notion that black people could counteract such social ills by simply adopting certain aspects of masculinity and femininity.

In the context of the new racism, using these arguments to explain African American economic and political disadvantage diverts attention from structural causes for Black social problems and lays the blame on African Americans themselves. Pandering to misogyny within African American communities, new versions of Black gender ideology evolve into one of perpetrator and victim in which African American men are "too weak" *because* African American women are "too strong" (2005, 184).

These ideas link Collins' conceptualization of the "new racism" to the ideas put forth by the Moynihan report of 1965 regarding the "pathological" black family. These arguments go as follows: if only poor black women would have fewer children, there would be more resources to go around for all black people; if only black men and women would relate to one another as middle- and upper-class white men and women tend to, then black people would have better jobs, housing, and health care. These arguments not only wrongly place all of the blame for social injustice and inequality on the targets of those ills, they further devalue black womanhood by identifying problems associated with black communities as intricately linked to issues of black femininity and black reproduction.

Yet these arguments are familiar, dating back to the 17th century when John Locke, and the 19th century when John Stuart Mill, both explicitly linked poverty to overreproduction (see Hirschmann 2003). They arose out of class-based, rather than race-based views. What Moynihan added to these arguments, and what Collins discusses above,

is the racist dimension. The racialization of class in the United States today (Roberts 1997) may explain this addition. Roberts argues that welfare policy, though clearly motivated by class-based views, also has an important racist feature. These arguments, with the addition of the racist dimension, perpetuate racism and classism by ignoring their complex causes, and by charging poor, black people with culpability for their own oppression. Furthermore, these arguments misread the intersectionality of the structural, social forces that engender such social problems. Racist, sexist, and classist oppressions, among others, combine, mutually construct, and together create the contexts in which poverty, joblessness, poor health care, and poor housing develop in black communities today. And in order to self-perpetuate, these oppressive systems form and misshape societal perceptions of the causes of these phenomena, such as placing fault with black women, who are, in fact, the ones most hurt by the intersectionality of these forces.

Conceptualization of intersectionality in black women's experiences of oppression allows for a greater understanding of the experiences of women more generally. Indeed, Liu argues that oppression based on race is intimately linked to oppression based on gender: "[r]acism is a kind of sexism which does not treat all women the same, but drives wedges between us on the basis of our daily experiences, our assigned functions within the social order" (1994, 581). That black women's experiences are, in part, shaped by racism, entails that white women's experiences are shaped by a lack of racism. That black women often experience the intersection of classist oppression with racial and gender-based oppression, also reveals more about white women's experiences, such as that white women often experience the intersection of gender-based oppression with the lack of race-based oppression, and in some instances, these forces interact with class-based oppression. The

intersection of classism with other forms of oppression in black women's experiences, and the extent to which classism itself is racialized, according to Roberts, suggests an opening for examining the workings of class in white women's experiences, as well. Understanding black women's experiences with these intersecting oppressions can illuminate how white women experience a different set of intersecting experiences; the presence or absence of classist oppression intersecting with the absence of racist oppression, concomitant with the presence of sexist oppression, is given meaning partially by understanding how some of these forces intersect for black women.

Black feminism, then, and the method of Gender Plus, or the consideration of at least one further level of inquiry beyond gender in feminist analysis, both point to the concept of intersectionality and point out that women all face intersecting oppressions. Hispanic lesbians, for example, also face racism, sexism, and possibly classism, but their experiences are also shaped by societal heterosexism. Problematic for feminism is that views of women can become skewed by oppressive forces that erase the experiences of some women from the collective consciousness, and thus distort the category "woman." In part because of the new racism, dis-engagement has allowed for the de-emphasis of white women's race. We can see from the perspective of intersectionality, however, that just as black women's race, and societal attitudes toward it, have enormous effect on their experiences of oppression, white women's race and societal attitudes toward it can likely be shown to affect white women's experiences of oppression. Intersectionality informs a more inclusive feminism that seeks to account for the important differences among women which shape their lives. In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the implications race and racism have for white women feminists, as well as the importance of differences for a comprehensive movement.

Part IV: Conclusion

For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic (Audre Lorde 1979).

Feminism has been a splintered movement for the past forty or so years. Hartsock dates the separatist movements within feminism from the mid to late nineteen sixties (1998, 59), and accounts for the divisions in feminism through a conceptualization of difference. She argued in the 1980s that feminism's relationship to difference has developed on a trajectory: feminism has "moved from a denial of the importance of difference, through avoidance of difference, to the beginnings of a recognition that the differences among us need not imply relations of domination" (1998, 56). I argue that today, feminism is in a similar position to that in which Hartsock saw it in the 1980s; it has yet constructively to appreciate the differences among women. A recognition of the link between difference and domination has been central to feminism. For instance, the fact of differences between the genders has been used to justify the domination of men over women (Hartsock 1998, 56; see also MacKinnon 1987). Hartsock uses a three-part typology to describe the ways in which difference is used to legitimize domination: *differences* as empirical phenomena—we are not all alike; *Difference*, or "radical alterity"—when *differences* "are given a particular social and even ontological meaning...and thereby can be used as a basis for domination"; and *specificity*, or "positive collective identity" (1998, 57). She argues that when *differences* among women, e.g. occupation, race, ethnicity, height, hair color, sexuality etc., are seen to relate to the essence or nature of women, then they become *Difference*; and when the argument is made that some women are fundamentally different from other women, then the possibility of a shared reality among women is erased and power relationships develop in

place of collectivity. Some feminist thinkers have, however, mistakenly assumed that *differences* must be directly related to *Difference*, and thus to domination. Some of these women sought to avoid *Difference* in the construction of the movement by rejecting all pretenses of leadership or hierarchy within the movement, while others, insisting that the dominant feminist voices did not speak for them, avoided *Difference* by forming their own movements, or branches of feminism, as a strategy for rejecting domination (Hartsock 1998, 61). The failure to take up the issue of *Difference* by some feminists, however, at times went hand in hand with a failure to recognize power structures and the social construction of “otherness” within the movement. Since *Difference* caused “othered” groups to split off, those who remained were not confronted with its relationship to domination and how that relationship had affected their feminist ideology.

Instead, Hartsock argues, the feminist practice that has appreciated *differences* as *specificity*, or “positive collective identity,” is a constructive move away from domination and toward action (1998, 58). Allowing for variance among women to exist within the category “woman” allows for the inclusion of the marginalized. Even this approach is incomplete, however; she advocates the development of a universal theory of feminism that embraces *differences* as a source of creative tension (1998, 67), of constructive debate, rather than simply as a framework for reacting to patriarchy. Acknowledging the importance of mainstream feminism as well as of the branches, such as lesbian feminism, Chicana feminism, and black feminism, she also asks: how can we work together despite our important *differences*? Her response is “that it is only possible at present by using, preserving, and enhancing our differences” (1998, 69).

As the reasoning behind Gender Plus argues, the attempt to suppress differences does not work. “White feminism” cannot justifiably pass itself off as unmodified “feminism,” because its scope is more specific than that. In its modified form, “white feminism” has constructed *differences* in race as *Difference* rather than as *specificity*, which has, in turn, given way to the development of a power relationship within feminism in which white women have power over women of color. This power relationship replaces the potential of *differences* as *specificity* for positive collective identity, with “white feminists”’ false claim to universality. We may learn something about all women by studying white women, but we will not know what we have learned unless we acknowledge the source. Thus, although the term “feminism” exists, a truly universal feminist theory is one that is self-aware in that it makes room for *differences* among women and the variance in women’s experiences. Scales argues for a new approach to jurisprudence that favors “concrete universality,” or that “takes differences as constitutive of the universal itself...[that] sees differences as systematically related to each other and to other relations, such as exploited and exploiter...[and that] regards differences as emergent, as always changing” (1993, 101). This approach incorporates *differences* as “multiplicity” (Scales 1993, 101), and rejects *Difference* as it relates to exploitation and domination. Instead of using equality between the sexes as the standard for jurisprudence regarding gender-based oppression, the priority instead becomes recognizing and invalidating “enforced inferiority” (Scales 1993, 103). In other words, rather than using *differences* to highlight how everyone must be treated equally, jurisprudence must take into account *differences* in order to understand how they can ultimately translate into domination.

An appreciation for the fact that our shared biological identity is not in itself enough to presuppose our shared social identity, underpins the search for a universal theory of feminism, one that can celebrate specificity while bringing women together. The *differences* among women become *Difference* as they acquire social meaning, and thus interact with oppressive forces that engender systems of domination. Recognition of such a trajectory must be part of the development of a universal theory of feminism because, as hooks states, “it is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative” (1981, 138). In other words, suppression of *differences* is a way of ensuring the expression of domination because only the already dominant group(s) has the political and social power to suppress those differences. The differences that are suppressed are therefore more likely to be those that threaten the self-concepts of the dominant group(s), and social hierarchies are thus reproduced within a movement designed precisely to fight, in this case, a social hierarchy.

Pence (1982), a white woman feminist, tells her story of coming to the realization that racism was a problem she had, rather than just a problem black people faced. Hers is a success story about how *differences* and even *Difference*, when approached thoughtfully, do not have to engender domination, but can rather lead to greater self-conception and the breakdown of oppressive forces. In that she rebelled against her openly racist father during the 1960s, Pence thought she had dealt with the possibility of racism in her own world-view and had stamped it out. Her involvement in feminism led to her interaction with black women who expressed anger and frustration towards white feminists:

I watched Blacks and Indians accuse white feminist women of racism. Certainly, they didn't mean me...I too was oppressed by the white male.

So when I heard women of color speaking of white privileges, I mentally inserted the word “male”: “white male privileges” (1982, 45).

Through discussion with a black woman friend of hers, Pence discovered parallels between men’s domination of women and white women’s domination of women of color within the feminist movement:

I began to see how white women ignored the need to examine the traditional white rigid methods of decision making, priority setting, and implementing decisions. Our idea of including women of color was to send out notices. We never came to the business table as equals. Women of color joined us on our terms (1982, 46).

Only when they reexamine their own behaviors and approaches can white women feminists see how they might be reinforcing the subordination of women of color. She concludes now that whites must consider racism to be a problem that negatively affects them as well as people of color:

We must acknowledge what we think we have to lose by this understanding [of racism in our own views] and find what we have to gain by eliminating our racism. We must believe that racism causes us to be less human and work toward humanizing ourselves (1982, 47).

Ideally, the inclusion of *differences* in the feminist repertoire will lead to revised self-conceptions, given that forces of oppression, such as racism and classism, remain just as prevalent as sexism in the politics of U.S. society. A fundamental benefit of confronting differences in a constructive manner are the new, less perverse understandings that are born, and the possibilities for engagement in a less skewed, more complete feminism.

Barbara Smith echoes Pence’s point, but does so from her perspective as a black woman frustrated by white women’s tendency to express being “tired of hearing about racism”; she counters that black women are “much more tired...of constantly experiencing

it” (1982, 48). She places importance on white women’s recognition of how harmful their racism is to themselves, for the advancement of the feminist movement:

You have to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women—that racism affects your chances of survival, too, and that it is very definitely your issue (1982, 49).

The importance of “white feminists” fighting racism can be argued in two ways. First, racism is morally wrong and should be stamped out. And what better place to engage in that struggle than a movement committed to stamping out oppression that, for the most part, targets women, while so many women experience racism? It is intellectually and theoretically consistent for a movement based on an end to oppression to fight all kinds of oppression. Insofar as feminism is “the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women” (Smith 1982, 49), white women feminists who do not seek out and break down their own racism allow it to persist within themselves and within the movement, and by doing so, compromise the potency of feminism.

Second, it is politically expedient for “white feminists” to fight racism. A weaker feminism is weaker for all women; the intersectionality of issues of race and class with issues of gender entail that effectively redressing one necessitates effectively redressing all. If you do not stand against all oppression, then, at root, you do not stand against oppression at all. Indeed, Audre Lorde echoes this line of reasoning: “white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven’t also educated yourselves about black women and differences between us—white and black—when it is key to our survival as a movement?” (1981, 100). One particular example of how racism can negatively affect white women, albeit that white women often benefit from race privilege, is that white women on welfare in the United States suffer from the racism of a

policy that determines the state support they receive. This is discussed further below (see Hirschmann, 2003).

While white women feminists face the task of finding and acknowledging their own racism, black women feminists face the task of resisting the temptation to curry favor with more privileged classes by deemphasizing racism. Hull and Smith warn black women thinkers against intellectual “passing” as “a dangerously limiting solution for Black women, a non-solution that makes us invisible women” (1982, xxiv). In their work designed to guide and to act as a reference text for the creation of black women’s studies programs, Hull and Smith argue that black women’s studies must be an intellectual space for black women to express and explore their ideas freely. Black women must make use of that space by giving primacy to the issues they face, the issues that have often been deemed less important by both feminism and antiracism. The study of black women’s experiences can contribute to the practice of constructively examining how *differences* become *Difference* and, in turn, lead to domination. Bringing issues of race to the forefront can allow feminists of varying perspectives and identities to come together to search out their own racism, to learn about their history, to be exposed to black women’s creative production, and thereby to embrace differences as the means to a better understanding of feminism.

A careful and authentic analysis of the differences themselves can be the very source of a broader, more inclusive approach to feminism. Hooks (1984) proposes a definition of feminism that she contends will blaze the path for the achievement of a universal feminist theory by making room for differences among women. Feminism, hooks argues, is a “movement to end sexist oppression” (1984, 26). Hooks defines feminism in this way, as a shift away from a feminism that seeks to achieve social equality between the genders (1984,

30), because the latter does not convey a broad enough understanding of social forces pertinent to feminism. For instance, if feminism were primarily concerned with social equality, with whom would women seek to be equal? “Men” is the apparent answer, but *which* men? As hooks points out, black women do not have as a goal social equality with black men, whom they know to be politically and economically disadvantaged due to racism. “Equality with men” as the central tenet of feminism lumps men into one large, homogeneous group, and presupposes all men’s social statuses to be enviable for all women. This tenet does not account for divisions in the societal power structure that fall along racial and class lines; it does not account for the important social and political differences among women. Nor does it account for the men who, themselves, are victims of sexist oppression, e.g. gay men. “Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression,” instead, leaves open the possibility—indeed, points to the reality—that a variety of social forces interact with sexism in practice. By defining feminism in terms of its struggle, this description highlights the need to end the forces that structurally oppose women’s advancement, and it does so rather than centering men as an ideal, or presuming men are an ideal. This approach also differs from “sexism-only feminism” in that it seeks not to isolate experiences of sexism from other oppressive experiences, but instead to understand how sexism operates with other forms of oppression. Hooks’ strategy is a way of building Hartsock’s specificity. Feminism as a struggle includes under its umbrella all the women who face that struggle, and thus creates a positive collective identity. This definition also recognizes that those affected by sexism have widely varying experiences:

By repudiating the popular notion that the focus of feminist movement should be equality of the sexes and emphasizing eradicating the cultural basis of group oppression, our own analysis would require an exploration of all aspects of women’s political reality. This would mean that race and

class oppression would be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism (hooks 1984, 25).

Feminism as a movement *against* oppression instead of *for* a particular, arguably narrow and misdirected, goal, puts the focus instead on understanding the oppression women face and how it operates differently for different women. Thus, hooks argues, the conception of sexism broadens. Once we ask how sexism operates in the lives of women, we are pointed towards the reality of sexism's interconnectedness with other oppressive forces, and we are confronted, as well, with the diversity of women's experiences:

When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements. When we cease to focus on the simplistic stance "men are the enemy," we are compelled to examine systems of domination and our role in their maintenance and perpetuation (hooks 1984, 25).

Hooks' conception of feminism seeks to account for the totality of women's experiences by providing conceptual space for the range of oppressions women confront. She aims to move feminists toward a universal theory of feminism by broadening the category "woman."

Arguing that "white feminists" have been able to dominate the feminist movement because of the lack of an adequate definition, she differentiates her conception of feminism from a feminism that seeks to benefit a "particular race or class of women" (1984, 26). Accounting for a group as diverse as "women" involves considering the contexts in which sexism operates. The United States is a complex society, and any one woman encounters a wide sampling of that complexity. We are born with certain bodies, certain body types and skin colors. These are "read" in particular ways that define how we see ourselves. We are defined by others and by ourselves in an interactive dynamic: what comes out of that definitional process is "identity." Our contexts create our experiences which form our identities.

Understanding not only how society sees us, but also understanding ourselves, is key to recognizing ways in which we are oppressed. This recognition can, in turn, help us to understand the structural forces stemming from the interactions among contexts, identities, and social constructions that engender our oppressions. As I argued in Part III, whether or not our race determines a set of structural barriers we face, will in itself affect the formation of the barriers we face due to our gender. In other words, our experiences are multifaceted just as our selves are multifaceted. Just as we each represent the integration of our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc., what we see, what we suffer, what we are held back from, what we accomplish, and how others see us and make us suffer are all, at least in part, shaped by the intersectionality of our identities and contexts and how structural forces of oppression respond to them.

Since our differences are so central to our identities and contexts—insofar as *Difference* and then domination arise from them—acknowledging and trying to understand those differences is a project fundamental to feminism. If we take feminism to be a movement to end sexist oppression, then, as I argued in Part I, and as hooks argues, the first step is to understand women and the oppressions they experience. Doing so involves recognizing intersectionality in that differences are experienced along simultaneous vectors, e.g. *black women*, not just various vectors, e.g. *black + women*. Intersectionality describes not just overlapping, additive layers but mutually constructing, interweaving threads. One way to conceptualize the intersection of race and gender in shaping women's experiences with sexism is the mule and dog metaphor from Gwaltney's interview with Nancy White (see Part I, p. 9). White draws an analogy between white women and "the master's" dog, and between black women and "the master's" mule. White women are socially constructed to

function as house pets, to love the master and to be duped into feeling like part of the family, all the while being treated like an animal. The essence of “dogness” is to love to work; the ideal dog has fun working and gets its whole sense of being from that. Black women, on the other hand, know that they are not part of the family and that the master does not love them; they know they are treated like animals rather than human beings. A mule, in contrast to a dog, is a beast of burden, and always needs to be told what to do or forced, and cannot be “trained” like a dog. In this metaphor, white women have not distanced themselves from their privilege and therefore have not been able completely to recognize their oppression. Their comfortable living arrangements, within the house and near the master, have impeded them from seeing that their status is that of the family pet; they happily engage in the work of the master; they willingly participate in the master’s racial dominance and thereby preserve their own privilege. Black women as “mules” have no pretense that they are anything other than mules in the master’s eyes. They are also aware of white women’s standing as dogs because their own “outsider within” status (Collins 1986) allows them a more complete, less perverse perspective. While it could be argued that white women as “dogs” also have “outsider within” status—in that they live in the house with the family, but are animals rather than family members—that status has not always led them to an awareness of their relative lack of power in comparison with the master, together with their simultaneous, relative power over those that sleep in the barn. Or, it has not always led them to a desire to question that power structure. It is their own racial privilege that white women have not yet recognized, or been motivated to break down, that prevents them from seeing that they are “dogs” in the master’s house.

Following the prescriptions of Pence (1982) and Smith (1982), white women must endeavor to distance themselves from the privilege of the master's den by distancing themselves from their race privilege and (for many) from their class privilege, in order fully to recognize how their oppression is constituted. Pence knew she was oppressed by white men, but until she examined her own racism, she did not know the role her race privilege played in her experiences of sexism. Neither did she, therefore, understand as fully as she had presumed, black women's experiences with sexism. Smith conceptualizes the mule and dog metaphor by comparing white men's and white women's roles in racism, and pointing out that white women's racism holds them back from liberation too:

White women have a materially different relationship to the system of racism than white men. They get less out of it and often function as its pawns, whether they recognize this or not. It is something that living under white-male rule has imposed on us; and overthrowing racism is the inherent work of feminism and by extension feminist studies (1982, 51).

Instead of "dog," Smith uses the term "pawn" to describe white women's status. Pawn status is analogous to dog status in that, in both roles, white women are less than human, and fulfill the function of furthering someone else's purposes, namely those of white men. If white women, too, enjoy the race privilege of a racist patriarchy, that privilege arises primarily as a byproduct, and is not enough justifiably to offset their less-than-human "pawn" status. Preferring the perpetuation of racism to relinquishing the benefits that derive from complicity in that perpetuation is morally problematic. Moreover, in order to fight subordination with political efficacy, white women must forego whatever gains come from their contribution to their own subordination.

Hooks also identifies the need for white feminists to gain understanding of their social status because so far, their general lack of acknowledgement of "the inter-relatedness

of sex, race, and class oppression” or their “refus[al] to take this inter-relatedness seriously” has prevented white feminists of privilege from being able to communicate effectively with diverse groups of women (1984, 14). She, as well as Hartsock, points to absence of the recognition of *differences* from the center of feminism as an explanation for the movement’s fragmentation.

Gender Plus advocates the primacy in feminist discourse of recognizing such differences. Presupposing feminism to be a movement to end sexist oppression, as hooks suggests, Gender Plus calls for incorporating into feminist theory an analysis of other forms of oppression and their intersection with sexism. In that Gender Plus asks for attention to, and acknowledgement of, at least one level of inquiry beyond gender in the production of feminist theory, and given my example of race, Gender Plus can serve as a method for breaking white women out of the fog of race privilege which serves to perpetuate their social status as dogs in the master’s house. That “white feminism” exists is perfectly acceptable to Gender Plus, which welcomes exploration of the differences among women. That “white feminism” does not acknowledge its “whiteness,” however, can begin to be solved by Gender Plus’s requirement that the identities and contexts studied in feminist theory be stated explicitly. Fulfilling that requirement will also solve the problem of white women as “dogs” and of black women as “mules.” In other words, women will not be “dogs” or “mules” anymore, but rather people. White women feminists’ acknowledgement of their race and their race privilege will help pave the way for acknowledgement of racism, and furthermore, for the deconstruction of that racism. Similarly, black feminism’s clearly defined scope pinpoints an intersection of identities and oppressions such that work can begin effectively to end sexist oppression in practice. As hooks and Scales argue, the point of feminism is to end

oppression and domination, rather than to equalize experiences. By sacrificing race privilege, white women will not then become “mules,” but will rather achieve personhood, just as black women, too, will achieve personhood, rather than graduating to the status of “dogs.”

As Hartsock describes the evolution of the feminist movement, groups of feminists who sought to break away from racial domination within the feminist movement formed separatist feminist movements, leaving only the feminists of race privilege to comprise the movement broadly defined as “feminism.” Even though “white feminists” did not separate *per se*, their position within feminism could more accurately be described as a branch of feminism not unlike black feminism, rather than as “feminism.” In other words, Gender Plus does not advocate white women’s split from feminism, but rather argues that “white feminism” is already a more specific movement than feminism, and should be practiced and positioned accordingly. Engaging in Gender Plus by calling themselves “white feminists” would redress “white feminism’s” domination of “feminism,” and open up the feminist conceptual space to the *differences* from which we can learn so much, about ourselves and each other. Gender Plus, therefore, points to how complicated sexist oppression is in practice, and in so doing, shows how exacting the practice of feminist theory must be.

Gender Plus, then, can be seen as a universal theory of feminism. Insofar as it underscores *differences*, it simultaneously stresses the point that *all women* have a gender, a race, a class, etc. It draws commonality from the fact of difference, and unites women under the rubric of using and learning differences in order better to understand each other, and to end sexist oppression. As a method for conducting feminist theory, it directs feminists toward a realistic project of inclusion. Effective universality cannot hope to be cultivated

through homogenization. In order for all women to fit under one feminist theory, that theory has at the least, to account for, at the best embrace, difference.

What does it technically mean to embrace difference, however? How far does one have to go to be recognized as embracing difference? Is one level of inquiry beyond gender enough to embrace difference? Collins (2000 and 2005), hooks (1984), Anzaldúa (1990), the Combahee River Collective (1981), and Roberts (1997) all insert considerations of class as well as race and gender into their intersectional analyses. Certainly classism is a potent, oppressive force women face in the U.S. Given the extent to which class is racialized (Roberts 1997, 110), however, can it be said to have as much influence over women's experiences as race does? Or does the assertion that "class distinctions are racialized" mean simply that classism and racism intersect in their effects, and that the lines between them are blurred? Could we not just as easily say, in view of the consistent differences between black and white women's experiences, that gender is racialized? These questions point to the difficulties of categorization, such as how to create a finite category that is inclusive enough to consider everyone who meets its criteria, but exclusive enough to function as a category. Some of those difficulties go beyond the scope of this paper. However, whether intersectional analysis can legitimately choose two forms of oppression to study, separating them from other forms of oppression with which they may be inextricably intertwined, is pertinent to the discussion of this paper.

Collins argues that the social construction of race and racist oppression have a greater effect on black women's experiences than does class:

But how does one explain the persistence of poverty among *White* Americans if poverty has long been attributed to Black biological inferiority? They are not biologically Black, but their poverty and downward mobility can be explained if they are seen as being culturally or

socially Black. Whites who embrace Black culture become positioned closer to Blacks and become stigmatized. In the context of the new racism, cultural explanations for economic success and poverty substitute for biological arguments concerning intelligence or genetic dispositions for immorality or violence (2005, 41).

Class distinctions in the U.S., by this thinking, follow the social construction of race distinctions. Cultural definitions arise from racial hierarchies and are then applied to class distinctions. Hirschmann (2003) makes a similar argument regarding poor white women on welfare. Since welfare policy in the United States has developed through racist biases (even though more whites receive welfare benefits than blacks), or in other words, with a racist picture held fast in the minds of legislators, the cultural conception of welfare holds race as the central identifying feature of women on welfare (the “welfare queen”). Insofar as welfare poses limitations on women recipients’ freedoms (see, for example, Hirschmann 2003, 147), the policies of its practice can be more damaging than helpful to those women. Hirschmann argues that the social constructions of gender, race, and class form stereotypes of welfare recipients that, in turn, drive welfare policy. In other words, the socially constructed bias that “black women cannot be good mothers, no matter what, because they are poor and lazy, so they should be forced to work for a living” (Hirschmann 2003, 158) has been fundamental to the development of welfare policies that require recipients to work. Such requirements pose difficulties for women, particularly those who are mothers of young children (Hirschmann 2003, 142-43) and those who are victims of Intimate Partner Violence (Hirschmann 2003, 147). From the theoretical perspective of feminism, “welfare reform, in its rush to get women off welfare, no matter how, seems to seek to punish women simply for being unmarried and poor” (Hirschmann 2003, 149), and thus arguably, for being “culturally or socially Black” in Collins’ terms. White women on welfare are punished for being

unmarried and poor; and since the “good” white woman is married and middle-class, and all black women are defined as unmarried and poor, those unmarried and poor white women become, *ipso facto*, black. The stereotyped images of “poor and lazy” black women are generalized to all women welfare recipients, and thus, white women on welfare are in this way considered black. One could argue, alternatively, that classism trumps both sexism and racism insofar as welfare policy requiring the poor, including whites and including women, to work date back to Locke’s and Mill’s poverty-inspired and class-based reforms. In today’s post-Civil Rights climate of the “new racism,” however, policies originally designed with classist notions at the forefront, have taken on notably racist and sexist qualities.

The culture and social status of blackness in the U.S. intimately interacts with class, such that class becomes an expression of racism. Or could it be instead that the social constructions of gender, race, and class function to obfuscate the role of class to some extent? Hartsock argues that issues of class have been “so well excluded from public debate in the United States, [that] there seems to be even less awareness of classist behavior than of racism” (1998, 66). This could well explain my understanding of the relationship between race and class as race-dominant. Further exploration of the exclusion of class from discourse on social hierarchies could serve to illuminate the role of class. Hooks contends that it is feminism’s disregard of race considerations that has obscured the relationship between race and class:

[C]lass structure in American society has been shaped by the racial politic of white supremacy; it is only by analyzing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge. Class struggle is inextricably bound to the struggle to end racism (1984, 3).

Class can perhaps only really be understood once race is understood. This logic supports that of Collins and Hirschmann in that it acknowledges the link between race and class, but also seems to give more weight to racism than classism. We may not come to a definitive answer as to their precise relationship until both are aggressively taken up in feminist and political theory.

Thus, justifying the demand for only one level of inquiry beyond gender may be difficult. Gender Plus, instead, requires *at least one* further level of inquiry. This wording acknowledges the force of intersectionality, but it also cautions that endless categorization dissolves categories themselves; it points to what is realistically possible in the development of theory based on categories. For instance, once we begin to move towards greater specificity in our study of women, greater accuracy in our claims to “positive collective identity,” do we not simultaneously dissolve the category “woman”? In other words, if black women have a particular experience of oppression, do not also black women who are lesbians? And black women who are Jewish? Black lesbians who are Jewish? Arguably, every individual’s experiences differ at least slightly from that of every other. In order to theorize about the effects of political and social forces on people, one must categorize. But too much specificity diminishes utility for the whole. Furthermore, although no one woman can be said to be quintessentially “woman,” or quintessentially “black woman,” there remains the reality of *collective identity*. Black women, Collins reasons, differ as much from each other on an individual level as they do from white women or Latina women or Asian-American women, but black women share a collective viewpoint (2000, 28) that is tied to their intersectional identities.

An important principle to associate with the politics of Gender Plus is the value in assuming that not all voices have spoken. Pence ran into difficulty with black feminists when she assumed that her views of sexist oppression counted for them, too. Although categories are useful for analyzing social and political phenomena, they must be divested, at least partly, of their power. The social construction of gender has made the category “woman” important, but its inattention to the social construction of race and of racism has assigned power to certain voices that are assumed to speak for the whole category “woman.” Similarly, the category “black” has been shaped by the social construction of gender such that particular voices have been heard more than others in the self-definition of “blackness.” Gender Plus pushes feminist theory into the margins by re-centralizing women whose race, class, sexuality, etc. have rendered their voices mute. It contends that social forces other than gender have shaped our gendered experiences, and demands to know how, thereby reconstituting the so-called center as equivalent to the so-called margins, in that each only represents a subset of women. This approach illuminates the fact that the relative power of “women” (assumed white) as over against “black women” (stated black) has located the former in the “center” and the latter in the “margins.”

Therefore, not only are certain women systematically excluded from the category “woman,” but the very term used to refer to the category from which they are excluded is misleading. The word “woman” is supposedly race-neutral, but politically refers to a particular race of women (i.e. white women) (Hull et al. 1982). Our discourse is thus complicit with, and perhaps at the same time constitutive of, the racism that renders it inaccurate. Gender Plus seeks to put power differences under the limelight by revealing the forces that constitute them (i.e. racism, classism), but to the extent that our language prevents

us from seeing those forces, Gender Plus may be difficult to achieve. It will take a conscious effort, especially on the part of white feminists, to examine their own racism and how it relates to power structures within feminism. That the advancement of feminism has been stunted by racism and domination on the part of “white feminists” can be explained by the inconsistency between “white feminists” supposed opposition to power, but simultaneous employment of it. For feminism to become a universal movement for all women, it is imperative that white women free themselves from the race and class privilege that keeps them from fully understanding their own oppression, and accept status as a subset of the category “woman” rather than the whole category itself. It will take the conscious effort of assuming that not all the voices have been heard.

Such an effort presupposes a level of foresight in the discourse. Hartsock places importance on the quality of a theory that lays the groundwork for theories to follow. “Perhaps the most fundamental question to be asked of every strategy for change is this: How does this strategy contain at least the seeds of its own supersession?” (Hartsock 1998, 70). How does Gender Plus create a framework for a further point on the trajectory of feminism’s advancement? Gender Plus is, in part, a *universalizing* theory in that it de-centers those with disproportional power and centers those with disproportional lack of power, in the feminist movement, such that each subset of women is on theoretical equal footing with each other subset, and all are included in the category “woman.” It can highlight the race of white women, for example, in order to engender a less partial, less perverse perspective for white women and thus to show what their contributions add to feminism. It is, in part, a *universal* theory of feminism in that it outlines theoretical strategies for all feminist thinkers, but it also contains, in part, the seeds for a *universal* feminist theory. Gender Plus acts as an

intermediary stage between fragmented, separatist feminisms and a universal feminism, by exposing the forces that have impeded the latter. It does so by accentuating the analysis rather than the suppression of, the differences among women. Its basis is the belief that only when we truly understand women and the struggles they face, can we effectively end sexist oppression. Furthermore, Gender Plus contains the seeds of its own supersession in that once feminists begin truly to understand women and to eradicate sexist oppression, hooks argues, they will find themselves involved in a much larger project:

Since all forms of oppression are linked in our society because they are supported by similar institutional and social structures, one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact (1984, 35).

In that Gender Plus calls for at least one level of inquiry beyond gender, it operates at a stage prior to the stage at which sexist oppression can be eradicated. A theory designed genuinely to eradicate sexist oppression in practice must exist on a grander scale; it must require that all vectors of oppression be examined and countered together. Gender Plus is a way of inaugurating this larger project; it functions as an important piece, opening up feminism to a greater universality, and it will necessitate an ensuing, more comprehensive approach to eradicating sexist oppression.

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