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Black feminist thoughts: from intersectionality to the engendering of racial capital

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Introduction

In my talk to day I would like to trace a path. This path will start with intersectionality. Purposely, I won't use a fixed definition of Intersectionality: intersectionality is a very open and sometimes fuzzy term, it can be a framework, a concept, a tool and method and it can be deployed in various disciplines and at various levels of analysis. As a conceptual tool, and very loosely defined, intersectionality seeks to tackle the workings and effects of multiple forms of oppressions based on the main modern systems of differentiation, that is to name a few usual suspects, gender, sexuality, race, nationality and class and so on.

In the last decades, Intersectionality has become more and more attractive in the European contexts: it has been taken up in feminist research and politics but has also become mobilised by powerful institutions such as the EU, and I wonder if we could not talk of an intersectionality turn in European gender studies and politics.

I work and live in the French speaking part of Switzerland, and there too Intersectionality has gained more and more visibility. Last year, two colleagues, PhD students at the University of Lausanne were organizing a doctoral school on intersectionality and politics and asked me to contribute with a lecture about intersectionality and black feminist thoughts- one of my privileged corpus.

I had said yes, but when I began to prepare the lecture, I realised that the black feminist texts with which I was engaging barely mobilised the notion of intersectionality. And found myself in a kind of tension. And it is this tension, this puzzle that pushed me to trace the path that I want to reconstitute in today's talk.

As I said, this path takes intersectionality as a starting point, but will rapidly move further from it. I will reconstitute some steps in my exploration of the alternative concepts that contemporary black feminists have developed in order to think the conjugated operation of racism, sexism, heteronormativity and capitalism. This path will end with the notion of the engendering of racial capital: understood here as a synthetic expression to make sense of the multiple processes, technologies, and relations that take part to gendered production and reproduction of race and capital during slavery, colonialism and their afterlives. The term capital must be understood from within a materialist perspective as the value produced and accumulated through the exploitation and appropriation of life and labor.

It is very important for me to note that I do not wish here to dismiss the political and intellectual utility of intersectionality understood. My aim here is rather to shed light on the richness and complexity of black feminist understandings of power and dominations,

How do capitalism, sexism, racism, ableism, heteronormativity work together? How can we resist to these conjugated oppressions?

Black feminist thoughts address this question with a very rich set of concepts and analytical strategies, more precisely, I wish to show that black feminist theorising of multiple dominations are based on a complex understanding of time.

Let me begin with a quote that many of you have certainly already encountered:

“If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

I would be curious to know how many of you in the room have already encountered this quote?

This quote is an excerpt of the “Black feminist statement” issued by the Combahee River Collective in 1977.

The literature devoted to intersectionality abundantly quotes this excerpt – very often in a isolated and thus de-contextualized way. This excerpt has become like a must-be-quoted. Furthermore, the literature devoted to intersectionality very often stages the formation and struggles of the Combahee River Collective as founding moments for the rise of an

intersectional thought and politics. The Combahee river collective often figures beside the name of the black feminist scholar and legal and critical race theorist Kimberly Crenshaw who is considered as the main initiator of intersectional thought in the institutional contexts of academia thanks to her seminal article of 1991, Mapping the margins (Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford law review*, 1241-1299.)

If we only consider this isolated and decontextualized quote by the Combahee river collective, then this quote refers to a specific conception of time/temporality: As illustrated in this image (that is one of the first image that appeared in my google search for the term intersectionality) this quote suggests that we need to apprehend the intersection or interlocking of systems of oppression in a **synchronous way**. In other words, the black women are subjected to multiple systems of oppression **at time t** and we need to combat simultaneously all these systems in order for black women to be free, and consequently for the rest of humanity to be free..

However, this synchronous conception of time changes if we put the quote in context, let me, on this behalf, put this quote in dialogue with another excerpt of the Combahee river collective which comes a little earlier in the statement:

(...) we would we would like to affirm that we find **our origins in the historical reality** of Afro -American women's **continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation**. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," **Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule** and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both **dramatic and subtle ways**. **There have always been Black women activists**—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to **make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique**. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of **countless generations** of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

Before I continue on, I would be very curious to know how many of you in the room have encountered this specific quote of the black feminist statement by the Combahee river collective? It is interesting that this longer quote, as many of other excerpts of the statement, are less quoted. It is interesting that only a fragment of the statement has become somewhat fetishized, and here my question is: at the expense of what. My answer: at the expense of a complex understanding of time.

Indeed, when read altogether the two quotes stage a very complex understanding of time. In this second excerpt the idea of “time” appears in three ways:

First, **time refers to history**, as signified by the mention “our origin in the historical reality” as well as by the long list of activist or the mention of “countless generations”. History here refers to a temporal entanglement of multiple lives produced by and throughout the histories of slave trade, slavery and colonialism.

Second, time appears as the **temporalities of the subject**: the mention “Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation” or the term “whole life situation” and “continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation” suggests that the multiple oppressions should not be conceptualised as external to the subject, but as producing and reproducing embodied subject positions. Such a dynamic approach of subject-formation enjoys us to couple oppressions with our understanding of subjection.

The third way time appears in this quote refers to the **temporary nature of resistance**. In the excerpt, resistance to multiple oppressions are qualified as “dramatic and subtle ways”, resistance is thus apprehended as taking multiple and complex forms and seem to be always temporary, never total in its effects. Resistance, as understood in black feminist thoughts here takes distance with the idea of the possibility of one revolutionary and definitive moment.

I would like to further explore these three temporal modalities within Black feminist thoughts. I use black feminist thoughts in the plural, as I apprehend black feminist thought as a constellation formed by the manifold and very diverse political, artistic and intellectual elaborations stemming from the spaces and circulations of the black diaspora all over the globe.

However for today's reflection, I will mainly draw upon the work of Saidiya Hartman – and mainly upon her book *Scenes of Subjection* – where she explores slavery and its afterlife in the north American contexts. Note that even if I am concentrating here mainly on Hartman, my reflection also draws upon other important works elaborated in and about very different spaces and times: for instance the recent work of Françoise Vergès tackling the differentiated control of women's reproductive practices in the Island la Réunion or of Alexander Weheliye (show the books)

So my main argument is the following: black feminists develop a complex understanding of time in order to narrate the ways sexism, racism and capitalism operate together as well as in order to formulate strategies of resistance to the injurious effects of multiple dominations. So let me develop this argument in three parts, each one devoted to one temporal modality.

1. The first part: history. “we find our origins in the historical reality”

Black feminist thoughts claim that in order to make sense of the conjugated operation of race, gender, class and sexuality, we must necessarily inscribe these concerted operations within the long and still unfolding histories of colonialism, slavery and slave trade. BFT claim that these global historical processes have instituted modernity's social texture, political grammar, and modes of production and reproduction of life and labor. They claim that colonialism and slavery have reconfigured the meanings of being human.

Black feminists develop historical accounts around figures and regimes that tend to be neglected in western-centred white critical thoughts theorizing from the figures of the worker or the regime of the modern factory. In contrast, black feminists base their account on the figures of the enslaved and the colonized and the regimes governing the plantation or the colonized territories and bodies and they account about the ways these historical figures and regimes still haunt us in the afterlife of slavery and colonialism.

The figure of the **enslaved subject** is at the center of Hartman's book *Scenes of Subjection* where she seeks to make sense of what it means to live as an enslaved, and how the enslaved is produced and reproduced through complex and continuously renewed processes of subjection. Following the work of Genovese, Patterson or Spillers, Hartman seeks to define the enslaved condition as social death.

The condition of social death is often defined in the literature through lacks – productive lacks as they produce subject into enslavement.

Social death refers to a state of kinlessness, as state which is maintained though the manifold processes that hinder the enslaved to be constituted by as well as to take part to stable and chosen kinships.

Social death refers to the dispossession of the body. The enslaved does not possess herself, this state of dispossession is continuously enacted through the injurious markings of her flesh, through violent practices that maintain her as permanently available for exploitation and appropriation.

Social death refers to the state of being deprived of any political status, to the impossibility to be part of a self-instituted and maintained collectivity.

By basing their theorization on social death and the figure of the enslaved, black feminists always think race, gender, class and sexuality as entangled – co-constitutive systems of oppression. In order to illustrate that I want to draw upon an excerpt of Hartman's account about the regulation of the maternal condition under slavery:

Hartman writes:

The maternal function was not enshrined with minimal or restricted rights but indistinguishable from the condition of enslavement and its reproduction. Motherhood was critical to the **reproduction of property and black subjection**, but parental rights were unknown to the law. This negation was effected in instances that ranged from the sale and separation of families to the slave owner's renaming of black children as a demonstration of his power and dominion. **The issue of motherhood concerned the law only in regard to the disposition and conveyance of property and the determination and reproduction of subordinate status.**

The **concept of 'injury'** did not encompass the loss of children, natal alienation, and enforced kinlessness. The law's concern with mothering exclusively involved questions of property: **diminutions in the value of slave property** if the slave female was unable

to reproduce or disputes regarding the conveyance and loss of property – lest we forget, we are talking about children here.” P. 98

Reparation: Lest we forget, we are talking about children here, this last remark by Hartman is very striking to me: Hartman super-imposes the terms children, motherhood or families in a quite anachronistic way: as the status attached to these terms were very denied to the enslaved.

So as illustrated by this excerpt, in order to make sense of a gendered condition, here motherhood, Hartman deploys a very precise narrative that articulates the I quote her “concerted processes of racialization, accumulation, engenderment, domination, and sexual subjection” (p.97).

And I found a very similar analytical gesture in the works of other black feminist thinkers for instance in the recent book of Francoise Vergès or in the research of Myriam Paris who precisely narrate the many controlling and dispossessing practices –ranging from the thefts of the bellies to forced abortions – that constrained the maternal condition of women of color in colonized and postcolonial France especially at La Reunion.

Let me sum up the first part of my argument: black feminist thoughts think race, class, gender and sexualities together through a thorough historicization, they always inscribe these concerted processes into a long temporality, within the long and complex histories of colonialism and slavery.

Black feminist thoughts deploy historical accounts in order to make sense of the racialization of gender, the engendering of race, the ways engendering of race and the racialization of gender inform capitalist accumulation based on appropriation, exploitation and dehumanisation. History, in their accounts, is not an abstract motor of social contradictions. History appears under the form of manifold and situated stories and experiences that allow us to understand how race and gender produced differentiated relations to the capitalist modes of production and reproduction.

However, history does not exhaust the modalities through which BFT permit us to think the operation of multiple forms of dominations. According to my reading of the b f corpus, Time emerges under a second modality, as linked to the temporalities of the subject.

2. The temporalities of the subject: **“Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation,...”**

The black feminist corpus apprehends the subject as an embodied, a fleshy and dynamic instance. In this corpus, positions such as “black woman” or “white woman” are never pre-given they are always produced, and reproduced and in relation to each other and to other positions.

In this perspective, Saidiya Hartman wonders:

“What would be made possible if, rather than assuming the subject , we began our inquiry with a **description of subjectification** that did not attempt to name or interpret anything but to simply describe its surface? “ (Hartman p. 99?)

As signified with this rather provocative quote, Hartman enjoys us to analyse processes of subjection rather than to depart from pre-given subject –positions.

And I think that the title of her book “scenes of subjection” gives us a clue for understanding her main analytical strategy. Scenes of subjection appear as a tools for her to organize and systematize her account about the numerous processes that maintain and reproduce the enslaved in a life-long condition of social death. It is by accounting for the scenes of subjection of slavery and its afterlife that Hartman can proceed to thorough “descriptions of subjectification” and thus shed light on the complex practices, processes and technologies that interlock, mutually amplify in order to actualize a captive condition.

Let me illustrate this by relying on an excerpt of Angela Davis book *women, race, class*. In this excerpt Davis herself quotes Jenny Proctor’s account about her life as an enslaved:

“ I ’tended to the children when I was a little gal and tried to clean house just like Old Miss tells me to. Then as soon as I was ten years old, Old Master, he say, “Git this here

n* to that cotton patch.” Jenny Proctor’s experience was typical. For most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown. Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. In this sense, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.

But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expediency governed the slaveholders’ posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles. (Davis, 1983 p.6)

In this excerpt one can read three scenes of subjection that maintain Jenny’s body in a state of captivity: the domestic work until the age of 10, then the cotton field, and the third scene is made by the “whip”, the punishment. In each of the scenes, the operation and meaning of gender and sexuality are more or less relevant depending on the practices and discourses that are deployed and depending on the modes and spheres of subjugation that are implied.

Jenny Proctor’s body is disciplined, but this discipline invests in very different ways her gendered flesh.

These three scenes of subjection can be related to what Hartman calls the contingency of the category “woman”, as she asks, I quote her:

“Can we employ the term ‘woman’ and yet remain vigilant that “all women do not have the same gender?” Or “name as ‘woman’ that disenfranchised woman whom we strictly, historically and geopolitically cannot imagine as a literal referent” – *can we do this* - rather than reproduce the very normativity that has occluded an understanding of the differential production of gender? (...) p. 99

Hartman insists on the contingent and disjunctive production of the category “gender”. She puts emphasis on the fact that the racialization of gender, and the engendering of race operate in multivalent ways and that we cannot grasp these complex operation if we mobilise gender as an a-priori given category.

The strategy of Hartman, in other words, is to depart from scenes rather than from pre-chosen descriptors of differentiated social embodiment. She then uses the relevant categories such as gender, race or class according to what emerges on the scenes of subjection that she reconstructs.

One could ask: If we adopt such an analytical approach, if we try not to sur-impose the category “woman” that would draw upon a referent implicitly attached to the history and the geopolitics of whiteness, what happen with intersectionality? Can we still use the term? Maybe, we need to use it in the plural and go from intersectionality towards intersectionalities as we seek to understand the entangled and complex processes that gender, engender, racialize , appropriate, accumulate and take part to continuous subjection in different social spaces and through a multitudes of practices, technologies and relations?

Instead of frontally answer to this question, I will now come to the last part of my talk.

Part 3. The temporary nature of resistances “ Black women ... have actively resisted ... in both dramatic and subtle ways”

In this part, I want to briefly consider how black feminist thoughts conjugate race, class, gender, and sexualities with regard to their conceptualisation of liberation struggles and resistances.

The grammar of resistance in feminist struggles often comprises slogans such as “,my body , my propriety” “my body belongs to me”. Such slogans express a desire of possessing one’s body, but such a desire sounds oddly when put in perspective with a black feminist framework. A framework which departs from the histories of a flesh appropriated, dispossessed, exploited and injured. As Hartman writes, the relation of the enslaved to the self was only made possible by way of “wrongful possession*” or “illicit possession” (e.g. stealing away).

If we draw upon scenes where one’s desire to relate to oneself and one’s body was never recognized, what happens with our feminist desires? How can we think resistance if extreme conditions of subjugation constitute our points of departure? Where is the space of desire, this motor for social transformation and transfiguration?

In its black feminist statement, the Combahee river collective links resistance and struggle to “dramatic and subtle ways”. They suggest that resistant practices take various forms and seem to be temporary in their effect as they nurture “continuous struggles”.

According to my reading, black feminist conceptions of resistance take distance from the idea of an ultimate revolutionary moment, a moment which once and for all would dissolve and annihilate all systems of oppressions and free us all. The black feminist idea of social change does not take the shape of a line towards progress and emancipation. Rather, it relates to interruptions, temporary redresses and furtive reparations, this is what Hartman calls the “provisionality of resistance”

Hartman strikingly refers to such a provisionality of resistance when she interprets the account of Harriet Jacobs, author of one of the most famous slave narratives : “Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl, Written by Herself” and published in 1861. In this autobiographical account, Linda (the pseudonym of Harriet) uses the term “giving oneself” as she evokes her relationship with her white lover Sand (with whom she eventually would get married and have children) in a context where she is regularly raped by her owner Flint:

It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except what he gains by kindness and attachment...” p. 104

What I find striking is that resistance here cannot be considered otherwise than provisory. Linda’s resistant act of “giving herself” constitutes a temporary and incomplete destabilisation of the injurious effects of the conjugated operation of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Linda seeks to forge a space for her own desire, she desires a space where she could escape the extreme conditions of subjugation, but her resistance under the form of giving herself cannot escape the her subjugation to property, Linda remains a property she remains inscribed in a network of exploitation, accumulation and value exchange, but by giving herself to Sand she experiences a form of appropriation that is a little better lived – akin to freedom – than Flint’s forceful appropriation of her body.

Sand in this account, can thus not be defined as the principal enemy (to quote the French materialist feminist Christine Delphy) who should be abolished.

(Giving oneself here exemplifies the temporary and vulnerable nature of resisting acts that seek to counter the injurious effects of multiple and entangled oppressions)

Conclusion

Let me come to my conclusion. I have proposed to explore the complex understanding of time within the black feminist corpus. My aim with such an exploration has been to shed light on black feminists' complex accounts about the concerted processes of racialization, accumulation, engenderment, domination and sexual subjection.

Time within BFT emerges as history, as the situated and precise accounts of experiences related to the historical formations of colonialism, slavery and racial capitalism.

Time refers to the temporalities of subjection, to the multiple scenes and entangled temporalities that produce racialized, gendered, and sexual captivity but also agency.

Time finally emerges as the temporary nature of resistances, that nurture the continuous struggles for liberation.

I started this talk with the notion of intersectionality and by affirming that this notion had become an attractive tool in European gender studies and politics. And I want to reiterate that I do not want to dismiss the analytical and political value of intersectionality, neither the richness of the scholarship associated with this notion.

However, by exploring the three modalities of time, through which BFT make sense of the complex and concerted processes of domination related to race, gender, sexuality and accumulation, my path has taken distance from the notion of intersectionality. My relation to this notion remains ambivalent.

I ask myself: might not Intersectionality be conceptually limiting when one wants to seize the power of black feminist thought? What does the current mainstreamed use of the notion do to BFT? Does it not reduce, or flatten the complex understanding of time upon which bft base their accounts of dominations?

Following Bilge and Hill Collins recent publication, I can neither avoid to ask myself? Is the recent success of intersectionality in European gender studies and feminist circles is not based on a politics of containment when it comes to black feminist thoughts – a containment that might be unconscious and unintentional but nonetheless very effective? Is not such a containment indicated by the decontextualized and somewhat fetichicized abundant circulation of the short quote of the Combahee river collective? Or by the fact that the most famous black feminist authors very often remain listed in footnotes without really being engaged with in feminist research and interventions?

Let me ask thus a last question: What would happen if within the various outlets that we produce in feminist research and events, besides the keywords intersectional and intersectionality, we would also refer to the engendering of racial capital ?

I thank you for your attention.

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