
Mapping the margins

Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color

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Intersectionality offers a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identities and the ongoing necessity of group politics. While the descriptive project of post-modernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance. To say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world, on the contrary.

Over the last two decades, women have organized against the almost routine violence that shapes their lives. Drawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices. This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of people of color and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development.

The embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice. Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination – that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different.

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring differences *within* groups frequently contributes to tension *among* groups, another problem of identity politics that frustrates efforts to politicize violence against women. Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color¹ have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the 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.

My objective here is to advance the telling of that location by exploring the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color. Contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider the intersections of racism and patriarchy. Focusing on two dimensions of male violence against women – battering and rape – I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourse of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both.

In an earlier article, I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black¹ women’s employment experiences (Crenshaw 1989, 139). My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women, race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. I build on those observations here by exploring the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural and political aspects of violence against women of color.²

I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity. My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed. I have divided the issues presented in this chapter into two categories. In the first part, I discuss *structural intersectionality*, the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different from that of white women. I shift the focus in the second part to *political intersectionality*, where I analyze how both feminist and antiracist politics have functioned in tandem to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color. Finally, I address the implications of the intersectional approach within the broader scope of contemporary identity politics.

STRUCTURAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Structural Intersectionality and Battering

I observed the dynamics of structural inter-

sectionality during a brief field study of battered women's shelters located in minority communities in Los Angeles.³ In most cases, the physical assault that leads women to these shelters is merely the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience. Many women who seek protection are unemployed or underemployed, and a good number of them are poor. Shelters serving these women cannot afford to address only the violence inflicted by the batterer; they must also confront the other multilayered and routinized forms of domination that often converge in these women's lives, hindering their ability to create alternatives to the abusive relationships that brought them to shelters in the first place. Women of color are burdened as well by the disproportionately high unemployment among people of color that make battered women of color less able to depend on the support of friends and relatives for temporary shelter.

These observations reveal how intersectionality shapes the experiences of many women of color. Economic considerations – access to employment, housing, and wealth – confirm that class structures play an important part in defining the experience of women of color *vis-à-vis* battering. But it would be a mistake to conclude from these observations that it is simply the fact of poverty that is at issue here. Rather, their experiences reveal how diverse structures intersect, since even the class dimension is not independent from race and gender.

These converging systems structure the experiences of battered women of color in ways that require intervention strategies to be responsive to these intersections. Strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited utility for those whose lives are shaped by a different set of obstacles. For example, shelter policies are often shaped by an image that locates women's subordination primarily in the psychological effects of male domina-

tion, and thus overlooks the socioeconomic factors that often disempower women of color.⁴ Because the disempowerment of many battered women of color is arguably less a function of what is in their minds and more a reflection of the obstacles that exist in their lives, these interventions are likely to reproduce rather than effectively challenge their domination.

While the intersection of race, gender, and class constitute the primary structural elements of the experience of many Black and Latina women in battering shelters, it is important to understand that there are other sites where structures of power intersect. For immigrant women, for example, their status as immigrants can render them vulnerable in ways that are similarly coercive, yet not easily reducible to economic class. For example, take the Marriage Fraud Amendments to the 1986 Immigration Act. Under the marriage fraud provisions of the Act, a person who immigrated to the United States to marry a United States citizen or permanent resident had to remain 'properly' married for two years before applying for permanent resident status, at which time applications for the immigrant's permanent status were required by both spouses.⁵ Predictably, under these circumstances, many immigrant women were reluctant to leave even the most abusive of partners for fear of being deported. When faced with the choice between protection from their batterers and protection against deportation, many immigrant women chose the latter (Walt 1990, 8). Reports of the tragic consequences of this double subordination put pressure on Congress to include in the Immigration Act of 1990 a Provision amending the marriage fraud rules to allow for an explicit waiver for hardship caused by domestic violence.

Yet many immigrant women, particularly women of color, have remained vulnerable to battering because they are unable to meet the conditions established for a waiv-

er. The evidence required to support a waiver “can include, but is not limited to, reports and affidavits from police, medical personnel, psychologists, school officials, and social service agencies.” For many immigrant women, limited access to these resources can make it difficult for them to obtain the evidence needed for a waiver. Often cultural barriers further discourage immigrant women from reporting or escaping battering situations. Tina Shum, a family counselor at a social service agency, points out that

“[t]his law sounds so easy to apply, but there are cultural complications in the Asian community that make even these requirements difficult just to find the opportunity and courage to call us is an accomplishment for many.” (Hodgin 1991, p. E1)

The typical immigrant spouse, she suggests, may live

[i]n an extended family where several generations live together, there may be no privacy on the telephone, no opportunity to leave the house and no understanding of public phones.” As a consequence, many immigrant women may be wholly dependent on their husbands as their link to the world outside their homes.⁶

Immigrant women may also be vulnerable to spousal violence because many of them depend on their husbands for information regarding their legal status. More than likely, many women who are now permanent residents continue to suffer abuse under threats of deportation by their husbands. Even if the threats are unfounded, women who have no independent access to information will still be intimidated by such threats. And even though the domestic violence waiver focuses on immigrant women whose husbands are United States citizens or permanent residents, there are countless women married to undocumented workers

(or who are themselves undocumented) who suffer in silence for fear that the security of their entire families will be jeopardized should they seek help or otherwise call attention to themselves.

These examples illustrate how patterns of subordination intersect in women’s experience of domestic violence. Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment. In the case of the marriage fraud provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the imposition of a policy specifically designed to burden one class – immigrant spouses seeking permanent Resident status – exacerbated the disempowerment of those already subordinated by other structures of domination. By failing to take into account the vulnerability of immigrant spouses to domestic violence, Congress positioned these women to absorb the simultaneous impact of its anti-immigration policy and their spouses’ abuse.

The enactment of the domestic violence waiver of the marriage fraud provisions similarly illustrates how modest attempts to respond to certain problems can be ineffective when the intersectional location of women of color is not considered in fashioning the remedy. Cultural identity and class affect the likelihood that a battered spouse could take advantage of the waiver. Immigrant women who are socially, culturally, or economically privileged are more likely to be able to marshal the resources needed to satisfy the waiver requirements.

Structural Intersectionality and Rape

Women of color are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds. When reform efforts undertaken on behalf of women neglect this fact, women of color are less likely to have their needs met than women who are racially privileged. For example, counselors who provide rape crisis

services to women of color report that a significant proportion of the resources allocated to them must be spent handling problems other than rape itself. Meeting these needs often places these counselors at odds with their funding agencies, which allocate funds according to standards of need that are largely white and middle-class.⁷ These uniform standards of support ignore the fact that different needs often demand different priorities in terms of resource allocation, and consequently, these standards hinder the ability of counselors to address the needs of nonwhite and poor women.

The fact that minority women suffer from the effects of multiple subordination, coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate non-intersectional contexts, shapes and ultimately limits the opportunities for meaningful intervention on their behalf. Understanding the intersectional dynamics of crisis intervention may go far toward explaining the high levels of frustration and burnout experienced by counselors who attempt to meet the needs of minority women victims.

POLITICAL INTERSECTIONALITY

The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing political agendas is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront. Indeed, their specific raced and gendered experiences, although intersectional, often define as well as confine the interests of the entire group. The problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of color by not acknowledging the 'additional' burden of patriarchy or of racism, but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Be-

cause women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color, and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, dominant conceptions of antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms.

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color. Adopting either analysis constitutes a denial of a fundamental dimension of our subordination and works to preclude the development of a political discourse that more fully empowers women of color.

The Politicization of Domestic Violence

That the political interests of women of color are obscured and sometimes jeopardized by political strategies that ignore or suppress intersectional issues is illustrated by my experiences in gathering information for this essay. I attempted to review Los Angeles Police Department statistics reflecting the rate of domestic violence interventions by district, because such statistics can provide a rough picture of arrests by racial group, given the degree of racial segregation in Los Angeles.⁸ The L.A.P.D., however, would not release the information. A representative explained that one reason the information was not released was that 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. Apparently activists were worried that the statistics

might permit opponents to dismiss domestic violence as a minority problem and, therefore, not deserving of aggressive action.

The informant also claimed that representatives from various minority communities opposed the release of these statistics. They were concerned, apparently, that the data would unfairly represent African-American and Latino communities as unusually violent, potentially reinforcing stereotypes that might be used to justify oppressive police tactics and other discriminatory practices.

Concerns about the misuse of statistics are, of course, well-founded; however, suppressing the information appears to be an easy answer to the problem only so long as the interests of women of color subject to domestic violence are not directly assessed. This suppression is also troubling given the improbability that women of color would benefit significantly from the trickle-down effects of either the feminist mobilization against domestic violence or the more community-based mobilizations against intraracial crime in general. Thus, the mutual suppression of critical information rendered the possibility of a broad mobilization against domestic violence within communities of color less likely.

As the discussion below suggests, these erasures are not always the direct or intended consequences of antiracism or feminism, but frequently the product of rhetorical and political strategies that fail to challenge race and gender hierarchies simultaneously.

Domestic Violence and Antiracist Politics

Within communities of color, efforts to stem the politicization of domestic violence are often grounded in attempts to maintain the integrity of the community. The articulation of this perspective takes different forms. Some critics allege that feminism has no place within communities of color, that gender issues are internally divisive, and that raising such issues within nonwhite

communities represents the migration of white women's concerns into a context in which they are not only irrelevant but also harmful. At their most extreme, critics who seek to defend their communities against this feminist assault deny that gender violence is a problem in their community, and characterize any effort to politicize gender subordination as itself a community problem. This is the position taken by Shahrazad Ali in her controversial book, *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman*. In this stridently antifeminist tract, anchor for Ali draws a positive correlation between domestic violence and the liberation of African-Americans. While she cautions that Black men must use moderation in disciplining 'their' women, she argues that Black men must sometimes resort to physical force to reestablish the authority over Black women that racism has disrupted (pp. 174, 172).

Ali's premise is that patriarchy is beneficial for the African-American community (p. 67), and that it must be strengthened through coercive means if necessary.⁹ Yet the violence that accompanies this will-to-control is devastating, not only for the Black women who are victimized, but also for the entire African-American community. And yet, while gang violence, homicide, and other forms of Black-on-Black crime have increasingly been discussed within African-American politics, patriarchal ideas about gender and power preclude the recognition of domestic violence as yet another compelling incidence of Black-on-Black crime.

Efforts such as Ali's to justify violence against women in the name of Black liberation are indeed extreme. The more common problem is that the political or cultural interests of the community are interpreted in away that precludes full public recognition of the problem of domestic violence. People of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions of their

communities against the need to acknowledge and address intra-community problems. Yet the cost of suppression is seldom recognized, in part because the failure to discuss the issue misshape perceptions of how serious the problem is in the first place.

The controversy over Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, can be understood as an intra-community debate about the political costs of exposing gender violence within the Black community. Some critics chastised Walker for portraying Black men as violent brutes (Early 1988, 9; Pinckney 1987, 17). Others lambasted Walker for the portrayal of Celie, the emotionally and physically abused protagonist who triumphs in the end. Walker, one critic contended, had created in Celie a Black woman whom the critic could not imagine existing in any Black community she knew or could conceive of (Harris 1984, 155).

The claim that Celie was somehow an unauthentic character might be read as a consequence of silencing discussion of intra-community violence. Celie may be unlike any Black woman we know because the real terror experienced daily by minority women is routinely concealed in a misguided (though perhaps understandable) attempt to forestall racial stereotyping. Of course, it is true that representations of Black violence – whether statistical or fictional – are often written into a larger script that consistently portrays the African-American community as pathologically violent. The problem, however, is not so much the portrayal of violence itself as it is the absence of other narratives and images portraying a fuller range of Black experience.

The political imperatives of a narrowly focused antiracist strategy support other practices that isolate women of color. Nilda Rimonte, director of Everywoman's Shelter in Los Angeles, contends that in the Asian community, saving the honor of the family from shame is a priority (Rimonte 1991,

Rimonte 1989, 327). Unfortunately, this priority tends to be more readily interpreted as obliging women not to scream rather than obliging men not to hit.

There is also a more generalized community ethic against public intervention, the product of a desire to create a private world free from the diverse assaults on the public lives of racially subordinated people. In this sense the home is not simply a man's castle in patriarchal terms, but it is also a safe haven from the indignities of life in a racist society. In many cases, the desire to protect the home as a safe haven against assaults outside the home may make it more difficult for women of color to seek protection against assaults from within the home.

There is also a general tendency within antiracist discourse to regard the problem of violence against women of color as just another manifestation of racism. Of course, it is probably true that racism contributes to the cycle of violence, given the stress that men of color experience in dominant society. But the chain of violence is more complex and extends beyond this single link. Moreover, arguments that characterize domestic violence in communities of color as the acting out of frustrations over denial of male power in other spheres tend to be tied to claims that eradicating the power differentials between men of color and white men will solve the problem. Yet, as a solution to violence, this approach seems counterproductive, first, because men of power and prestige also abuse women, but most importantly, because it buys into dominant images of male power that are socially damaging. A more productive approach – one more likely to benefit women and children as well as other men – is to resist the seductive images of male power that rely on the ultimate threat of violence as a legitimate measure of male agency. The legitimacy of such power expectations can be challenged by exposing their dysfunctional and debilitating effects on families and

communities of color. Moreover, while understanding links between racism and domestic violence is an important component of any effective intervention strategy, it is also clear that women of color need not await the ultimate triumph over racism before they can expect to live violence-free lives.

Race and the Domestic Violence Lobby

Not only do race-based priorities function to obscure the problem of violence suffered by women of color; certain rhetorical strategies directed at politicizing violence against women may also reproduce the political marginalization of women of color. Strategies for increasing awareness of domestic violence tend to begin by citing the commonly shared assumption that battering is a problem located in the family of the 'other' – namely, poor and/or Minority families. The strategy then focuses on demolishing the straw man, stressing that spousal abuse also occurs in white elite communities. That battering occurs in families of all races and all classes seems to be an ever-present theme of anti-abuse campaigns. Countless first-person stories begin with a statement like, "I was not supposed to be a battered wife". The inference, of course, is that there *is* a more likely vision of a battered spouse, one whose race or class background contrasts with the identity of the speaker to produce the irony. Playing on the contrast between myths about and realities of violence functions effectively to challenge beliefs about the occurrence of domestic violence in American society.

Yet this tactic is tricky business, one that may simultaneously reify and erase 'othered' women as victims of domestic abuse. By pointing out that violence is a universal problem, elites are deprived of their false security, while non-elite families are given reason not to be unduly defensive. Moreover, all battered women may well benefit from knowing that they are far from alone. But there is, nonetheless, a thin line between

debunking the stereotypical beliefs that only poor or minority women are battered, and pushing them aside to focus on victims for whom mainstream politicians and media are more likely to express concern.

An illustration of this troubling possibility is found in the remarks of Senator David Cohen in support of the Violence Against Women Act of 1991.¹⁰ Senator Cohen stated:

[Rapes and domestic assaults] are not limited to the streets of our inner cities or to those few highly publicized cases that we read about in the newspapers or see on the evening news. . . . It is our mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who are being victimized.¹¹

Senator Cohen and his colleagues who support the Act no doubt believe that they are directing attention and resources to all women victimized by domestic violence. Despite their universalizing rhetoric of 'all' women, they were able to empathize with female victims of domestic violence only by looking past the plight of 'other' women, and by recognizing the familiar faces of their own. The point here is not that the Violence Against Women Act is particularistic on its own terms, but that, unless the senators and other policymakers consciously examine why violence remained insignificant as long as it was understood as a minority problem, it is unlikely that women of color will share equally in the distribution of resources and concern. As long as attempts to politicize domestic violence focus on convincing elites that this is not a 'minority' problem but their problem, any authentic and sensitive attention to the experiences of minority women will probably continue to be regarded as jeopardizing the movement.

Race and Domestic Violence Support Services
While gender, race, and class intersect to create the particular context in which

women of color experience violence, certain choices made by ‘allies’ can reproduce intersectional subordination within the very resistance strategies designed to respond to the problem.

Feminists, of course, cannot be held solely responsible for the various ways in which their political efforts are received. Usually, much more is demanded of power than is given. Nonetheless there are sites in which feminist interventions can be directly criticized as marginalizing women of color.

This problem is starkly illustrated by the inaccessibility of domestic violence support services to many non-English-speaking women. The problem is not easily dismissed as one of well-intentioned ignorance. Indeed, several women of color reported that they had repeatedly struggled with the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence over language exclusion and other practices that marginalized the interests of women of color.¹² Yet despite repeated lobbying, the coalition did not act to incorporate the specific needs of non-white women into their central organizing vision.

Some critics have linked the coalition’s failure to address these issues to the narrow vision of coalition that animated its interaction with women of color in the first place. Efforts to include women of color came, it seems, as something of an afterthought. Many were invited to participate only after the coalition was awarded a grant by the state to recruit women of color. However, as one ‘recruit’ said,

“they were not really prepared to deal with us or our issues. They thought that they could simply incorporate us into their organization without rethinking any of their beliefs of priorities and that we would be happy.”

Even the most formal gestures of inclusion were not to be taken for granted. On one occasion when several women of color attended a meeting to discuss a special task

force on women of color, the group debated all day over including the issue on the agenda.

The relationship between the white women and the women of color on the board was a rocky one from beginning to end. Other conflicts developed over differing definitions of feminism. For example, the board decided to hire a Latina staff person to manage outreach programs to the Latino community, but the white members of the hiring committee rejected candidates who did not have recognized feminist credentials even though they were favored by Latina committee members. By measuring Latinas against their own biographies, the white members of the board failed to recognize the different circumstances under which feminist consciousness develops and manifests itself within minority communities. Many of the women who interviewed for the position were established activists and leaders within their own community, a fact that suggests that these women were probably familiar with the specific gender dynamics in their communities, and were accordingly better qualified to handle outreach than other candidates with more conventional feminist credentials.

The coalition ended a few months later when the women of color walked out. Many of these women returned to community-based organizations, preferring to struggle over women’s issues within their communities rather than struggle over race and class issues with white, middle-class women. Yet as illustrated by the case of the Latina who could find no shelter, the dominance of a particular perspective and set of priorities within the shelter community continues to marginalize the needs of women of color.

The struggle over which differences matter and which do not is neither an abstract nor an insignificant debate among women. Indeed, these conflicts are about more than difference as such; they raise critical issues of power. The problem is not simply that

women who dominate the anti-violence movement are different from women of color, but that they frequently have power to determine, either through material or rhetorical resources, whether the intersectional differences of women of color will be incorporated at all into the basic formulation of policy. Thus, the struggle over incorporating these differences is not a petty or superficial conflict about who gets to sit at the head of the table. In the context of violence it is sometimes a deadly serious matter of who will survive – and who will not.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented intersectionality as a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color. I have used intersectionality as a way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally. I have also used intersectionality to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and anti-racism. The effort to politicize violence against women will do little to address the experiences of nonwhite women until the ramifications of racial stratification among women are acknowledged. At the same time, the antiracist agenda will not be furthered by suppressing the reality of intra-racial violence against women of color. The effect of both these marginalizations is that women of color have no ready means to link their experiences with those of other women. This sense of isolation compounds efforts to politicize gender violence within communities of color, and permits the deadly silence surrounding these issues to continue.

I want to suggest that intersectionality offers a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics. It is helpful in this regard to distinguish inter-

sectionality from the closely related perspective of anti-essentialism, from which women of color have critically engaged white feminism for the absence of women of color on the one hand, and for speaking for women of color on the other. One rendition of this anti-essentialist critique – that feminism essentializes the category ‘woman’ – owes a great deal to the postmodernist idea that categories we consider natural or merely representational are actually socially constructed in a linguistic economy of difference.¹³ While the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance.

One version of anti-essentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis, is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, ‘Blacks’ or ‘women’, and thus it makes little sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them.¹⁴

But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful – is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged. It is, then, a project that presumes that categories have meaning and consequences. This project’s most pressing problem, in many if not most cases, is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them, and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies.

This is not to deny that the process of categorization is itself an exercise of power, but the story is much more complicated and nuanced than that. First, the process of categorizing – or, in identity terms, naming – is not unilateral. Subordinated people can and do participate, sometimes even subverting the naming process in empowering ways. One need only think about the historical subversion of the category ‘Black’, or the current transformation of ‘queer’, to understand that categorization is not a one-way street. Clearly, there is unequal power, but there is nonetheless some degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming. And it is important to note that identity continues to be as site of resistance for members of different subordinated groups. We all can recognize the distinction between the claims “I am Black” and the claim “I am a person who happens to be Black.” “I am Black” takes the socially imposed identity and empowers it as an anchor of subjectivity. “I am Black” becomes not simply a statement of resistance, but also a positive discourse of self-identification, intimately linked to celebratory statements like the Black nationalist “Black is beautiful.” “I am a person who happens to be Black,” on the other hand, achieves self-identification by straining for a certain universality (in effect, “I am first a person”) and for a concomitant dismissal of the imposed category (‘Black’) as contingent, circumstantial, non-determinant. There is truth in both characterizations, of course, but they function, quite differently depending on the political context. At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for dis-empowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it.

Vulgar constructionism thus distorts the possibilities for meaningful identity politics by conflating at least two separate but closely linked manifestations of power. One is the power exercised simply through the

process of categorization; the other, the power to cause that categorization to have social and material consequences. While the former power facilitates the latter, the political implications of challenging one over the other matter greatly. We can look at debates over racial subordination throughout history and see that, in each instance, there was a possibility of challenging either the construction of identity or the system of subordination based on that identity.

If history and context determine the utility of identity politics, how, then, do we understand identity politics today, especially in light of our recognition of multiple dimensions of identity? More specifically, what does it mean to argue that gendered identities have been obscured in antiracist discourses, just as race identities have been obscured in feminist discourses? Does that mean we cannot talk about identity? Or instead, that any discourse about identity has to acknowledge how our identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions? A beginning response to these questions requires that we first recognize that the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed.

In the context of antiracism, recognizing the ways in which the intersectional experiences of women of color are marginalized in prevailing conceptions of identity politics does not require that we give up attempts to organize as communities of color. Rather, intersectionality provides a basis for re-conceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women of color. For example, in the area of rape, intersectionality provides a way of explaining why women of color have to abandon the general argument that the interests of the community require the suppression of any confrontation around intra-racial rape. Intersectionality may provide the means for dealing with other marginalizations as well. For example, race can also be a coalition of

straight and gay people of color, and thus serve as a basis for critique of churches and other cultural institutions that reproduce heterosexism.

With identity thus re-conceptualized, it may be easier to understand the need for, and to summon the courage to challenge, groups that are after all, in one sense, 'home' to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home. This takes a great deal of energy, and arouses intense anxiety. The most one could expect is that we will dare to speak against internal exclusions and marginalizations, that we might call attention to how the identity of 'the group' has been centered on the intersectional identities of a few. Recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics.

NOTES

1. I use "Black" and "African-American" interchangeably throughout this article. I capitalize "Black" because "Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities', constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun." (Crenshaw, 1988, 1332 n. 2, citing Mackinnon 1982, 516). By the same token, I do not capitalize "white", which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group. For the same reason I do not capitalize "women of color."

2. It is important to me to name the perspective from which one constructs one's analysis; and for me, that is as a Black feminist. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the materials that I incorporate in my analysis are drawn heavily from research on Black women. On the other hand, I see my own work as part of a broader collective effort among feminists of every color to expand feminism to include analyses of race and other factors such as class, sexual orientation, and age. I have

attempted therefore to offer my sense of the tentative connections between my analysis of the intersectional experiences of Black women and the intersectional experiences of other women of color. I stress that this analysis is not intended to include falsely, nor to exclude unnecessarily, other women of color.

3. During my research in Los Angeles, California, I visited Jenessee Battered Women's Shelter, the only shelter in the western states primarily serving Black women, and Everywoman's Shelter, which primarily serves Asian women. I also visited Estelle Cheung at the Asian Pacific Law Foundation, and I spoke with a representative of La Casa, a shelter in the predominantly Latino community of East LA

4. Racial differences marked an interesting contrast between Jenessee's policies and those of other shelters situated outside the Black community. Unlike some other shelters in Los Angeles, Jenessee welcomed the assistance of men. According to the director, the shelter's policy was premised on a belief that given African-American's need to maintain healthy relations to pursue a common struggle against racism, anti-violence programs within the African-American community cannot afford to be antagonistic to men. For a discussion of the different needs of Black women who are battered, see Richie 1985, 40.

5. The Marriage Fraud Amendments provided that, for the conditional resident status to be removed, "the alien spouse and the petitioning spouse (if not deceased) jointly must submit to the Attorney General ... a petition which requests the removal of such conditional basis and which states, under penalty of perjury, the facts and information." 8 U.S.C. +s 1186a(b)(1)(A). The amendments provided for a waiver, at the attorney general's discretion, if the alien spouse was able to demonstrate that deportation would result in extreme hardship, or that the qualifying marriage was terminated for good cause. (+s 1186a(c)(4)). However, the terms of this hardship waiver have not adequately protected battered spouses.

6. One survey conducted of battered women "hypothesized that if a person is a member of a discriminated minority group, the fewer the opportunities for socioeconomic status above the poverty level and the weaker the English language skills, the greater the disadvantage." (Pagelow 1981, 96). The seventy Minority women in the study had a double disadvantage in this society that serves to tie them more strongly to their spouses."

7. For example, the Rosa Parks Shelter and the Compton Rape Crisis Hotline, two shelters that

serve the African-American community, are in constant conflict with funding sources over the ratio of dollars and hours to women served. Interview with Joan Greer, Executive Director of Rosa Parks Shelter, in Los Angeles, California (April 1990).

8. Most crime statistics are classified by sex or race, but none are classified by sex and race. Because we know that most rape victims are women, the racial breakdown reveals, at best, rape rates for Black women. Yet, even given this head start, rates for other nonwhite women are difficult to collect.

While there are some statistics for Latinas, statistics for Asian and Native American women are virtually nonexistent.

9. In this regard, Ali's arguments bear much in common with those of neo-conservatives who attribute many of the social ills plaguing Black America to the breakdown of patriarchal family values (see Raspberry 1989, C 1 5, Will 1986a, A23, Will 1986b, 9). Ali's argument shares remarkable similarities with the controversial "Moynihan Report" on the Black family, so called because its principal author was now-Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-N.Y.). In the infamous chapter entitled "The Tangle of Pathology," Moynihan argued that: The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (p. 29)

10. On January 14, 1991, Senator Joseph Biden (D.-Del) introduced Senate Bill 151 the Violence Against Women Act of 1991, comprehensive legislation addressing violent crime confronting women. S. 15, 102nd Cong., 1st Sess. (1991). The bill consists of several measures designed to create safe streets, safe homes, and safe campuses for women. More specifically, Title III of the bill creates a civil rights remedy for crimes of violence motivated by the victim's gender (+52 301). Among the findings supporting the bill were "(1) crimes motivated by the victim's gender constitute bias crimes in violation of the victim's right to be free from discrimination on the basis of gender" and "(2) current law [does not provide a civil rights remedy] for gender crimes committed on the street or in the home." S. Rep. No. 197, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. 27 (1991).

11. 137 Cong. Rec. S61 I (daily ed. Jan 14, 1991), statement of Sen. Cohen.

12. Roundtable Discussion on Racism and the Domestic Violence Movement, April 2, 1992 (transcript on file with the Stanford Law Review) The

participants in the discussion-Diana Campos, Director, Bilingual Outreach Project of the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Elsa A. Rios, Project Director, Victim Intervention Project (a community-based project in East Harlem, New York, serving battered Council for women; and Haydee Rosario, a social worker with the East Harlem Human Services and a Victim Intervention Project volunteer-recounted conflicts relating to race and culture during their association with the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a state oversight group that distributed resources to battered women's shelters throughout the state and generally set policy priorities for the shelters that were part of the coalition.

13. I follow the practice of others in linking anti-essentialism to postmodernism. (See, generally, Nicholson 1990.)

14. I do not mean to imply that all theorists who have made anti-essentialist critiques have lapsed into vulgar constructionism. Indeed, anti-essentialists avoid making these troubling moves, and would no doubt be receptive to much of the critique set forth herein. I use the term vulgar constructionism to distinguish between those anti-essentialist critiques that leave room for identity politics and those that do not.

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SUMMARY

Identity-based politics has been a source of strength for people of color, gays and lesbians, among others. The problem with identity politics is that it often conflates intra group differences. Exploring the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural and political aspects of violence against these women, it appears the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both feminist and anti-racist discourses. Both discourses have failed to consider the intersections of racism and patriarchy. However, the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform quite different from that of white women. Similarly, both feminist and antiracist politics have functioned in tandem to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color. The effort to politicize violence against women will do little to address the experiences of non-white women until the ramifications of racial stratification among women are acknowledged. At the same time, the anti-racist agenda will not be furthered by suppressing the reality of intra-racial violence against women of color. The effect of both these marginalizations is that women of color have no ready means to link their experiences with those of other women.

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