

Say Their Names: Black Feminist Thought and the Power Elite

By Francisco Gaspar

ABSTRACT. This article investigates the critical affinities between contemporary sociological theory and Black feminist thought. It specifically aims to assert the significance of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Say Her Name” report through the lens of C. Wright Mills, who uses the concept of the power elite to describe political, economic, and militaristic affairs. By providing a comparative analysis of this theoretical framework, I intend to convey how misogynoir and other oppressive ideologies have informed the dissemination of social justice work and knowledge production. Throughout this article, I reference several Black feminist scholars’ works in conversation with Crenshaw’s report. Additionally, I offer comparisons to other contemporary sociologists to exemplify how Mills’ work is equipped to explain these themes.

The Significance of Crenshaw’s Report

Violence from police forces is not a new phenomenon in the United States. It has been historically pervasive in communities of color and has had fatal consequences. Black¹ folks have been subjected to disproportionate rates of violence and have actively resisted police brutality for centuries. The issue has reached public discourse extensively over the past decade but has failed to account for the intersections of race and gender. Michael Brown and Tamir Rice have become recognizable through the efforts of their mothers to bring them to justice. However, the

¹ I capitalize “Black” throughout this paper, as it draws attention to Black identity. I will not do this with “white.”

same outcomes have not been met for Black womxn² victims. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality,” recognized this gap in the reports of police violence. She has since committed herself to disrupt these discourses to shed light on a neglected demographic.

Kimberlé Crenshaw produced the “Say Her Name” report, which involved an expansive list of Black womxn victims, in 2014. She prefaces the report by demanding accountability for all victims of police violence, writing “the failure to highlight and demand accountability for the countless Black womxn killed by police over the past two decades...leaves Black womxn unnamed and thus unprotected in the face of their continued vulnerability to racialized police violence” (Crenshaw, 2015, p. 1). She proceeds to divide the report by sections, noting common themes in the womxn’s stories. Some of the titles she includes are “Driving While Black,” “Guilt by Association,” and “Gender and Sexuality Policing.” Ultimately, Crenshaw produced the report to disseminate information on these victims and recognize them in the pursuit of social justice. In producing this work, Crenshaw also aimed to provide a framework for existing and developing movements around issues of race, militarism, and state-sanctioned violence. “It is our hope that this document will serve as a tool for the resurgent racial justice movement to mobilize around the stories of Black womxn who have lost their lives to police violence” (Crenshaw, 2015, p. 2).

Crenshaw is among other Black feminist scholars who have advocated for an intersectional lens in social movements. Many of these scholars, however, have been ostracized from communities that serve a one-dimensional

² I apply the feminist use of “womxn” throughout this paper to address the variety of experiences of womxn who are subjected to patriarchal violence, rather than relying on a monolithic definition of womanhood. A former use of “womyn” has been deemed transphobic, due to its biologically essentialist focus on chromosomes.

purpose. Whether excluded from racial justice movements on the basis of gender or dismissed from feminist movements on the basis of race, Black womxn's knowledge has been continuously subjugated. Brittney Cooper further explores the public conceptions toward Black womxn in *Eloquent Rage*, and she writes "the truth is that Angry Black Womxn are looked upon as entities to be contained, as inconvenient citizens who keep on talking about their rights while refusing to do their duty and smile at everyone" (Cooper, 2018, p. 3). This removal from the civic body has been part of a project of benign neglect, in which feminist organizers have been heavily surveilled and regulated. Nevertheless, the work Black feminist scholars have produced has resisted these mechanisms of control.

As we continue to assert that #AllBlackLivesMatter, the theory and applications from Black feminist scholars should continue to be disseminated. As bell hooks claims in "Killing Rage," this work is relevant and liberating. Hooks writes, "working to critically interrogate and challenge racist/sexist representations, revolutionary feminist black womxn have offered... a progressive anti-racist, anti-sexist standpoint that fundamentally alters old ways of thinking about black female reality" (hooks, 1995, p. 78). Policing Black womxn's knowledge production has intentionally maintained the imperialist, white-supremacist, and capitalist cisheteropatriarchy.

The Power Elite and Its Implications

C. Wright Mills' theory on the power elite further explicates these systems of domination. He developed this framework to explain the significance of power through a violent and stratified apparatus. He asserts that the power elite "is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments... [as] they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences" (Mills, 1956, p. 230).

The power elite serves as an explanation for several facets of capitalistic control. Primarily, it concerns the political sphere, which “opens and closes many avenues to wealth” (Mills, 1956, p. 233). As the privilege of prestige is only bestowed among the elite, it is thus reflected in this group’s access to institutions. Historically, political power has rested among white men who have corrupted societal conceptions with hegemonic ideologies. This is most evident in necropolitics, which has controlled the public response to Black death. Che Gossett, in “Queer Necropolitics,” explicitly outlines the way this apparatus is designed to target Black bodies.

The necropolitical also indexes various anti-black enterprises and state violence, from lynching, Jim Crow-era racial apartheid and terrorism, to contemporary militarized police violence against black people crystallizing in “stop and frisk” orders and reminiscent of slave patrols, to outright police assassination of black “citizens.” (Gossett, 2014, p. 32)

These incidents have not occurred in isolation, as systemic terrorism is designed to target Blackness. Where Black womxn are concerned, their narratives have been silenced in the midst of efforts to achieve justice for Black men.

Another component of the power elite’s core regards the economic affairs of society. Yet, as Mills explains, “the pyramid of wealth cannot be understood merely in terms of the very rich” (Mills, p. 232). Rather, the connections among the elite have further restricted access to wealth for several populations, and the political decisions from the elite have affected wealth access to a great degree for Black communities. This powerlessness has further ostracized Black communities from the civic body. This is most evident within the prison industrial complex, which is fueled by the aforementioned rates of police violence and arrest. Angela Davis unpacks the gendered components within prison abolition movements in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. She describes the

commonly held belief that Black womxn are represented less in the prison system, then challenges the notion with a historical analysis. She asserts that “the economic and political shifts of the 1980s... produced a significant acceleration in the rates of womxn’s imprisonment both inside and outside the United States” (Davis, 2015, p. 65). Furthermore, failure to account for the intersections of carceral identities and police violence is harmful to our liberation movements.

The third mechanism central to the power elite is its military control. This has been prominent throughout the United States and has maintained a presence throughout social movements. The use of excessive force and deadly military tactics conveys how Black bodies have been dehumanized. Angela Davis draws critical attention to this in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*. She describes, “in response to the recent killing of Michael Brown, demonstrators challenging racist police violence were confronted by police officers.... armed with military weapons, and driving armored vehicles” (Davis, 2015, p. 79). Throughout this text, Davis (2015) also notes the disturbing tactics of the US police forces, which we conceptualize as an entity to “protect and serve” us (p. 14). This protection cannot be promised for Black communities when the system is intrinsically designed to surveil and exterminate them. Black womxn are even more scrutinized, as misogynoir is rampantly embedded in these forces.

Comparative Applications to Contemporary Theorists

Mills’ analysis of the power elite can be informed by the work of other contemporary sociologists. One could argue, for example, that George Herbert Mead’s concept of the generalized other serves as a venue to communicate common values in social movements. This resonates with Mills’ note that “When taking the attitude of the generalized other toward one’s self, one assumes the attitudes that are common to the whole group” (Mills, 1956, p. 331). This

logic then orients our behavior in relation to abstract ideas, including freedom, individual rights, and fairness. This framework could be useful to reinforce the collective mission for social movements, as indicated by the #AllBlackLivesMatter discourses. However, there is potential to problematize the framework of the generalized other, as it risks making an essentialist statement about community values. This may contribute to erasure, which could counter the visibility that these theoretical frameworks aim to bring to the surface. Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman critique the nature of essentialism in “Obscuring the Importance of Race,” proving its problematic consequences. They write, “whenever it is attempted, the experience of womxn of color, who are at the intersection of these categories and cannot divide themselves to compare their own experiences, is rendered invisible” (Grillo & Wildman, 1991, p. 412). Furthermore, a successful application of this theoretical framework should account for the multifaceted nature of Black womxn’s lived experiences.

One could also investigate the potential for intersubjectivity to explain the lack of public attention to police violence against Black womxn. Alfred Schutz employed this term to describe how our experiences in the world have a shared consciousness. Intersubjectivity, therefore, allows for diversity in our interactions. This theory is made consistent by Susana M. Morris in “After the Love Has Gone.” Morris critiques the radical left for its tendency to be divisive, saying, “I am concerned that the way we talk about our differences is not only unproductive but also oftentimes a violent distraction from our shared goals (Morris, 2017, p. 95). Her emphasis on shared community values is pervasive as she proposes methods to bridge community divides. This is a framework that could be used for communicating the need for representation of Black womxn’s narratives. One oversight we should consider, however, is the tendency of sameness to be

weaponized against voices that express discontent with homogeneity. This is the same logic that informs misguided concepts such as colorblindness.

Conclusion

Mills' framework is inherently useful for describing violence against Black womxn. It outlines the mechanisms of control within the power elite and calls hegemonic control into question. Through political, economic, and military forces, the power elite has maintained its dominance in the United States. As white men continue to be overrepresented in this demographic, Black womxn have been further excluded from the benefits of society.

While C. Wright Mills' work can assess the "Say Her Name" report through three specific institutions, the report is not limited to this number. Kimberlé Crenshaw developed this report to recognize the troubling and consistent ways in which violence has been inflicted on Black womxn's bodies through a plethora of systems. By internalizing and disseminating the information in the "Say Her Name" report, we can further organize around the need for societal reform. Consequently, we can continue to actively disrupt state-sanctioned violence using Crenshaw's work as our infrastructure.

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