

Words by Myisha Cherry
California, United States

Feminism

Photography:
Archives

Black feminism is much more than feminism that focuses on black women.

Black feminism is for everybody

By Myisha Cherry



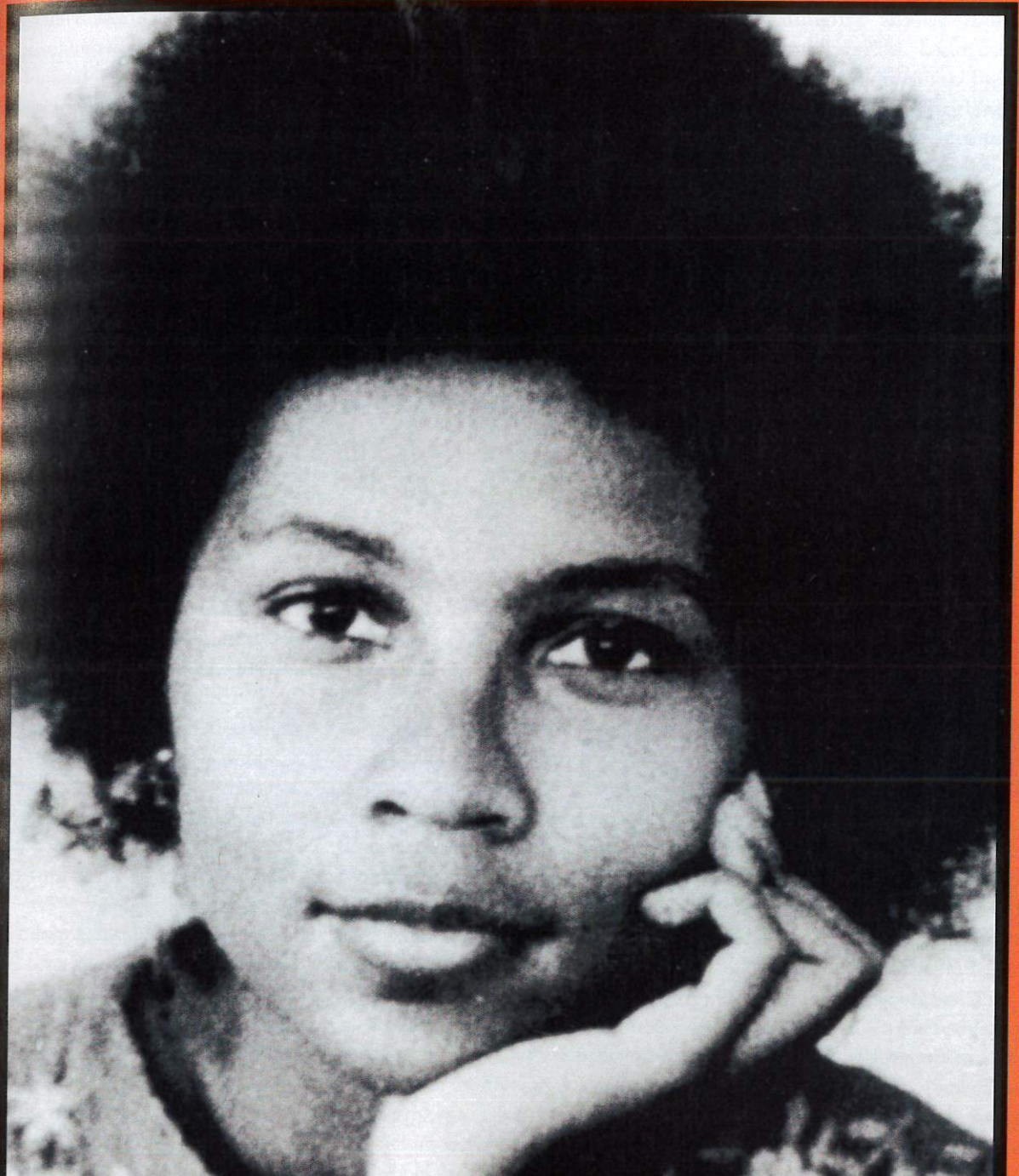
I came to black feminism through my mother Vernell Cherry. Vernell was born in 1954 and would six years later become a foster child due to her single-mother's death. Though she would grow up to be a mother of two girls, a grandmother, an active church member, and a community organiser, her life was lived as a black, physically-disabled, working-class woman. I knew by observation and through conversations with her that her experiences with discrimination, for example, were unique - different from her girlfriends' and different from my own. But I also saw, through her life, a reclamation of her humanity and a certain consciousness that she

exercised through constant struggle - whether by political activism or providing shelter in her home to black women who had recently become homeless. Though I didn't know it at the time of her death 12 years ago, my mother - who never read Audre Lorde or Alice Walker - was a black feminist. And to survive in this world and make meaning out of it, she had to be.

In bell hooks' book *Feminism is for Everybody*, she defines feminism as an opposition to and a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. One might think - based on this definition - that putting "black" in front of "feminism" means that black feminism aims

to end sexism and oppression only against black women. If so, black feminism is quite narrow at best and self-serving at worst, at least according to this view.

However, black feminism is much more than feminism that focuses on black women; however this doesn't mean that black women aren't given proper attention in it - attention that founders of the movement found lacking in dominant feminist and racial struggles. In the 1977 Combahee River Collective's statement, they say that black feminism entails the belief that black women are inherently valuable. This isn't to say that black women desire to be put on pedestals or be



regarded as queens - rather that they be recognised as "levelly human". To be a black feminist is to see black women's value not in the sex, entertainment, or domestic work they provide but merely in their existence as a human being. It acknowledges that black women face not just sexist or racist oppression but racial-sexual oppression. It's not that black women are necessarily more oppressed than others, but that their experiences are unique and black women's lives have a "multilayered texture".

For the Combahee River Collective, the movement isn't just about the liberation of black women - it aims at "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression". At the heart of this is the idea that systems of oppression are interlocking - that is, they happen simultaneously. And to end these oppressions requires political action and solidarity with others on issues in which "race, sex, class, [etc.,] are simultaneous factors in oppression". So it makes sense that some of the early work considered by the Combahee River Collective was working in rape centres in black communities or labour organising for women in the Global South.

Brittney Cooper states in her response to American singer Beyoncé embracing feminism: "Black feminism helps you think about what happens when you are the most powerful chick in the game and you [Beyoncé] are married to one of the

THE IDEA WAS THAT "IF BLACK WOMEN CARVED OUT A SPACE FOR THEMSELVES, THEY WOULD IN TURN ALSO CARVE OUT A SPACE FOR EVERY KIND OF INDIVIDUAL".



most powerful dudes [Jay-Z] and he still won't treat you right because he is intimidated by your power." Several popular analytic and theoretical concepts have emerged out of black feminism to help us make sense of the world and respond to it: 'intersectionality' and 'identity politics'.

Intersectionality, a term coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1993, is the idea that things such as inequality cannot be understood through class or race alone. Intersectionality as a framework shows us how race, gender, age, disability, class, etc., "relate in complex and intersecting ways to produce... in-

equality". For example, viewing the Williams sisters' experience in tennis only through the lens of race or gender does not allow us to fully capture their mistreatment. Or looking at the wealth gap through only race or gender doesn't fully capture the economic situation of brown female immigrants. Intersectionality not only helps us to understand the unique plight of cis women but also black immigrant male FIFA players. It also helps us to see that we cannot understand or fight against transphobia (which has resulted in an annual rise in homicides of trans women in the US) without addressing racism, poverty, gender norms, sex work, and misogyny. Although Crenshaw coined the term, it is very much genealogical - for we find black women before her such as Sojourner Truth (1851), Anna Julia Cooper (1892), Mary Church Terrell (1940), and Francis Beal (1970) referencing simultaneous oppressions (although we might also say that what differentiated their theories from each other were the implications of and conditions that gave rise to the theories, among other things).

The term 'identity politics' is used a lot in debates around political protests and election trends, but often in ways that are completely different from its original meaning. The Combahee River Collective is credited with first using the term in their black feminist statement. As they meant it, identity politics -

summarised in the words of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor - was an "analysis that would validate Black women's experiences while simultaneously creating an opportunity for them to become politically active to fight for the issues most important to them". Taylor is intentional about describing what identity politics is not. It was not conceived as an exclusionary politic in which only those who were part of a particular group could fight against those particular issues. Neither was it a claim as "the most oppressed". Those black feminists knew that identity alone was not enough to overcome oppression. But they saw identity as a way to see and fight against oppression.

Barbara Smith, a co-founder of the movement, notes that black feminism as a self-identifying movement arose in the 1970s as a critique of and frustration with the single-issue politics of white feminist, gay liberation, and black nationalist movements. The idea was that "if black women carved out a space for themselves, they would in turn also carve out a space for every kind of individual". This was because black feminists' analysis and practice would create a consciousness that could benefit everyone.

Today the movement continues through the work of scholars such as philosophers Kristie Dotson, Denise James, and Angela Davis; cultural critics Joan Morgan and Brittney Cooper, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, and many more. It

also exists as a framework through such freedom movements as Black Lives Matter, the #SayHerName Campaign, Black Youth Project 100, Reimagine Rebuild Coalition, and many grassroots movements around the world. The movement also continues through the personal lives of little black girls in Brooklyn, New York, and queer coloured men in Johannesburg, South Africa, as well as and through the memories of women like my mother, to name a few.

Black feminism, like any other revolutionary movement, has faced and continues to face challenges. Critics have written on what they believe to be the contradictory nature of intersectionality, have misused and warned against using the concept of identity politics, and many continue to decentre black women even when co-opting black feminist movements such as Black Lives Matter. Myths such as "black women are doing better than black men" and "black feminist thought is not nuanced" are often echoed to delegitimise black feminism. But we ought not to take these as threats to the movement but rather as merely "side effects"

that come with any attempt at revolutionising the way we think and move in the world.

From these cultural theorists and freedom fighters, as well as ordinary black feminists like my mother,



Ntozake Shange, black feminist and playwright

what I've learnt is: I can join the fight for liberation just as I am; my experiences of oppression should not be sidelined for a 'greater cause'; reject universalism and choose to see our differences instead; knowing concepts doesn't mean anything if they do not guide my political practice; and no matter what group a person may identify with, black feminism is for everybody.