

Difference, Power, and Lived Experiences: Revisiting the "Metalanguage of Race"

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first encountered Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" (1992) as a graduate student in a women's history course in 1996, and the article has traveled with me ever since. I have assigned the article in at least one of my courses every year, even as I've taught across a number of fields, including African American history, feminist theory, and social movement history. Moreover, it has been one of the key theoretical texts I have employed to frame my own research and writing. Although I came to the article after it had been in circulation for four years, it resonated with me as a powerful and much-needed intervention in feminist theory and women's history. Indeed, "Metalanguage" stands as one of those rare articles that continues to be relevant in ongoing debates about gender, sexuality, and race, and serves as a useful guidepost for my own scholarship.

Higginbotham's article provides an incisive response to debates among a broad spectrum of feminist scholars about how to be attentive to gender across difference and differently lived experiences, and it represented an important addition to the theorization of what would become popularly known as intersectionality. Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw is most often credited with coining the term "intersectionality" as she details it in two key articles, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," published in 1989, and "Mapping the Margins," a law review article published in 1991. In these essays Crenshaw draws on legal studies to present intersectionality as a critique of "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (1989, 139) and a tool for highlighting "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences" (1991, 1244). Crenshaw also suggests that intersectionality as a theory "might be more broadly useful in mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" (1991, 1296).

Yet, as Crenshaw notes, she was neither the first nor the only black feminist scholar to theorize these issues. Among women's historians, these theoretical concerns have been most notably taken up by Elsa Barkley Brown in her essay "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics" (1992), which calls on scholars to recognize "that all women do not have the same gender" (298). Higginbotham

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entered the conversation “to bring race more prominently into” feminist theorizing and the “analysis of power” (1992, 252). These interventions are an important part of the genealogy of theorizing difference that is historically informed and invested in tracing lived experiences.

For me, the incisiveness of Higginbotham’s intervention resides in the ways it draws on examples from African American women’s history to make visible “the construction and ‘technologies’ of race as well as those of gender and sexuality” while also provocatively pointing to “race as a metalanguage by calling attention to its powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality” (1992, 252). In centering race and relying primarily on examples from African American women’s history, Higginbotham brilliantly illustrates the centrality of conceptions of blackness and of black women’s lived experiences to understanding and unmasking US history and developing more powerful feminist theorizing. In detailing the crucial insights provided by an intersectional approach that situates a critical analysis of race and power at its core, Higginbotham is also attentive to the expansive ways that “racial categories are strategically necessary for the functioning of power in countless institutional and ideological forms, both explicit and subtle” (253–54). Thus, Higginbotham writes against tendencies to view black women’s history as narrow or specialized even as she also illustrates the ways in which reading gender, sexuality, and power through race produces invaluable insight for a whole host of scholarship, including women’s and labor histories, sexuality studies, legal studies, studies of social movements, and more.

Higginbotham’s theorizing (along with that of a number of other black feminist scholars) resonates deeply with my own commitments to writing history at the intersection of race, gender, politics, and power. The article provides an analytical framing useful in developing an analysis and reading practice that moves across and against the grain of multiple kinds of archival sources—from court cases and political broadsides to newspaper accounts and personal narratives. I feel particularly indebted to Higginbotham’s theorizing of the ways “gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity” (1992, 254) and her historically informed and thorough reading of the ways these forces marked difference not only across race and gender but also across sexuality, economic status, and region. Such strategic theorizing of power and differences within lived experience also makes visible the differentiated positionalities and experiences among black women. Higginbotham explicates intersectionality’s capacity to examine multiple systems of power and thereby make visible the production of oppression and privilege and the ways these systems are involved in constituting categories of difference that come together to shape what we understand to be

identity. As she moves from tracing the dominant discourses that united Southern whites around white supremacy and justified sexualized violence—the lynching of black men—to detailing black elites' investments in the politics of respectability, she makes clear how these systems are interlinked. These insights have been crucial to my own research efforts to deploy historical methodologies to engage debates about historiography and periodization through the frameworks, insights, and theorizing of black women intellectuals and activists.

Indeed, I drew on Higginbotham's historically contextualized theorizing as a way into thinking about black women radicals' political thought and activism in my book, *Radicalism at the Crossroads* (Gore 2011), particularly as I sought to be attentive to difference, power, and the political analyses of the US Left during the Cold War. Higginbotham's reading of the process by which black women were excluded from the category of "lady" and her argument that this exclusion said "as much about [the dominant society's definition] of sexuality as it did about class" (1992, 261) provided key points of reference as I examined both white women's framing of "the woman question" (as it was known within the Communist Party) and black women radicals' interventions in debates over US womanhood that continually centered the experiences of nonracialized (white) women. Her viewpoint was particularly useful in reading the implicit privileging of whiteness by Betty Millard in her 1947–48 two-part series "Woman against Myth" (1947, 1948). In these essays, Millard sought to address the "economic, legal, and political barriers against women" (1947, 8) by speaking for an undifferentiated US womanhood that inevitably centered white women's experiences and literally relegated black women's experiences of racialized gender violence to an asterisk. Beulah Richardson's 1951 poetic analyses in *A Black Woman Speaks . . . of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace* offered a direct challenge to Millard's analysis and illustrated the ways in which race operates as a metalanguage. Richardson's writing made visible the assumed whiteness of "womanhood" as she asserted, "I would that I could speak of white womanhood/as it will and should be/when it stands tall in full equality./But then, womanhood will be womanhood/void of color and of class."¹

Theorizing race as a metalanguage also illuminates its deployment as a "double-voiced discourse" that could operate both as a site of oppression and as a site of resistance for black people, enabling an analysis of the ways black

¹ Beulah Richardson, "Foreword," in *A Black Woman Speaks . . . of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace* (New York: American Women for Peace, 1951), 1, microfilm, Sc Micro F-11727, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.

people “took ‘race’ and empowered its language with their own meaning and intent” (Higginbotham 1992, 267). Higginbotham expanded on this point to highlight the ways such strategies tended to erase or mask difference and power relations within black communities, an influential insight that Cathy J. Cohen, for instance, takes up in her discussion of “cross-cutting issues” and “secondary marginalization” in her groundbreaking study *The Boundaries of Blackness* (1999). Thus, black activists collectively mobilized under the honorifics of “race woman” and “race leader” even as such challenges to white supremacy masked the deeply rooted and contested gender, sexual, and status implications imbued in such terms.

As a scholar writing about black political thought, social movements, and the US Left, I find such theorizing an essential starting point to developing a more nuanced analyses of black politics, collective activism, and contested visions of leadership. It makes space for thinking differently about figures like Pauli Murray, whose writings, personal experiences, and professional labor have led to her being celebrated as a feminist icon, studied for her scholarly insights, or recovered as a queer or transgender figure. Yet in seeking to construct a coherent narrative of Murray’s long and expansive life, scholars tend to disaggregate her experiences and variously inscribe her within a liberal framework, depict her as a representative figure, or read her as a singular figure of exclusion. Thus, whether examining her organizing as a civil rights activist, her commitments as a priest, her contributions as a black feminist legal scholar, or her lived experiences as a masculine-identified woman, most studies are not attentive to the ways her vast range of political investments and personal struggles overlapped. These studies often obscure the ways Murray moved between resisting and seeking out a normative life path and politics. It is precisely her contradictory and ambivalent engagement with normative pressures that marks her as such an intriguing figure of the twentieth century. A more theoretically nuanced analysis, as modeled by Higginbotham, makes space for examining the intersections of the multiple facets of Murray’s life history and politics. Attention to race as it intersects with other categories of difference and power helps to explicate the ways Murray negotiated the normative pressures of dominant constructions of African American womanhood, civil rights politics, and middle-class respectability, even as she also imagined and enacted a queerer life.

Since the 1990s intersectionality has emerged as one of black feminism’s and women’s studies’ most celebrated contributions to scholarship. It now circulates broadly as a theory and method of analysis that informs a diverse range of disciplines—from sociology, English, and cultural studies to psychology, legal studies, and the sciences. In recent years, its widespread institutionalization has sparked scholarly debates that critically engage, critique,

and defend intersectionality.² It is through its more historically attuned and materially grounded theorizing that, in my opinion, Higginbotham's essay continues to provide an insightful and instructive guidepost that is worth revisiting. The essay reminds us of the long and diverse history of black women intellectuals theorizing across race, gender, sexuality, and class in their political writings decades before intersectionality became an academic term du jour. As Higginbotham remarks, this form of theorizing is visible in Anna Julia Cooper's 1892 book *A Voice from the South*, in which she wrote, "the colored woman of today occupies one may say a unique position in this country. Her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a women question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (Cooper 1892, 134). A similar theorizing is also noticeable some sixty years later in Claudia Jones's 1949 article, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!" published in the Communist Party journal *Political Affairs*. A leading figure in the Communist Party who refused to privilege class as a singular category of analysis, Jones urged its members to "overcome the gross neglect of the special problems of Negro Women" (1949, 51) by addressing the "special oppression she faces as Negro, as woman and as worker" (54).

Higginbotham's article highlights not simply an awareness of the multiple social categories at play in shaping black women's experiences and identity but, just as important, the ways that categories of difference convey privilege and power and operate as identities (i.e., white, elite, heterosexual, lady) without being named or acknowledged as such. Even this theorizing does not address the full story, however. In her essay, Higginbotham gestures to the limits of her own theorizing, particularly in acknowledging the continued need to "problematize much more of what we take for granted" (1992, 274). This ongoing problem reflects a larger difficulty, for as scholar David Valentine points out in explicating the ways categories of difference inform lived experience, we always run the risk of "those categories com[ing] to be seen as valid descriptions of experience rather than as tools used to apprehend that experience" (Valentine 2004, 217).

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² See Dill and Zambrana (2009), Nash (2010), Puar (2011), Berger and Guidroz (2012), Ferguson (2012), and May (2015).

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