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DEFINE AND EMPOWER: Black Feminist Discourse in a Caribbean Context

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ABSTRACT

In the global Feminist forum, many women and women-identifying voices are forgotten and subsequently omitted. Women of colour, specifically Black women, are often left out of discourses due to the troubled history of Feminism and its founders. In light of this, black women have frequently been forced to create narratives and discourses through art, music, resistance and scholarship. This discussion aims to highlight the progression of Feminism over the years, beginning with its troubled past and recognizing the potential for its future while incorporating discussions of the reclamation or emergence of Black Caribbean Feminism from the residual shackles of colonialism and the patriarchy.

When Feminist discourses are raised frequently, the more intimate and intricate conversations about the sexuality, history and identity of people of colour are omitted, forgotten or glazed over by the overpowering space occupied by its one-dimensional definition. This is not for lack of Black, Indigenous and other people of colour identifying as feminists or for failure to contribute to this global forum, but due to the dominating definition and widely accepted concept of Feminism, historically excluding several voices of women and those who identify as female. The irony that confronted me is that, before embarking upon this project, I never considered myself a "feminist"; and certainly did not identify with the mental meaning carved out in my mind, not because I do not support women's rights or because I did not embrace my "female-ness," but because the ongoing narratives never quite felt like they applied to me or were about me or needed me. My first epiphany was that: there is not one perfect or finite model of Feminism that can address and include everyone's ideals. Again this is partly due to the origin of the movement being limited from conception by what the pioneering white women assumed to be and deemed to be 'all women's issues. In this essay, my objective is to highlight the progression of Feminism over the years, beginning with its troubled past and

recognizing the potential for its future while incorporating discussions of the reclamation or emergence of Black Caribbean Feminism from the residual shackles of colonialism and the patriarchy. I intend to supplement my argument by including demonstrations of Feminism by Black Caribbean women, condemned and, I dare say, demonized by what I will call White Feminism, the former described as unconventional, evidencing lingering Colonial stereotypes that continue to plague the region to this day.

There is no shortage of definitions for "the Caribbean." From one geographical definition of a chain of islands and land, territories close in proximity to each other, with shores united by the Caribbean Sea (Oxford dictionary), to a second historical definition that links the region's Colonial past hand in hand with the political ideologies and governance frameworks that were constructed post-colonialism and abolition of slavery. However, a third geological definition states that the Caribbean region comprises countries on the Caribbean tectonic plate. All of the three definitions mentioned above provide broad descriptions of commonalities of "the Caribbean", which inadvertently exclude some countries and include others that may align with a definition though the country itself is not technically part of the region.

In like manner, Feminism and the global feminist movement offer multiple definitions and applications of Feminism, which may appear inclusive at first glance but essentially omit people of colour. This patent omission has driven modern-day feminists to create multiple constructs that tangibly aim for inclusivity by factoring in race, ethnicity, socio/economic class, sexuality and sexual orientation, political alignment and immigrant status. From the movement's inception to 2021, there have been four documented waves of this crusade from which approximately six new strains of Feminism emerged.

The Caribbean region is a multicultural melting pot, home to many different people, cultural traditions, and idiosyncratic ways of life. This demographic diversity has informed various political structures, experiments, social policies, and agents of change. Feminism is one notable social initiative, partly nurtured within the region, but most scholarship only recognizes the Colonial Caribbean's role in implementing this movement. The journey of Feminism in the Caribbean has had many high and low tides, with two very notable milestones. The first is the recognized and accepted Colonial pathway. Worldwide, first-wave Feminism had a relatively simple goal: have society recognize that women are humans, not property. Though the leaders of first-wave Feminism were abolitionists, their focus was premised upon "White" women's needs, White women's rights, and this exclusion would haunt Feminism for years to come. (Soken-Huberty, 2021).

The first wave gained traction in the late 19th century, where first-wave feminists and the scholarship that accompanied them frequently used slavery as a metaphor for the bondage of marriage and patriarchial control that white women felt. Tracing the use of this analogy between the white woman's status within marriage and slavery began in French writings of the mid-seventeenth century, with scholars arguing that by the time of the French Revolution, the white woman's subordination in marriage had become inextricably compared to objections to the institution of black slavery in the West Indies and Americas (Rosenthal, 2018).

For a deeper investigation into this association, Jamie Rosenthal investigates Eliza Fenwick, a prominent figure in the Caribbean and European first-wave feminist movements. A divorced, British, single mother, Fenwick resettled in the Caribbean on the island of Barbados, with hopes of improving her family's economic circumstances in 1814. (Rosenthal, 2018). Fenwick was considered a radical in England, as she was a vocal advocate for women's equality and the abolition of slavery. Interestingly, after she moved to Barbados, she directly subscribed to anti-abolition movements by owning her own slaves. Though the manifesto of the first-wave feminist movement aimed to have society recognize that women are humans, not property, first-wave feminists contradicted their mandate and continued to treat black women as property and not as humans. Fenwick continued to contribute to the first wave of Feminism but revealed that she and many other first-wave feminists did not consider black women as real women, and

even worse, they did not consider them worthy/deserving of their rights, equality and humanity.

Due in considerable measure to first-wave Feminism being so well documented [due to the freedoms of some and not others], it can quickly be credited as the Big Bang of the feminist movement; however, this does not mean that the movement was devoid of feminist demonstrations by Caribbean enslaved women. One chilling demonstration historically considered a dastardly act of defiance is infanticide, executed by enslaved mothers salvaging maternal instinct to extract their offspring from a wretched existence, boundless hopelessness. Inexplicable or disturbing perhaps to anyone who cannot contemplate the anguish immortalized in the enslaved, but in the context of this analysis, the surest form of resistance in the story of the chattel-enslaved Caribbean women as full, rational people who made calculated decisions with rebellion in mind (Allain, 2014). Initially classified as an act of non-insurrectionary resistance to the plantocracy, it also encompasses many elements of Feminism, despite history's retelling of the events that prompted, preceded, and, I controversially suggest, offered a plausible justification.

In short, enslaved Caribbean women practiced infanticide and abortion to prevent, with absolute conviction, their children from ever becoming the direct property of white plantation owners or enduring any of the inhumanity of shackled servitude. Sabina Park, an enslaved Jamaican who was brought to trial for killing her young child, claimed that she "had worked enough for buckra (master) already and that she would not be plagued to raise the child… to work for white people." (Allain, 2014). Park's story is not uncommon to the region, and records kept by planters that display the low birth and high infant death rates attest that infanticide was indeed a common occurrence in response to inhumane conditions of the plantocracy. Not surprisingly, plantation owners and many white feminists condemned infanticide and would accuse slave women of procuring abortions to continue to have promiscuous sex unhindered by pregnancy (Allain 2014). This, of course, functioned to bolster the claims of pro-slavery advocates that enslaved women were neglectful, evil, unfit mothers (Allain, 2014).

In reality, enslaved women were accepted to be two things in the plantocracy: both unconditionally: reproductive machines to increase property stock and sexual objects available to and for white enslavers. The plantocracy was founded upon and fueled by European wealth and greed, therefore, planters pursued any measure to reduce expenditure or increase earnings. They often did so by stripping enslaved women of their sexuality and denying them motherhood by kidnapping their children. (Bush, 2010) Children of the enslaved became the new enslaved, subjected to two fates, either being sold to another plantation or being forced to work under the same inhumane conditions as their enslaved mother. As heartless as it seemed, infanticide was a particular option that prevented children from being born into slavery and experiencing the horrible abuses of the plantation.

The unbelievably difficult choice these women, enslaved or not, were forced to make is arguably the purest form of Feminism- direct control of one's destiny as a woman. Pure, unrefined Feminism is resistance to not only the patriarchy but also to the plantocracy, constructed upon the importance of choice as a fundamental human right.

The over-sexualization of the black enslaved female by their former masters was further extorted by White Caribbean feminists using it as an avenue to demonize Black women for being overtly sexual and promiscuous, without any acknowledgement of the plantocracy and the patriarchy's direct hand in this vicious cycle. This has fed and furthered the negative, residual, colonial and patriarchal sweeping stereotypes plaguing Caribbean women today, painted as embattled sex in the form of concubinage, prostitution, asexual warriors, or hypersexuality, each working the intimacies that exist between invisibility and hypervisibility (Rowley, 2010).

Today, black women are still eliminated or erased from feminist conversations while continually condemned for their sexuality and choices. The protection and cover of Feminism fall short of extending to the Black woman, whose feminist struggles stand in isolation and atonement for sins "she" did not commit. The developing story of

Black Feminism does not discourage but inspires Caribbean women to pursue unconventional Feminism and modern-day demonstrations. Caribbean feminists have been able to chart their course, create their definitions, and participate in their style of feminist discourse, often through scholarship, politics and artistic expression, most substantially manifest in music.

Looking closely at artistic expression, specifically music, the Caribbean basin is brimming with genres, original works and world-class artists telling of the exploitation, the exclusion, and the ethos of who she is and why. Jamaica Dancehall artist and collaborator Lady Saw can be considered a prominent example of resisting colonialist, heteronormative, and patriarchal ideals through song and performance. The internationally recognized disc jockey and songstress, who has not only influenced but entered the arena to dominate the male-dominated Caribbean music scene, is known outside of Dancehall as Marion Hall and formally on the music scene as the proclaimed 'Queen of Dancehall.' In her signature "raw" style, Lady Saw has capitalized on these misdirected stereotypes and expectations attached to Caribbean women while also manipulating the theme of the overly sexualized Black, Caribbean woman in her favour. Hall speaks directly to the black Caribbean working-class woman and challenges the patriarchy by recognizing and simultaneously exposing the blatant gendered double standards present in Caribbean culture [and the global music world], but also achieves this by promoting the right to female sexuality.

Colonialism stained black female sexuality, allowing the world to look down on black women and black people who identify as female as overly sexual, promiscuous, lustful and sinful beings. Saw represents the direct response, reclaims her sexuality, and helps other women of colour reclaim and recognize theirs by speaking openly about sex, sexual health and safety while calling attention to race, class and political issues these women face. Alongside her liberal use of 'obscene' language and Jamaican Patois in her lyrics, her additional brazen use of feminized "bad" words in Jamaican popular culture becomes a subversive reclamation of the contested power of the "bad" and the "vulgar" (Cooper, 2004). Lady Saw has contributed to the more inclusive feminist discourse while being omitted from the popular western feminist conversation. Helping women (cis or not) be more vocal and confident about owning their sexuality and guiding them to realize that everyone is entitled to their sexuality and place in the world. The singer, paradoxically an unsung heroine herself, Lady Saw, would have satisfied the criteria to be declared a notable Caribbean feminist contributor.

On a similar note, when looking at Black Caribbean contributions to accepted feminist scholarship, another contributor that is widely revered is Audre Lorde. Undoubtedly, Audre Lorde's voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory, as this black, lesbian feminist poet is at the cutting edge of consciousness. (Lorde, 1984) Lorde, a New York native born to Caribbean parents, has dedicated her life to including black women, poor women and black LGBTQIA+ people in widely accepted feminist conversations and scholarship. Despite being a highly acclaimed academic, she has witnessed and faced the deliberate exclusion and erasure of black voices from ongoing conversations of Feminism. It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences and without significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians (Lorde, 1984).

A significant incident occurred when she was asked to speak at a conference for the New York University's Institute for Humanities. Despite her status, the organizers failed to prepare the panel for the contributions of black women and lesbians in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable (Lorde, 1984). Additionally, there was a failure to add more than one opportunity for these voices to contribute, as one sole panel allowed black women, lesbians and people who identify as women to discuss their issues. Thereby once again, assuming lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power (Lorde, 1984). Lorde's forcible inclusion through poetry and writing has helped shape feminist thought by commenting on the tools of racist patriarchy that have been used over time to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy. (Lorde, 1984)

Lorde's freedom to publish accessible feminist scholarship is a direct form of writing back to the plantocracy, the patriarchy and harmful colonial first-wave feminism, as it reclaims black women's rights in developing feminist discourse.

In closing, far from being one dimensional, Feminism casts a wide net and should transcend more sectors, with the Indigenous and Black being key vulnerable and under-represented constituencies as articulated above. It may be a point of contention that black enslaved women (such as Sabina Park), and modern free Black women Lady Saw and Audre Lord can and should be recognized as black feminist icons sharing the same space, and the fact that their inclusion is considered potentially contentious speaks to the residual colonial pressures that stain the Caribbean region and the world today. The Caribbean region, by any definition of feminist inspiration, has spawned many female pioneers and leaders in all sectors. In recent years there have been 11 female Heads of Government for Caribbean countries, where Dominica was first in 1980, with the most recent being Dame Sandra Mason, the newly appointed President of Barbados, following their 2021 status of an Island Republic. Expressive world-renowned female designers, athletes/ sportsmen/ sportswomen, dancers, craftsmen, writers, jurists, professionals and the like, the Caribbean has produced a catchment of internationally renowned feminists, endowed with all the attributes to step and take their place in any discourse or definition, of any wave of Feminism, old or new. The future of Caribbean black feminism and intersectional, inclusive feminist discourses is auspicious.

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