

Black Women's Journey in America and the Need for Intersectionality: A Comparative Reading of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise", Lucille Clifton's "won't you celebrate with me" and June Jordan's "Poem About My Rights"

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Abstract

Through a comparative reading of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise", Lucille Clifton's "won't you celebrate with me" and June Jordan's "Poem About My Rights", this essay aims to analyse the black women's journey in America, by considering their identity and the adversities they faced during their path under the light of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality".

Keywords: Intersectionality; Identity; Race; Gender; Poetry

Resumo

Através da leitura comparada dos poemas "Still I Rise" de Maya Angelou, "won't you celebrate with me" de Lucille Clifton e "Poem About My Rights" de June Jordan, este ensaio procura analisar a jornada das mulheres negras na América, considerando a sua identidade e as adversidades que enfrentaram no seu percurso através do conceito de "interseccionalidade", introduzido por Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Palavras-chave: Interseccionalidade; Identidade; Raça; Género; Poesia

In 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw, leading scholar of critical race theory, published a ground-breaking essay titled “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, in which she thoroughly explained how different layers of discrimination can juxtapose and further marginalize particular groups like African American women or “women of color” as she names them:

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 intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics 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 difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women. Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect 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. . . . Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both. (1243-44)

More than thirty years later, the problem persists: there is a movement against racism, there is a movement against gender discrimination, but the fight for people who belong to the minorities of both race and gender is the strongest of them all and the one where less has been achieved.

This clearly sets the need for intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw herself in 1989, in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, to be further discussed. The term originates from the observation that the connection of social categories such as class, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, immigration status, among others, intersect and overlap, thus creating unique and distinct forms of discrimination and disadvantage in society. In the

mentioned article, Crenshaw, using three legal cases as examples, analyses the way courts dealt with situations which involved both racism and sexism, observing that justice often refused to recognise when black women affirmed they were victims of discrimination not only because they were black or female, but for being both things combined. Instead, the only forms of discrimination which were thought of by the legal system were either of one category or the other, as if all women suffered the same oppression and all black people went through the same discriminating situations, ignoring that the intersection of both race and gender created another sphere of violence.

Having this in mind, it is imperative to give black women the opportunity to make their voices heard and having their stories told, after being silenced for so long. Accordingly, Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, and June Jordan, three black female writers, felt the need to speak about their journey, identity and experience while writing in America. My aim with this work is to analyse three of their poems - “Still I Rise”, “won’t you celebrate with me” and “Poem About My Rights”, respectively - and do a comparative reading of the texts to see how they describe black women’s journey regarding their personal life and their creative work, having in consideration the adversities they suffered by living in a racist and patriarchal society.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory concerning intersectionality influenced various authors to reflect about the specific spheres of oppression generated by the intersection of social categories. Most of the texts which evoke the concept coined by Crenshaw were written with the aim to reflect upon the complexity of intersectionality and the way intersectionality could be studied and adapted within the disciplines, as Leslie McCall theorised in “The Complexity of Intersectionality” in 2005 and in “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”, in 2013, along with Sumi Cho and Kimberlé Crenshaw herself. Other articles expand and transcend Crenshaw’s theory, as Jennifer C. Nash in “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality”, in 2011, and Devon W. Carbado in “Colorblind Intersectionality”, published in 2013. On the one hand, Nash’s work, which sets Crenshaw’s theory as its starting point for reflection, is focused on black feminism and the dialogue between love and identity politics. On the other hand, Carbado’s text aimed at deconstructing the narrow theoretical frame in which intersectionality was being considered, while appealing for its theoretical boundaries to be pushed rather than disciplined. More recently, in 2018, Angela Harris and Zeus Leonardo published “Intersectionality, Race-Gender Subordination, and Education”, in which they remembered Crenshaw’s thinking while they reflected on the unjustified

violence and murder of black people, considering the Black Lives Matter movement. Moreover, Harris and Leonardo's article reinforced the existing subordination and oppression caused by race and gender inequality, and explored how the racist and patriarchal prejudice was being approached in education.

The referred studies, which departed from Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional theory, are of the uttermost importance given the unique spheres of oppression generated by the overlap of social categories. However, this article aims at providing an innovative perspective on intersectionality by presenting a comparative reading of three poems which have not yet been considered together while analysed through an intersectional approach.

"Still I Rise" is a poem written in 1978. Its authorship belongs to Maya Angelou, an American poet whose personal life served as inspiration for several of her own works, always with the focus of exploring themes of racial, gender and sexual oppression. She was part of the Harlem Writers Guild, was recurrently associated with the Black Arts Movement and one of the most characteristic traits of her poems is to resemble the structure of sermons by aiming at calling to action. From the beginning of her poem, the word "you" is referred multiple times, and it is, in fact, to whom the poem is addressed. This "you" is representative of the oppressor, and, although white people and slave-owners are referenced, the significance should not be restrained to this, but should be extended to a universal receiver. It is important to note that the speaker recognizes that this "you" has power, this being revealed by the anaphoric expression "you may" in the verses "You may write me down in history/ . . . You may trod me in the very dirt/ . . . You may shoot me with yours words,/ You may cut me with your eyes,/ You may kill me with your hatefulness" (vv. 1, 3, 21-3). However, the speaker has a power too, the power to rise. And the similarity in the sound of the words "lies" and "rise" in "With your bitter, twisted lies, . . . But still, like dust, I'll rise." (vv. 2, 4) shows that her power to rise through and above all that is stronger than all those lies. The use of the word "dust" (v. 4) is also significant, since it can be connected to the Bible - "All come from dust, and all return to dust" (Ecclesiastes 3:20) - emphasizing that, despite the differences, all humans are the same, come from the same place and will end the same way.

In another part of the poem, the focus is on black female empowerment, which can be associated with the slogan "Black is beautiful", popularized due to an embrace and pride of black culture and identity in the 1960s and 1970s in America. Moreover, the space of the female black body in the public space is also present with the verses "Does my sassiness upset you? / . . . Does my haughtiness offend you? / . . . Does my

sexiness upset you?” (vv. 5, 17, 25). Further in the text, the American history and legacy is present when diamonds, oil wells and gold mines are evoked in close relation to the female speaker: “‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells/ Pumping in my living room/ . . . ‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines/ Diggin’ in my own backyard./ . . . That I dance like I’ve got diamonds/ At the meeting of my thighs?” (vv. 7-8, 19-20, 27-8). All these three references represent forms of wealth and economic empowerment of the United States and, by placing them in her private spaces, both the body and the house, this black woman is proclaiming her own place and part in the American dream.

The historical mentions continue with “I am the dream and the hope of the slave” (v. 40), summoning the time of slavery in America and, specifically with the word “dream”, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech concerning the end of racism and the fight for civil rights of black people. On a final note, it is important to reflect on “Out of the huts of history’s shame/ I rise/ Up from a past that’s rooted in pain/ I rise/ I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide” (vv. 29-33): this black female speaker will rise above the past of a country who shamefully abused her ancestors and caused pain and trauma in every member of the black female community; she will rise, as well as all the other victims of that oppression, who are angry for what was done to them.

The second poem to be considered is “won’t you celebrate with me”, published in 1993 by Lucille Clifton, a poet and professor whose literary talent was discovered when her work was included in Langston Hughes’ anthology *The Poetry of the Negro*. In “won’t you celebrate with me”, the speaker is once again female and black, and is describing her personal journey regarding her identity and the obstacles she had to face to become her true self. She affirms “I had no model” (v. 3) and this absence of an example is both on a personal and creative level, since the canon was restricted to mainly male and white writers; this way, there was not an official legacy for black female writers in America, and this made her focus on herself. This is relevant enough for Fahamisha Patricia Brown to believe, like claimed in the article “In the Light: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton”, that the verse “what did i see to be except myself?” (v. 6) became a mantra for Clifton’s poetry (Brown 15). Still linked to this idea, vocabulary such as “shaped” (v. 2), “model” (v. 3) and “clay” (v. 9) introduce the idea of the speaker being like a piece of clay which can be shaped into whatever form she wants to take, thus revealing her freedom of identity and of the self. This becomes clearer when particular attention is paid to the active form present in “what i have shaped into/ a kind of life” (vv. 2-3) which indicates that she was responsible for her self-creation.

The poem opens with a call to action addressed to the reader: “won’t you celebrate with me” (v. 1). And the reason for this celebration is her self-creation while remaining truthful to her identity, despite the oppression and lack of privilege: she reveals being born “both nonwhite and woman” (v. 5). It is not explicitly said she was born black, and this is significant: what is stated is the opposition between white and everything which is not white, so, again, there is a universal meaning, just like in Maya Angelou’s poem. There is a broad category that serves to allocate in it everyone who is not white, everyone who is not given such privileges, despite their race. This speaker, by identifying herself as “nonwhite”, is siding with all those who see their identity reduced to the Other. And, of course, the fact that she is a woman takes this lack of privilege and presence of prejudice even further - the intersection of the categories of race and gender creating an even more violent oppression to this speaker, complying with the theory presented in the beginning by evoking Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory.

In fact, there is a technique used by Clifton, not only in this poem but in a great majority of her work, which can be perceived as a demonstration of this difference between oppressor and oppressed: the lack of capital letters. While it may also be an act of non-conformity concerning tradition and grammar, it can be a representation of the oppressed, namely of black female writers in the American literary canon, who have always seen their voices and their experience in America being diminished - as if they are always a lower case when standing next to the capital letter white male writers. While still inviting the reader to celebrate with her, the speaker’s act of holding her own hand tight shows that, as a black female writer, the place she has conquered in society is not to be taken for granted. Moreover, by holding her own hand, she emphasizes her autonomy and strength to survive and thrive on her own, despite all the harm and injustice she has suffered. This seems to be the reason why every time something or someone tries to hurt or minimize her identity, they fail: “my one hand holding tight/ my other hand; come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed” (vv. 10-4).

The final literary object in analysis, “Poem About My Rights”, is a poem written by June Jordan, an American poet and activist who, similar to Maya Angelou and Lucille Clifton, focused her work on writing about issues of gender, race and representation. She was involved in the Black Arts Movement and gave a great emphasis to the use of African American English, also known as Black English, in her poetry, supporting the importance of its usage as an expression of black culture. This poem has its basis on the experience of a black woman who states “. . . I can’t do

what I want/ to do with my own body because I am the wrong/ sex the wrong age the wrong skin” (vv.7-9). She revisits her trauma as a survivor of rape who is angry at the world and its politics which protect the ones who should be locked away. This is evident in an example she gives of a case of sexual abuse which took place in France:

and in France they say if the guy penetrates
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me
and if after stabbing him if after screams if
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing
a hammer to his head if even after that if he
and his buddies fuck me after that
then I consented and there was
no rape because finally you understand finally
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was
wrong again to be me being me where I was
wrong to be who I am
(Jordan vv. 23-33)

This evokes a real case in France, back in 1978, when two Belgian women were raped by a group of three men. It was the first situation of sexual abuse in the legal history of the country in which the victims were heard by the *Cours d’Assises*, the criminal court which is responsible for the judgement of serious crimes. This was worthy of public attention in *The New York Times*, and it was there revealed that local men incurred in violent acts during the trial, threatening women lawyers and journalists, and the violence was mainly directed towards the victims and their lawyer, who had previously won the case which led to the legalization of abortion in the country. Every reference of the poem is accurate to what truly happened, since the victims said no, screamed, one of them struck one of the rapists with a hammer, and still, the three criminals repeatedly abused the two women for hours.

The speaker of the poem has also been a victim of sexual abuse, affirming this has happened because “. . . I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age/ the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the/ wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic” (vv. 93-6), as if all parts of her identity were a justification for the crime committed against her.

Moreover, the political sphere also has its place in the text in another section, in the verses “which is exactly like South Africa/ penetrating into Namibia penetrating into/ Angola” (vv. 34-6): these are a possible reference to the South-African Border War, a conflict in Namibia, Angola and Zambia which lasted for more than twenty-

three years and only ended with the Tripartite Accord, a peace treaty in which the republics of Angola, Cuba and South Africa agreed to allow Namibia to be independent from South Africa and to end the direct involvement of foreign troops in the Angolan Civil War. In addition to this, the poem also refers the case of Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba: “back in 1966 the C.I.A. decided that they had this problem/ and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they/ killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba” (vv. 49-51). The first is a reference to the *coup d’etat* of February 1966 which overthrew Nkrumah’s government in Ghana and the U.S., namely through the C.I.A., were seen as having not only supported but also contributed to this; the latter is a reference to the assassination of Lumumba, an independence leader and Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, whose government was also overthrown by a *coup d’etat* in 1960. When trying to escape, Lumumba was captured and murdered some weeks after, and the assassination had the participation of the U.S. and Belgium. Through the evocation of these deaths, the personal and the political are linked and the speaker exposes not only the American past and its role on racism, slavery and oppression, but also the American participation in political international conflicts and consequential assassinations, comparing these to the sexual abuse theme which dominates the poem.

Peter Erickson, in his 1986 article “The Love Poetry of June Jordan”, claims Jordan’s poem “presents a strenuous drive toward self-definition [with a tone which is] serious, urgent, menacing [and which] spends most of its energy fending and sloughing off false terms . . . [being a] rejection of destructive labels” (221). This is explicitly conveyed when the speaker claims, in the last stanza: “*I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name/ My name is my own my own my own/ . . . I can tell you that from now on my resistance/ my simple and daily self-determination/ may very well cost you your life*” (vv. 110-5). By stepping forward and denying the label of “wrong” associated with every characteristic of her body and of her identity, this black female speaker is creating a definition of herself according to her traits and particularities and embracing them.

Along with this act, she will also resist anyone who tries to diminish her, threatening those oppressors, who will face the consequences of their actions and who will fail in those attempts - a resolve that is similar to the message that ends Lucile Clifton’s poem, in which everyone who tried to destroy her also failed and would continue to do so. Moreover, both black female speakers of these two poems are proud of their journey, just as Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” speaker, who can rise despite all the lies and prejudice she is forced to deal with.

In conclusion, even though each of the analysed poems has its own specific approach - Maya Angelou's text focusing on black female empowerment, the space of the female black body in the public space and the inclusion of the black female in the American dream and legacy; Lucille Clifton's referencing the power of self-creation and black female voices' minimization in the American canon; and June Jordan's remembering the topic of sexual violence and the rejection of a wrong attributed social identity - they all present the idea that, as much as the oppressor tries to destroy them, these black females who are writing in America will never allow it. Their strength, beauty, and power, which derive from their identities, give them the capacity to overcome all forms of prejudice they are susceptible to, enabling them to share their journey and experience with the courage.

However, despite their personal courage and tenacity, their narratives expose a worrying world of oppression and violence that surrounds not only their private environment but also their creative and working world as they attempt to establish their place in the literary canon of America. This difficulty comes with their skin colour and cultural heritage, but it also comes with their gender and the sum of both parts, each of them being already a minority in terms of power, makes the discrimination they're exposed to more brutal and distinct from the one which a black male or a white female are forced to deal with.

Therefore, it is not enough to have a movement which only fights against racism or one which only gives voice to women as if the oppression was equal and the same to every member of that category. With the rise of the different social movements, it becomes imperative to recognise that the struggle black women deal with daily comes from the overlapping of their gender and race. For this, intersectionality is fundamental, as Kimberlé Crenshaw defended and theorised in the articles quoted in this paper. No social movement is enough if it does not include intersectionality, and, in the specific case of women, there is no real fight for feminism unless it is an intersectional feminism.

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