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Luis Cañadilla Pons

"The Intersection between Ethnicity and Sex: Women's Activism Against Discrimination in America during the XIX Century"

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"The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation,
because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source."
— Lucretia Mott

Abstract: When understanding feminist theory, it is essential to consider all its layers as well as their impact on women's rights and freedom. However, feminism, over the course of its existence, has mainly focused on white, middle-class women, whereas other minority groups have remained repressed and silenced. In that regard, intersectional feminism, alongside other feminist movements, emerged as a reaction against the injustices and struggles that women and other minorities in North America had to endure in several aspects of their lives such as social marginalisation or racial segregation. Pioneers like Lucretia Mott and Sojourner Truth, among others, created an intersectional feminist prototype that was centuries ahead of its time. Accordingly, this essay intends to portrait their efforts to disavow the structures of power imposed on women, not only to create a new order in which all women are equal, regardless of their race, sexual orientation or class status, but also to create a new order in which men and women have equal rights.

Keywords: Intersectionality, feminism, Lucretia Mott, segregation, suffragist movement, Seneca Falls.

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The Intersection between Ethnicity and Sex: Women's Activism against Discrimination in America during the XIX Century

0. Introduction

According to intersectional feminist theorist and researcher, Leslie McCall, intersectionality has been proclaimed from its very beginning as "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (1771). As an essential instrument to analyse the different power relations in society, intersectional theory provides a framework for feminist theory and social sciences to critique and analyse the multiple and different intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and social divisions. The term "intersectionality" was popularised by American academic, Patricia Hill Collins (Hulko 44), and originally coined by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her critique of the United States anti-discrimination laws against black women coupled with the blindness of identity politics (Hulko 46). While its formulation is used to describe identities on micro-level processes, Collins argues that intersectionality reflects "the notion of interlocking oppressions [which] refers to the macro level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class and gender" (492). Furthermore, Avtar Brah, alongside Ann Phoenix, interpreted the theory as:

> Signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasises that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands. (76)

Despite its popularity among feminist scholarship, intersectionality offers multiple debates regarding its ambiguity. Having that said, it could be argued that the ambiguity around intersectionality allows feminist theorists to approach intersectional theories in an almost infinite number of ways according to their particular purposes or settings (Davis 77). Thus, in spite of being ambiguous at times, its theoretical approach has become much wider. McPhail's defines the theory as an "epistemological continuum" (17) since numerous approaches can effectively depict the interconnection of women's identities and oppressions in feminist scholarship (Mehrotra 422). However, as there is no precise procedure to apply intersectional methodologies, it has led to many uncertainties whether its theories could be used or not for feminist inquiries. It is relevant to address the multiple studies, such as black feminist studies, Asian American women studies, Chicana studies... that are

commonly assumed to fall within the context of intersectionality, when, in fact, intersectional research, and any feminism variant, do not have necessarily to be synonymous terms. While it is true that these studies and research share many aspects in common, by claiming intersectional theory just in the name of Asian American, Latin American or black women narrows the richness of the theory, ignoring other perspectives that these studies address. In that regard, feminist scholar and researcher Kathy Davies argued that:

> Although intersectionality addressed an old problem within feminist scholarship, it did so with a new twist. It offered a novel link between critical feminist theory on the effects of sexism, class, and racism and a critical methodology inspired by postmodern feminist theory, bringing them together in ways that could not have been envisioned before. While feminist theories of race, class and gender and poststructuralist feminist theory shared many of the same concerns, there were also some theoretical and methodological incompatibilities. (73)

One could argue that the significant modern formulation of intersectionality contributed to the development of its theories. However, its concept comes from a long time back in history. In relation to black feminism in North America, black women have been historically excluded from both feminist theory and antiracism campaigns. In that regard, Scharf and Jensen argued that "Afro-American women dared to dream a white man's dream – the right to enfranchisement – especially at a time when white women attempt to exclude them from that dream" (262). Thus, studies only focused on racism or sexism that do not take into account the intersectional experience cannot address in a reliable or realistic manner how black women have been discriminated against and marginalised over the course of history. Therefore, this analysis intends to provide a proto-intersectional approach to showcase black women's efforts and activism to claim for the abolition of slavery in North America as well as the end to their marginalisation.

1. The Seneca Falls Convention and the Suffragist Movement

Feminist activists from the nineteenth century such as Sojourner Truth, Lucretia Mott or Mary Church Terrell struggled with the intersection between ethnicity, sexuality and female status within society. After gaining recognition in the mid-19th century among cries for the abolition of slavery, intersectional movements demanded expanded political rights for women. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw:

> Neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claims as their respective constituents.

> In order to include Black women, both movements must distance themselves from earlier approaches in which experiences are relevant only when they are related to certain clearly identifiable causes (for example, the oppression of Blacks is significant when based on race, of women when based on gender). The praxis of both should be centred on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties. (166)

To improve American women's status within society, activists like Cady Stanton or Mott, alongside fellow abolitionists and white women suffragists like Stone or Susan B. Anthony, advocated for women's right to vote and made clear their position after gathering in the Seneca Falls Convention in July 1848. To emphasize the importance of the convention, it must be remembered that it gathered around three hundred people in order to not only discuss women's social, civil and religious conditions, but also their political rights. Moreover, the convention became the first women's rights convention in modern North American history. Under those circumstances and by using the Declaration of Independence (1776) as a model, more than one hundred people signed the "Declaration of Sentiments,' a document that asserted "that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness..." (Harrison 142). It is important to realise that almost two-thirds of the signers were women, so sex was a relevant factor of the convention and one of the aspects that caused major disagreements during the convention. In equal manner, other relevant and considered problematic factors were race or place of birth, as the vast majority of signers were native-born European Americans with the exception of Frederick Douglass, the only African-American man, who became one of the greatest allies of the women's suffrage movement. Undoubtedly, these women's rights movements and the Seneca Falls Convention turned these sentiments into a feminist approach for politics, creating a new beginning in the history of feminism and modern United States movements for women's rights opening new horizons for the cultural and social inclusion of black people in the future of America.

Since there are "two standard approaches [that] explain why the nineteenth-century U.S. women's movement emerged when and where it did" (Wellman 10), it could be argued that Seneca Falls stands as a symbol of the modern United States movement for women's rights. In an equal manner, it was a relevant part of Cady Stanton's personal experience that she wanted to portrait in order to criticise the discrimination and injustices she had to endure during her childhood. Women's rights movements emerged from their efforts to participate in antislavery movements and from the radical Garrisonian wing of abolitionism that, according to Dubois "reinforced

the secularizing of the abolitionism movement" (33). Furthermore, Dubois further argued that Garrisonian abolitionism enabled them to hold onto their religious beliefs but at the same time supported them to summon churches as institutionalized support systems of slavery and the oppression of women (33). As a movement with a more advanced position on sexual and racial equality, the Garrisonians were composed by a group of abolitionist thinkers who gathered around William Lloyd Garrison's leadership to join his reformist and unifying discourse on the equal participation of women that began a few years ago when he published the *Liberator* in 1831, declaring: "I will be as harsh as truth, and uncompromising as justice... I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard" (Cameron 108). As a result, it could be argued that Garrisonian abolitionism coupled with women's rights activists helped to reinforce the public demand for social changes regarding women's situation.

The so-called Suffrage Movement was fighting for equal political status as well as advocating against the patriarchal and conservative notions of gender roles, as suffragettes emphasised how women's morality could be useful to reform the political system at the time. Although abolitionism remained as an international enterprise, antislavery women movements in the United States began to expand their activities in the 1830s. According to Bonnie S. Anderson, abolitionism for British women remained a distant cause with no significant impact on their lives. However, in the United States, slavery and segregation were extremely frequent issues, particularly in the South of the country and in the national fabric industry. Hence, black and white communities constituted two complete separated nations (117). Although activists such as Lucretia Mott or Susan B. Anthony are seen as the spotlight of the movement in North America, the struggles African-American collectives of women had to endure also deserve proper recognition, as intersectionality played an important role in the women's suffrage movement. Thus, after their exclusion from American Anti-Slavery male associations, women created their own emancipation movements in favour of their rights and the immediate abolition of slavery.

Additionally, these associations created by women included both white and black members, extending their activities by petitioning and fund-raising for their movements. Moreover, some of the most considered radical antislavery movements came from women's activism in these years. To exemplify, American abolitionist and women's rights activist, Lydia Maria Child's published her book, *An Appeal in Favour of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), claiming for black people's inclusion in society. By the same token, the public letters of the first American female advocates of the abolition of slavery and women's rights, Angelina and Sarah Grimké,

became abolitionists and renounced to their slaveholder family heritage. Later, African-American abolitionist and former slave turned preacher, Sojourner Truth (born Isabella Baumfree), delivered a speech at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron (Ohio) in May 1851 claiming for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for men and women. Truth's challenging words defying social conventions had a massive influence on later feminist campaigns and expressed the thoughts of many black feminists:

> Well, children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter, I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North - all talking about rights—the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me-and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it-and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children, and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me-and ain't I a woman? (Lykke 76)

By presenting her own personal experiences, Truth revealed the contradictory reality of being a black woman coupled with the ideological myth of womanhood, the latter, according to Gilbert and Gubar, being "the eternal type of female purity [that] was represented... by an angel in the house" (20). Thus, it could be argued that her words stand as a significant counter-statement to the popular misconception of women being inferior to men. By the same token, Truth's statements did not only challenge patriarchal societies and its conservatism, but also white feminists who disregarded black women's situation, arguing that black women were less than "real" women, so their experiences could not be applied to what they understood as "true" womanhood. Her famous statement "Ain't I a woman?" while exposing her breasts to the audience in Silver Lake (Indiana) after being accused of being a man, supposed a rather melodramatic act that portrayed her indomitable spirit. However, historians such as Nell Painter argue that it never happened, stating that it was an unusual anecdote created by the convention organiser, Frances Dana Gage and other feminists that wanted to portray Truth's figure in front of white audiences as a genuine ally in their fight for women's rights. Either way, Truth's influence will be reflected later on in contemporary feminist texts on the subject such as Denise Riley's *Am I that name* (1988) or Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).

2. Lucretia Mott: Intersectional Theory Ahead of its Time

As one of the most representative figures in North American women's activism, Lucretia Mott (née Coffin) was a well-respected abolitionist and Quaker minister, who can be considered an authentic defender of what nowadays is called intersectionality, as she advocated for slavery abolition. Moreover, Mott was the first woman to speak at the Seneca Falls Convention, struggling to achieve female suffrage and brave enough to state that "we may be personally defeated, but our principles never" (Faulkner 65), emphasising the inward light of people as the distinctive theme of the Quaker society that allows a person to know God's will. Additionally, Mott became part of the first organisational meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society and was a vital part of both the inner circle and the founder of the "Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society," a small band that included both black and white women. According to Judith Wellman, this group of people were mostly Quakers who joined Lucretia Mott, not just to promote their antislavery ideals, but also to claim the rights of African Americans to education, jobs and citizenship (48). Comparatively, American historian and scholar, Carol Faulkner, argues that "Mott's interest and involvement in women's rights, while ongoing and profound, never trumped her support for abolition or racial equality" (4). According to Faulkner, it was clear that white American's freedom cannot be separated from that of the slaves. Thus, by using other countries, like France, she provided an example of how North America should end with slavery and other socio-political inequalities: "yet, when we look abroad and see what is now being done in other lands when we see human freedom engaging the attention of the nations of the earth, we may take courage" (Faulkner 291). Given these points, Mott, like many other considered radical feminists, believed that freedom was a universal right: we all must be free or none of us should be.

Additionally, Mott defended that men were not tyrants by nature; instead, she stated that the inherent power men had within society was what created all these inequalities between both sexes. In a way, Mott's ideas exemplified what English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe previously asked in 1818 "Can man be free, if woman be a slave?" (Graham 890), since contributions were not just reduced to religious audiences, as she also used social platforms to fight for the liberation movement. In the end, Mott's labour was greatly recognised at the time by both male and female writers; Harriet Martineau (1802 – 1876) defined her as a noble, philosophical and firm woman after hearing her preach in 1836. Moreover, Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862) stated that "her self-possession was something to see, if all else failed, it did not" (Anderson 124) after attending one of her lectures in 1843. One of the most impressive descriptions of Lucretia Mott's impact after a speech was declared by

Marianne Finch, an Englishwoman who was present at her sermon against the Fugitive Slave Act in 1851:

> A very plainly dressed little woman rose [Mott was thin and barely five feet tall, considered small in her own day] . . . Taking off her bonnet, [she] revealed a very ugly Quaker's cap, an expansive forehead, and a pair of beautiful soul-lit eyes. As soon as she spoke, I felt myself her captive. Her voice was inexpressibly sweet, deep-toned, and earnest. Her manner easy and dignified; her Christianity broad and practical, without bigotry and mysticism; her words flowed freely, but not superfluously, and seemed the best she could have chosen to express her meaning. Above all, she seemed to take a deep interest in what she said, and to wish her hearers to do the same Lucretia Mott deserved her fame. (Anderson 124)

Faulkner pictured Mott as a "radiant personality" (Faulkner 33), "an eloquent speaker with a sweet and melodious voice" (41). who arguably focused on converting language into a major weapon to be heard and to fight against social inequalities. Equally important, Mott was a very important person in the life of Cady Stanton, as she represented a new world of thought that encouraged her to be part of the antislavery movement.

By the end of the 19th century, in February 1898, one of the first African American women to earn a college degree, Mary Church Terrell (1863 – 1954) spoke at the National American Woman Suffrage Association convention in Washington. As a personal background, Terrell was a black suffragist born to former slaves that represented intersectionality at its best. After earning her bachelor and master's degrees, she served as president of the National Association of Coloured Women, her powerful speech in front of white women reflected the oppression and violence black women had to endure working as slaves. Additionally, she included an optimistic remark at the very end of her speech, stating that when women are free, they are symbols of courage and intelligence and, although the path to achieve racial and sexual equality is a rather long and hard one, humanity must still believe in changes.

3. Conclusion

All things considered, despite the term "intersectionality" is a rather recent one, the movement gained major recognition based on the contribution of feminist activists like Mott or Truth among the cries for slavery abolition and the female claim for expanded political rights and equality. Having highlighted its main theoretical premises and its origins in North America within black feminism, intersectionality

provides a new *raison d'être* for both feminist theory and criticism, as it promises feminist scholars of all identities, theoretical and political perspectives.

As a nation in which slavery existed "from the colonial period until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865" (Kemble 33), America's history is flawed from its very beginning. Furthermore, and due to white male supremacy, the history of women's suffrage in America is rather troublesome. It should be also noted how enslaved black women were prevented from living by the standards of white women. Additionally, they "were not regarded as human or as women but as chattel", as they were even excluded "from the definition of women" (Vallier 6). Thus, these women didn't follow the manifestations of patriarchy existing within white communities, resulting in black women's failure to live according to society standards and the constant racism and discrimination their communities had to endure throughout history. In that regard, intersectionality demonstrates why an analysis of patriarchy based on the white experience cannot justify female black experience. As a result, when women failed to conform to appropriate sex and gender roles, they were stigmatised and considered inadequate, as they were not what the system expects women to be. Having that said and as previously mentioned, black women had to experience a double marginalisation, as they combined the experience of being discriminated for their ethnicity and the discrimination for having been born as women. As a result, black women had to endure discrimination on the basis of both race and sex.

The analysis so far conducted aims to portray this harsh reality and engage in the intersectional celebration of women's rights promoted by many activists during history, whether they were men or women. In that sense, intersectional theory suggests that there is still much work to be done. In all, intersectionality is presented as a paradigm to tackle complexity to address categories of difference that are dynamic and indivisible. Likewise, it challenges scholars to critically portrait this multidimensionality of subjectivity in order to implement certain social changes in order to achieve equality.

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Bioprofile of the author: Luis Cañadilla Pons is an English Studies graduate from Universidad Complutense de Madrid. His main areas of interest are the Victorian period and Contemporary fiction in North America. Moreover, his fascination for Anglo-American literature has motivated him to pursue a PhD in the future.

Contact: <lucanadi@ucm.es>