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Understanding Intersectionality through *Hunger* and *Ain't I a Woman*

Intersectional oppression is something Black women in America have been deeply in tune with since the time of slavery. In her article, "Race, Gender, and the Black Women's Standpoint," Catherine E. Harnois studies this intersectionality by comparing empirical data to prove that Black women have a specific way of understanding the world because of their intersecting identities, while Anna Mollow investigates state-sanctioned intersectional oppression by combining fat theory, Black theory, and disability theory in her essay, "Unvictimizable: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies." In their books, Roxane Gay and bell hooks each explore intersectional oppression from their perspective as Black women, using personal and collective histories to do so. They also bring in experiences from their other unique identities, like those relating to weight, sexuality, and class. Ultimately, understanding the intersectional experiences of Black women teaches us about systems of power and how they affect those most vulnerable in society.

Roxane Gay inhabits many marginalized identities: Black, woman, queer, fat. In *Hunger*, she not only details her personal traumatic experiences, but she also clearly and cleverly explains how intersectional oppression contributes to her life and the trauma she's had to face. Through her weight gain, which occurred as a defense mechanism after her rape, Gay began to see how fatness is perceived and policed in society, noting how "the words "first do no harm" do not apply to unruly bodies" (Gay 179). She faces oppression in medical settings because of her weight and the negative connotations associated with it, noting that she has suffered from an undiagnosed stomach condition for over 10 years because she understands that doctors will not treat her well. In her experience, doctors "are happiest when they can try and use their expertise

to force me to discipline my body" (Gay 180). Mollow supports this, asserting that "the medical profession's belief in weight loss as a remedy for almost every imaginable illness or disability is in part the result of the financial power of the diet industry" (Mollow 110). The diet industry is something that Gay is subjected to throughout her life in both indirect and direct ways, such as through doctors' promotion of weight loss surgery, the weight loss camp that her family sends her to, or even in the form of reality TV and commercials centered around dieting and fitness.

According to Harnois, the "everyday experiences or "lived conditions" of black women," alongside the fatphobia and the cultural pressures Gay navigates, directly contributes to "an intersectional understanding of oppression" (Harnois 72). Between the perceptions of the medical establishment and the harmful messages she receives from shows like *The Biggest Loser* or even her Haitian family, Gay recognizes that she is "never allowed to forget the realities of [her] body, how [her] body offends the sensibilities of others, how [her] body dares to take up too much space…" (Gay 175). Just as she cannot ignore the racism and fatphobia attributed to her body, she cannot forget the trauma that led to her fatness: her rape.

To better understand Gay's sexual assault, we must first look to the connections between racism, sexism, and rape as a tool of the oppressor. bell hooks primarily writes from a historical perspective in *Ain't I a Woman,* and the historical facts she presents are key to understanding intersectional oppression and how it continues to affect modern-day Black women. In her first chapter, "Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience," she clearly demonstrates how racism and sexism have worked in tandem to keep white, colonialist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems in place. During slavery, "the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault," clearly positioning the enslaved Black women's oppression at the intersections of race and sex (hooks

39). Enslaved women were held to the same standards as men when it came to the production of labor, but they were also expected to constantly produce children for their masters' use. Black women that did not meet the standards of production or childbearing faced the same punishments as their male counterparts, but unlike Black men, they also experienced punishment through rape. Despite what some may have argued, sexual violence was not a result of white men's inability to control their sexual urges, for "this categorical rape of black women by white males was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order" (hooks 45).

Mollow also calls attention to the historical oppression of Black people, particularly the through the lens of fatphobia. She explains that many believed enslaved people "were so prone to physical and mental disabilities that they could not survive without the "protection" of their white owners," while also believing that those of "African descent possessed such inordinate strength that they did not suffer from the abuses that their enslavers imposed upon them" (Mollow 105-106). We can see the consequences of this today, as medical institutions still hold the assumption that Black people have a higher pain tolerance. Black people are often assumed to be unhealthy as well, which Mollow admonishes, as the health issues that Black communities deal with are usually due to societal problems, like extra stresses from oppression, lack of access to fresh food, or unclean living situations, like the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. She also talks about how society perceives Black communities to have high rates of obesity and how this "characterize[s] the majority of black people in the U. S. as disabled simply because they are fat," because, as she explains, fatness in Black bodies is seen as a sickness (Mollow 107).

As we have seen through hooks', and to a lesser extent, Mollow's, writing, Gay's rape did not occur in a vacuum; it was borne from a long-used form of state-sanctioned violence against Black women. Despite the deep, terrible impact her rape had on her, Gay "appreciate[s] that at

least some of who [she is] rises out of the worst day of [her] life" because it has enabled her to use her "voice, not just for [herself] but for people whose lives demand being seen and heard" (Gay 197). As Harnois explains, Black women in particular "share a distinct consciousness in which a struggle for social justice based on an intersectional understanding of oppression is central" (Harnois 73). We see this at work when Gay describes a time, during an event, in which attendees wished for the sign language interpreter to move so they could better see her and Gloria Steinem on stage. Here, her personal experience allowed her to consider the needs of others and prioritize the visibility of the sign language interpreter. The "greater sensitivity" she exhibited "could only be brought about by the realities of [her] body" because her "body has forced [her] to be more mindful of how other bodies, of differing abilities, move through the world" (Gay 195).

Interestingly, Gay questions whether "fat is a disability" as she discusses how she faces inaccessibility in the world around her (Gay 194). She struggles finding clothes or spaces, like airplanes or chairs in restaurants, that accommodate her body, and says that she has to consider what options are available to her, such as elevators or railings on stairs, when navigating different spaces. Mollow argues that "fatness can be understood as a disability" if it is considered "through the lens of the social model," which she explains is a mode of thinking that shifts the focus of disability from the body's impairments to the "barriers erected by cultural attitudes and the built environment" (Mollow 112). Essentially, this model considers disability not as a personal failing or an individual problem but as a societal one because of how non-normative bodies are effectively pushed out of or made to struggle in order to exist in the public sphere. Therefore, through the social model, Gay's struggles with inaccessibility can be read as a disabled experience. Even if she does not connect or identify with the label herself, it cannot be

denied that her experiences have impacted her own understanding of herself, as well as of the structural and societal inequalities that impact disabled people on a day-to-day basis. This is something that she herself attests to, noting that her struggles have "show[n] me a fraction of the questions people with disabilities must ask to be out in the world" (Gay 194).

Roxane Gay, bell hooks, Catherine Harnois, and Anna Mollow all consider the role of intersectional oppression in the lives of Black women through various angles, like personal experience, historical study, data analysis, and contemporary theoretical inquiry. hooks' crucial revelations about the reality of the treatment of enslaved Black women helps us better understand the historical ties to power structures that are still in place and affecting Black women and other marginalized peoples today. Her work also illuminates Gay's own writing and the systems that have contributed to her own oppression. The unique understanding, perspective, and empathy Gay has cultivated is partially because of the trauma she went through, and it enables her to recognize and bring attention to oppression she witnesses, as well as her own. While no person should have to suffer any kind of violence or oppression, we cannot ignore the reality of those traumas radically transforming our lives and identities and sometimes leading us to new, positive growth and a desire to better others' lives, just as it has for Gay. By educating ourselves and connecting with people of various experiences, we can develop our own understanding of intersectionality and societal oppression and grow into more socially conscious people.

Works Cited

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