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Sandra Laugier

Translated by Daniela Ginsburg

Intersectionality on Screen

"Intersectionality" is a term that often provokes at best confusion, and at worst aggression. This may be because the concept is not always explained, but it also has to do with the difficulty feminists themselves have in thinking the inequalities between women and defending a "black feminism." To understand intersectionality, one need look no further than the characters on the three-season series *American Crime* (ABC, John Ridley, 2015-2017), whose lives combine poverty, lack of education, and racial and sometimes religious oppression. The show, using an ingenious technique common to certain anthological series, casts the same actors throughout its three seasons, but in different roles, with variations in the characters' social positions and profiles from one season to another. By showing the same actresses—in particular, the excellent Regina King and Felicity Huffman—and actors—especially Timothy Hutton—in inverted social situations, *American Crime* explores class, gender, and race relations in all their difficulty and complexity, and renders directly perceptible the arbitrariness of racial segregation, which can lead, seemingly ineluctably, from poverty to exclusion and delinquency. It is not a matter of alternating "points of view" as in the film *Rashomon*, but rather of constructing characters in new contexts, which creates both understanding and shock, and reveals, better than any discourse, the full weight and violence of discrimination. And the show is broadcast on a major public network, ABC, making it more democratic than if it were on cable or an online platform such as Netflix.

Intersectionality thus viewed onscreen is a necessary, everyday concept, and it allows the viewer to understand, beyond the accumulation or combination of traits, how women's very identities are themselves intersectional, and how

domination today is defined by multiple oppressions. It is a tool that renders visible extreme yet ordinary forms of discrimination and vulnerability, and in particular those of black women in the United States. Before *American Crime*, the series *Orange is the New Black* was the first to have put on display, within a closed world of women, inequalities of race and class as well as sexual differences. To be sure, at the aesthetic level it was rather conventional, in that the two main characters were white women, but in the end the series foregrounded strong black female characters, who were portrayed by such excellent actresses (Samira Wiley, Uzo Aduba, and many others) that the political message came across naturally. Even a seemingly more standard series, *Scandal* (also on ABC) focused on an iconoclastic, conquering black woman, Olivia Pope, played with authority by Kerry Washington. The series veers into caricature with its multiple improbabilities and plot twists, but it is nevertheless true that the presence of this woman at the center of the series—gradually transcending her undeniable quality as a sex object for powerful white men—also constitutes a small revolution, even if the class dimension is only present implicitly.

It is notable that questions of intersectionality have been more easily addressed by television series than by film, and by fiction rather than by theory. In the case of television, this is thanks to the mobility and reversals of situation made possible by a narration that stretches over several years, the attachment to characters that the series format allows, and the educational aims many series harbor. In the case of theory, which was slow to develop thought around intersectionality, this has to do with the fact that feminist movements and thinking were long dominated by white women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw is one of the major figures of feminism and an authority on the theory of intersectionality, black feminism, and critical race theory.¹ She was the one to introduce the term “intersectionality” in the late 1980s, in a now classic work entitled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist*

¹ Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics (1989).

The first thing to understand about intersectionality is that it does not only refer to a complex system of multiple oppressions (connected to race, class, or gender). The idea of multiple oppressions is not new; it emerged at the end of the 19th century, and, in any case, analyses in the social sciences often consist in studying combinations of multiple factors (age, sex, geographic origin, etc.). The injunction to think about a plurality of relations of domination together may thus seem redundant, since after all, realities are already “intersected” by definition; gender is always racial, social, etc. So then what is new here? We may think of the powerful slogan of American Black Feminism in the 1980s: “All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave.”² The slogan denounced the double exclusion of black women: from white bourgeois feminism and from sexist black nationalism. Black feminists created a political movement of singular importance in the United States built on the denunciation of these oppressions. Their struggles are beginning to pay off, at least within academia, where thinkers such as Angela Davis and Kimberlé Crenshaw are now recognized. We may also point to the last elections, in which a significant number of women of color emerged as political leaders and were elected. As a loyal and determined electorate, women of color are on the front lines in the new struggles against a Trumpism that combines all forms of hatred (classism, sexism, racism, ageism, etc.). In fact, Trump provides a sort of negative illustration of intersectionality in the way he targets women of color who are involved in grassroots activism.

Black feminism is a critique of hegemonic white feminism, so-called “first-wave” or “mainstream” feminism, which masked the complexity of the forms of exclusion experienced by minority women. This brand of feminism, anchored in a

² See the edited volume *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*, eds. Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1982) and Elsa Dorlin, ed., *Black Feminism: Anthologie du féminisme africain-américain, 1975-2000* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008), one of the first works published in Europe to showcase black feminist thought.

denunciation of relations of domination between men and women and the need for “womankind” to enjoy the same opportunities as men, presents the subordination of women as universal and common to all women. However, it actually expresses the demands and needs of just one specific kind of woman: white, heterosexual, Western (or Westernized), urban, and middle-class. In this way, feminism reproduces and reinforces a logic of hierarchy between women—which intersectionality reveals, to the chagrin of some.

Intersectionality is obvious in the service professions analyzed by theories of care; in these professions, certain women serve and care for other women, and also, thereby, ultimately men. Perhaps the most feminist series of the moment, *The Handmaid's Tale* (which also stars Samira Wiley, alongside Elizabeth Moss), is based on this structure and exposes the hierarchical and hate-filled relations between women in a patriarchal society.

The theoretical contribution of intersectionality is to have gathered under one term various feminist critiques—of sexism, of racism, of class injustice, as well as of ageism and heteronormativity—and to have turned it into a principle of action rather than a lament about domination. It is not enough to demand gender equality; one must face up to these oppressions and their mutual imbrication, which defines women's lives and which feminism can no longer deny—or else it risks ignoring violence against women as it has been publicly revealed in the wake of the Me Too movement which began in late 2017.

It is notable that Crenshaw is also an activist, like Angela Davis and all the major black feminist thinkers, for whom thought is a weapon, and activism, rather than being something that causes one to lose objectivity, serves to clarify and focus one's view of reality. In 1996, Crenshaw founded the think-tank [The African American Policy Forum](#), which has supported innovative [research on violence against women of color](#) in the United States. In February of 2015, she launched the hashtag [#SayHerName](#) on Twitter, which has catalogued over a billion cases of police violence against women. She carried her work forward with the African American Policy Forum, publishing the report [Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, Underprotected](#) (2015), which proposes a series of recommendations

for taking the specific needs of black girls into account in social policy in the United States.

There are historical roots to Crenshaw's activism. In 1991, she worked with the team that represented Anita Hill during the Supreme Court confirmation hearing of Clarence Thomas (whom Hill accused of sexual harassment, and who was nevertheless confirmed, thanks to the support of Republicans and the cowardice of Democrats). A fascinating TV movie *Confirmation* (HBO, 2016) is based on these hearings. The movie is not exactly suspenseful, since we know that Thomas still sits on the Court today—and yet, watching it, we feel extreme tension during the scenes depicting the long hours of Hill's testimony (Hill is played, significantly, by Kerry Washington, the star of *Scandal*). Hill, an academic, denounces the harassment she was subjected to by Thomas when he was her colleague years earlier (including heavy-handed invitations and conversations involving his obsession with pornography). It is rather chilling to see a committee of all white men, headed by none other than Joe Biden (a Democratic Senator at the time and, in the film, a character of incredible cowardice) and given the runaround by conservative Republicans, interrogate with brutality and sarcasm an isolated and vulnerable black woman, without granting the least bit of credence to her testimony and refusing to hear the testimony of other women who experienced the same treatment by Thomas.

One striking scene is the one in which Judge Thomas defends himself with sincere anger against the contestation of his nomination to become only the second black judge to sit on the Supreme Court. Calling it a “high-tech lynching,” he invokes the (very real) racism of the political world, which found this stereotypical accusation of a black man all too convenient—as if this racism affected him alone. The film serves as a veritable rehabilitation of Anita Hill; today, no one doubts the veracity of her testimony. Since 1991, proof of harassment by Thomas has piled up, without ever threatening his presence on the highest court in the land. This is not to mention his many decisions against the rights of women.

When *Confirmation* came out in April of 2016, it seemed almost retro.³ Today we cannot help but think back to this moment in the wake of another contested confirmation to the Supreme Court, that of Brett Kavanaugh, the ultraconservative judge nominated by Donald Trump to replace the rather moderate Anthony Kennedy—a confirmation that will create a conservative stranglehold on the Court with crucial repercussions for the rights of women, workers, and immigrants. Anita Hill herself took part in the debate surrounding Kavanaugh’s confirmation. And, looking at Kavanaugh’s first accuser, we cannot help but be reminded of Hill: Christine Blasey Ford is also an academic and a level-headed woman, with no motivation for coming forward other than a concern for the truth and anguish at seeing a person of such character ascend to the highest court of her country. Nevertheless, either because she is not black, or because of public restraint engendered by the Me Too movement, she was treated with respect by the senatorial committee, she was allowed to speak *before* Kavanaugh (*Confirmation* reminds us that the order of appearances was reversed at the last minute to allow Clarence Thomas to speak first), and she was not called a slut or a liar by the media or by politicians, as Hill was. It is true that in her case it was a matter of an attempted rape with the use of physical force by a drunken and brutal Kavanaugh.

Almost three decades after her work on Anita Hill’s legal team, [Crenshaw’s was one of the most important voices](#) in the public debate over Kavanaugh’s confirmation, which painfully echoed the wrongs done to Hill in 1991, an ordeal from which, according to Crenshaw, we still have not recovered. The vulnerability specific to black women was entirely denied or ignored at the time: anti-racists were incapable of understanding the role of gender in the affair, and feminists were unable or unwilling to confront the various racist stereotypes at work in it.

In fact, it was because of a *lack of intersectional thinking*—a lack of theoretical tools and political use of them—that the confrontation between Hill and

³ See my [article](#) on *Confirmation* in *Libération* and my book *Nos vies en séries* (Climats 2019).

Thomas devolved into such a collective humiliation, grotesquely repeated in 2018 with the contested confirmation of a new judge to the Supreme Court.

At the moment of Kavanaugh's confirmation (a judge with decades of decisions in favor of class, race, and sex discrimination to his name), Kimberlé Crenshaw reminded us that it was black feminist networks organized in the wake of the Hill-Thomas affair that fought for real social justice, something that theoretical frameworks limited to race or gender alone—as is often the case with critical thought in France—constantly risk missing. This is the meaning of intersectionality: it is not only a critical concept that allows us to see the imbrications of injustices both historically and today; it is also a project for uniting struggles for justice. Today, it is a weapon in a political battle of which women of color are the first victims as well as some of the most visible combatants, as the stigmatization, in 2019, of 4 Democratic representatives who are women of color by a racist and sexist president shows, in what is probably one of the most deplorable recent illustrations of the relevance of the concept of intersectionality.

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