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Intersectionality in the Contemporary Women's Marches: Possibilities for Social Change

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Abstract: The Women's Marches of January 2017 and 2018 were some of the largest mass demonstrations in history. They represent an important stage in the American feminist movement in its current iteration. Unlike the first and second waves of the movement, which were led by privileged class cisgender white women, the leadership of these marches includes women of color who have brought a vision of intersectionality and diversity to the marches. Banners covering a wide range of issues including reproductive choice, #MeToo, equal pay, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, and support for immigrants, became the hallmark of these marches. Is the contemporary feminist movement finally recognizing the importance of intersectionality? Or, is it merely paying lip service to the concerns of diverse people by way of representational politics? This article provides a historical analysis of the contemporary "Women's Marches" with the specific intent of evaluating their contribution to intersectionality and diversity within the mainstream feminist movement.

Keywords: women's marches, feminism, women's movement, history, three waves, intersectionality

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After fifteen years of a women's movement which professes to address the life concerns and possible futures of all women, I still hear, on campus after campus, "How can we address the issues of racism? No women of Color attended."

Audre Lorde, 1984

These are exciting and challenging times for the feminist movement in the United States. On one hand, the #MeToo movement has provided the social context for more cisgender women to break the silence on sexual assault. On the other hand, women's testimonies are not considered credible enough to stop the assault on social justice. The confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court, and the new abortion restrictions introduced in states like Alabama, Missouri, and Ohio, question the credibility of women's revelations of sexual assault, and threaten many hard won rights such as reproductive justice, legalization of gay marriage, asylum laws, and DACA. This crisis in gender, racial, and sexual justice in contemporary society also creates a unique opportunity for different groups to come together and participate in an intersectional struggle for social justice. Does the current activism in the feminist movement, with its massive marches of 2017 and 2018, have the potential for creating an inclusive and diverse agenda of struggle against a conservative, white supremacist transphobic, hetero-sexist, patriarchal political establishment?

Women's Marches 2017 and 2018

On January 21, 2017, exactly one day after Donald Trump's inauguration as the Forty-Fifth President of the United States, more than five million people, a majority of whom were women, took to the streets in protest. On that day, nearly four million people marched in sixty-three cities across the United States (Abrahams 2017). Many women wore pink "pussy" hats to protest "the hyper-masculinity of Trump's election campaign, and his attitude towards women throughout—from his stance against reproductive rights ..., to his boasts of "grabbing 'em by the pussy" (*ibid.*). Widely covered by news channels and social media outlets across the globe, the Women's March on Washington turned out to be, "somewhat unexpectedly, one of the largest mass demonstrations in American history" (*ibid.*). Following the march, women continued their activist work, "the voices of marchers are in more spaces than ever — in voter registration drives, in conversations about #MeToo and sexual harassment, and in political campaigns across the country, as women gear up to run for office in record numbers" (North 2018).

One year later, on the same date January 21, 2018, more than one million women once again took to the streets protesting Trump's Presidency and his policies, this time urging women to vote. The MeToo, Timesup, and PowerToThePolls movements, which had gathered momentum in the one year since the first march, figured prominently during the second march. What sets the contemporary marches of 2017-18 apart from previous demonstrations and organized protests is the optics of diversity among the issues represented in the marches. Protestors carried banners and chanted slogans on a wide variety of issues ranging from reproductive rights, prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault, to support for immigrants, Muslim women, Black Lives Matter, and so forth. Those of us who have been teaching intersectionality in Women's Studies classrooms for more than a decade were moved by this representation of diversity in a mainstream women's march. Once the dust of the initial excitement settled, it gave way to serious speculations regarding how rigorously intersectionality was practiced in the marches. Is the contemporary feminist movement in its current iteration finally recognizing the significance of how class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, ageism, and more affect people's lives? Or, is it merely doing lip service to the concerns of diverse people by way of tokenism and representational politics?

In other words, how *inclusive* is the women's movement today, thirty-seven years after Audre Lorde (1984, 125) inquired, "How can we address the issues of racism?" Secondly, to what extent are the women's marches representative of feminism in the United States today? To answer these questions, this article provides a historical analysis of the 2017 and 2018 "Women's Marches" and their contribution to feminism with specific attention to how they address intersectionality and the inclusion of diverse people's struggles within the mainstream feminist movement.

The Marches and Feminism

The Women's Marches and the activism surrounding them have a significant impact on what has been described as the fourth wave of the feminist movement (Abrahams 2017; Baumgardner 2011; Rivers 2017; Sollee 2015; Solomon 2009). Starting in the mid-1990s, the feminist movement gained popularity through blogs and social media outlets, and during the last decade "feminism got cool" (Zeisler 2016, x). Feminist issues such as equal rights, women's empowerment, and school and workplace safety have become part of mainstream discourse. They have in turn contributed to increased political consciousness among liberal feminists who are leading these marches and uprisings.

However, throughout its history, the American feminist movement has been divided along racial, class, and gender lines. Dominant narratives of this history have focused on the contributions of privileged class cisgender white heterosexual women who played important roles organizing in the movement, and as such these narratives reflect the racial, cultural, and class interests of the organizers. Contributions to the movement since its inception by black feminists like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, have either been neglected or rendered marginal. Unlike this historical lack of inclusion within the mainstream feminist movement, for the first time during the contemporary marches of 2017 and 2018, we saw diversity both in the membership of the march organizing committee,¹ selection of speakers at the marches,² as well as in the issues represented. The march organizers, “in refusing a singular identity of woman as well as who can be supporters of women’s rights, attempted to bring the reality of living in bodies marked by social difference into a common voice of dissent” (Moss and Maddrell 2017). Scholarship and activism by queer and black feminists such as, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Cathy Cohen, and Andrea Ritchie, to name just a few, have played an important role in contributing to this shift in the approach and organizational efforts of these marches.

In the months following the first march, the visual representation of diversity even prompted the question, can “a movement embracing such wide-ranging goals — from protecting immigrants to stopping climate change, from racial justice and religious diversity to reproductive freedom — channel its support into sustained political action? Other recent movements, like Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, may have offered insight into and prominence for their issues, but they haven’t delivered major policy shifts” (Gade 2017). Irrespective of whether or not movements that attempt to address multiple intersecting issues, such as the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements, are able to deliver major policy shifts, the women’s marches have succeeded in mobilizing a vast majority of women and they may even succeed in channeling their efforts into “a sustained political action,” as suggested above. However, in attempting to do so, the marches have the potential to replicate the existing structures and agendas of first and second wave hegemonic feminism or they can center non-white and non-middle class cis and trans women’s struggles in substantial ways that shift the historical praxis of feminism. Which path the contemporary marches will take ultimately depends on how committed the leaders and participants in these marches are in pursuing the goals of intersectionality.

Historical Overview of the Feminist Movement: The Three Waves

The wave metaphor continues to be employed for describing the history of the women’s movement in the United States despite widespread criticisms (Cobble et.al. 2014; Hewitt 2012; Nicholson 2015). It has been argued that the concept of waves, which was only retrospectively developed to describe the first wave, “willingly lumped all of our predecessors, the entire sweep of US women's rights activism from the 1840s to 1920, into a single wave” (Hewitt 2012, 659). The wave metaphor is used to describe the history of gender activism as unfolding in “ebbs and swells” (Nicholson 2015, 5), with the first and second waves representing periods of heightened activity, and the periods in between representing low points in feminist activism. Such a construction is not only erroneous; it renders the labor, civil rights, and social justice activism of the 1930s through 1960s invisible or insignificant to the movement (Cobble et.al. 2014). In other words, only the struggles and accomplishments of one segment of the population are represented using the wave metaphor within what is traditionally known as the American feminist movement: privileged middle class white women.

The First Wave

Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are honored in history as pioneers of the first wave. However, critics like bell hooks (1981) and Angela Davis (1983) dispute this claim, arguing that early feminists like Mott, Stanton, and the Grimké Sisters came to a realization of their own oppression only after encountering it in the abolition movement, which was a precursor to the women's rights movement. Further, the contention over the right to vote between black men and white women in the nineteenth century, revealed the racist tendencies of many early women's rights activists including Stanton and Anthony (Davis 1983; hooks 1981). Activist and scholar Sally Wagner (1996) makes a similar argument about the racism of white feminism regarding the "Indigenous roots" of early American feminism. The autonomy and freedom enjoyed by Native American women in the neighboring Iroquois Nation provided Stanton and Matilda Gage the models upon which to develop their own aspirations for freedom. Thus, at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, which is considered the first ever organized initiative by American feminists even though there were other movements preceding it, neither the freedoms enjoyed by Native American women, nor the activism of African-American was recognized.

Early feminists of the mid-nineteenth century focused exclusively on problems typically encountered by white and privileged class women. For example, the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions adopted at the Convention foregrounded issues such as gender equality, marriage, property rights, child custody, and suffrage ("Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" 1848). Historical accounts of the first wave fail to recognize the intersectional struggles of working women and women of color, as is illustrated in the working class Lowell Mill Women's Strike in 1834 (Robinson 1883) abolitionist activism by Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth in mid-nineteenth century, and anti-lynching campaigns led by Ida B. Wells Barnett in the 1890s (Davis 1983).

The Second Wave

As with the first wave, historians often site the 1968 protest against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey as the beginning of the second wave of feminism, which continued well into the 1980s (Siegel 2007). The August 1970 Strike for Equality in New York City organized by Betty Freidan and the National Organization for Women (NOW) represented the largest march of the era, drawing over 50,000 women (Siegel 2007).

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of radical activism in US history. Like the first wave, second wave protests and demonstrations, including the Stonewall uprising, were directly inspired by the Civil Rights movement (hooks 1981) and the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations (Cobble, et. al. 2014), although their influence on second wave feminism is rarely discussed within mainstream feminism. "Hegemonic feminism" is "white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression. Hegemonic feminism deemphasizes or ignores a class and race analysis" (Thompson 2002, 337).

Whereas the women's strike is well documented in history, other organized protests of the same period, in which working class women, immigrants, and women of color participated, are left out of the mainstream history of the women's movement because these do not directly impact the lives of the women who are identified with feminism. Strikes organized by the National Farmworkers Association led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the 1960s, in which hundreds of immigrant farmworkers across California participated; the Dewey's Lunch Counter sit-in in Philadelphia (1965) and the Compton Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco (1966) led by Queer and Trans women (Stryker 2008); community

protection and activism organized by the Black Panther Party in which women played an active role (1966); and the Native American fish-in protests (1964), and occupations at Alcatraz (1969) and Wounded Knee (1973) all question the very foundations of colonialist, heteropatriarchal white capitalist nationalism, but rarely figure into mainstream historical accounts of second wave feminism. The sexist patriarchal oppression of middle class white women is central in second wave feminism. Even when women of color experienced similar forms of sexist patriarchy white women failed to recognize the differences and intersections of these experiences and reclaimed white middle class heterosexual women's struggles as representative of all women's struggles.

Diverse groups contributed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism in the second wave. After the Stonewall uprising of June 1969, lesbians who were active within the feminist movement organized around sexuality explicitly. They were dismissed as "the lavender menace" by none other than Betty Freidan in 1970 (Schneir 1994). They responded by calling themselves the Radicalesbians and demanding support and recognition from fellow feminists within the movement, emphasizing "the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution" (Radicalesbians 1972, 167). However, the antagonism and homophobia they encountered within the mainstream women's movement was not much different from the resistance Barbara Smith and other organizers of The Combahee River Collective encountered later in the mid-1970s and 1980s:

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. (Smith et al. 1977, 177)

Hegemonic feminism prevailed in suppressing the representation of diverse struggles within the second wave. But the main contribution to the movement by these diverse movements, in particular black feminists, was that they represented not just one aspect of oppression, but in fact "a whole range of oppressions" (182). There was, however, a difference in the separatist politics advocated by queer white women's organizations like Radicalesbians, and the more inclusive and intersectional politics practiced by black feminist organizations which did not "advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand[ed]" (180). Chicana scholar Cherríe Moraga (1981) expresses a similar frustration with feminist politics and the lesbian movement while putting together an anthology of writings by women of color, "I had nearly forgotten why I was so driven to work on this anthology. I had nearly forgotten that I wanted/needed to deal with racism because I couldn't stand being separated from other women. Because I took my lesbianism that seriously" (xvii). The result of this struggle to connect to other women of color, especially Black, Chicana, and Asian-American women, is *This Bridge Called My Black*, the first anthology of writings by women of color, co-edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. This anthology, in addition to scholarly writings by bell hooks (1981), Angela Davis (1983), Mary Crow Dog (1990), Becky Thompson (2002), and others, contributed to the rewriting of second wave feminist history from radical women of color perspectives.

The Third Wave

The so-called third wave³ gained momentum for a brief period in the early 1990s. Diversity and the language of intersectionality finally entered the movement as a reaction to the lack of diversity in the

second wave of the 1970s and 1980s. Activists like Rebecca Walker travelled across the country, recruiting minority women to participate in the electoral process (Cobble et al. 2014). Concerted efforts were made to focus on the struggles of black, Native American, Latinx, immigrant, and under-represented Asian American women. However, the creative artists, publishers, and activists of the period, “confront[ed] many of the same difficulties as their predecessors in mobilizing diverse constituencies around common goals” (Hewitt 2012, 667). The activism that occurred during this period was scattered and narrowly divided based on individual groups’ interests and identity politics.

Two major marches that occurred during this period were the April 1993 March on Washington for LGBTQ Rights, and the October 1997 Million Women March organized by Black grassroots feminist activists. The LGBTQ march, attended by approximately a million people, launched a national movement demanding basic civil rights and inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people in all major social institutions and practices. Their charter of demands included the establishment of laws and protections against discrimination, as well as funding for HIV/AIDS education and research (Smith 2013). The Million Woman March organized in Philadelphia called all women of African descent to come together to address “the economic deterioration of African American communities, the importance of nurturing young children in a positive environment, finding a collective voice in politics and the civil rights movement, and strengthening black families” (Jones 2008). In spite of their contributions to the LGBTQ movement and to the Black struggle, neither of these two major events is included in mainstream accounts of feminist organizing.

Any major march or protest carried out in the name of “women” or women’s rights, such as the Women’s March, Women’s Strike for Equality, or Women’s Convention, is typically identified with mainstream feminism. The terms feminism and feminist movement are not usually used to describe mass mobilizations by women of color, such as in the Million Women March or the Black Lives Matter marches. Problems faced by underprivileged communities, such as racism, police brutality, Muslim travel bans, lack of humane working conditions, unsafe neighborhoods, homelessness, and detention of immigrant women and children, are not considered feminist issues per se. Feminists may raise these issues under the banner of human rights or social justice, but these are not perceived as directly influencing mainstream feminism. By the same token, as articulated by the campaign, Say Her Name, sexism within communities of color prevents putting women at the center of struggles against police brutality, deportation, etc. in large Black or immigrant rights rallies. This goes to the heart of intersectionality and the failure to pay attention to factors that go beyond the dominant group’s concerns within any given group:

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 in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. (Crenshaw 1991, 1242)

Crenshaw frames this discussion in terms of the failure of identity politics to recognize intragroup differences, as evident in the developments of the feminist movement during the so-called third wave in the 1990s. Despite claiming to be “broader in their vision, more global in their concerns, and more progressive in their sensitivities to transnational, multiracial, and sexual politics” (Hewitt 2012, 661), third wave feminists, emphasizing identity politics, failed to recognize, as stated by Crenshaw above that, “racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people” (661). In feminist praxis intersectionality needs to occur at two levels, integrating different groups’ concerns within the same space, as well as recognizing the need to address more than one factor of oppression in individual lives, which contributes

to a recognition of interlocking systems of oppression within our communities, in turn paving the way for a broad platform of coalition (Collins 1993).

In spite of these serious omissions and criticisms it has received, the wave metaphor continues to hold sway in contemporary feminist politics (Baumgardner 2011; Hewitt 2012; Siegel 2007). In her defense of the wave metaphor, Baumgardner (2011), argues:

Personally, I find the waves useful shorthand in describing the broad strokes of feminist history, which most people don't know in even the most cursory way, much less a nuanced one. The American history we get in schoolbooks is also condensed, politically retrograde, and filled with holes—yet it at least provides the barest frame to view where we have been and where we are going. Feminism needs that same road map. We can add to it, balk at it, revel in it—but first we have to have it.

Even Linda Nicholson (2015), who is highly critical of the wave metaphor for its failure to encapsulate the varied and complex history of women's activism, concedes: “there is one use that the wave metaphor is suited for – to identify those moments in history when issues of gender mobilize large numbers of people in very public, noisy, and challenging ways, that is, when such issues are able to generate large scale social or political movements.” Based on this, it is possible that this moment in history when issues of gender has mobilized a large number of people to participate in the women's marches, will be described as yet another wave. It remains to be seen whether this mass mobilization will lead to political change. But the question still remains: is it ONLY when white women come together in large numbers and fight for a cause, that it is considered a huge upheaval contributing to social and political change? The latter seems to be the case given the historic events leading to the origin and use of the wave metaphor in feminism.

Diversity in the Contemporary Women's Marches

From the beginning, the Women's March on Washington was ridden with controversies, most of them having to do with diversity. The initial naming of the march as the Million Women March drew consternation from activists in the black community who felt that the organizers were appropriating the name of the successful march they had organized in 1997, as mentioned earlier. The women's march organizers, who were initially all white women, brought into the committee activists of color like Tamika Mallory, Linda Sarsour, and Carmen Perez who had extensive grassroots, community, as well as national organizing experience. They then changed the name of the march to the “Women's March on Washington,” after the famous march by Martin Luther King Jr., thereby honoring his legacy (with permission from his daughter). Making concerted efforts to right the mistakes of previous feminist movements, the organizers created an inclusive platform and vision of diversity, “recognizing that women have intersecting identities and are therefore impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues” (womensmarch.org).

Intersectionality figured prominently in the mission, agenda, and organization of the marches. It was reflected in the list of speakers at the 2017 march in Washington, which included political activists and celebrities like Angela Davis, America Ferreira and Janet Mock. However, “gaps” or fissures appeared between the organizers intentions and how the marches themselves unfolded:

Some black activists still boycotted the march for its apparent roots in white feminist thought. Some white women boycotted the march, too, because they didn't think issues of race and racism belonged

next to issues like equal pay and reproductive rights. The clash in perspectives had little to do with the Women's March itself. But the march served as an illuminating microcosm of progressive American society in general, and the feminist movement in particular, which has only just begun to account for how the white supremacy of its past still affects its present. (Carteucci 2017)

Despite the tensions, it is noteworthy that the Women's March organizers did create the space for intersectionality and inclusion of "all women, femmes, and allies" (womensmarch.org), a factor that has been emphasized by scholars and activists of color since the 1970s. Yet, the rift described above between white women and women of color, which can be traced back to the first wave, continues to this day and unfortunately could not be bridged during the actual marches. Racism in the women's movement is a structural condition and in order to understand the reasons for this rift, we have to once again examine the broader historical context of contemporary hegemonic feminism, of which the marches are a fair indicator.

While reaction to Trump's election was the trigger for the massive marches of 2017 and 2018, that they were organized and led by cisgender women and millions of women from the United States and around the world participated in them, is no coincidence given the popularity and support for feminist issues in the current decade. As with the first and second waves, the contemporary feminist movement has to be analyzed using the lens of intersectionality. Feminism has grown in contemporary times from an object of derision during the 1990s backlash era,⁴ to a popular movement. According to Valenti (2014), "As feminism's star has ascended, so has the number of celebrities willing to lend their name to the movement. Feminism is no longer "the f-word", it's the realm of cool kids." Recent activism by Hollywood stars around the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns and their willingness to speak out about feminism and women's rights during awards functions,⁵ are just a few examples of the strong presence of feminism in public culture. This transformation in popular sentiments is captured in the contrast between *TIME* magazine's 1998 cover story "Is Feminism Dead?" to its recent issue in which it named the "Silence Breakers" of the #MeTooMovement as the 2017 Person of the Year. In twenty years, feminism's star has once again risen.

Popular feminism, influenced by market choices and materialist aspirations has become trendy enough to warrant packaging by advertisers for selling goods ranging from feminine hygiene products to soaps, sneakers, and kids toys. For a generation bred on marketplace feminism (Zeisler 2016), where concepts such as women's empowerment, choice, and feel good feminism are commoditized and sold as consumer goods (Kirkpatrick 2010; Zeisler 2016), Hillary Clinton's stunning defeat at the polls sent a shockwave across the American middle class. Thus, when out of sheer frustration over the election results, Teresa Shook created an event on Facebook for a Women's March and invited her friends to join, her page flooded with responses the very next day (Stein 2017). Thus, what started as a campaign identified with choice and empowerment for the white middle class just a few years ago, has transformed since the election of Trump into a movement to hold on to hard won freedoms that are being threatened by his government. The recent nomination and election of Bret Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's sworn testimony in front of the US Senate Judiciary Committee that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in high school have only contributed to the intensification of feminist organizing around sexual assault/domestic violence. It has led to a noticeable increase in women's participation in the political process, with an unprecedented number of women elected to Congress in the 2019 mid-term elections.

The Women's Marches and the Previous Waves

Just as the first wave of the feminist movement was influenced and organized by activists involved in the abolition movement and the second wave was influenced by civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, the current feminist marches in the United States have also been influenced by broader global and national movements that preceded them, such as the Green Movement of Iran in 2009, the Arab Spring of 2011, the Occupy Movement later in the same year, the Black Lives Matter movement which began in 2013, as well as protests organized by grassroots organizations in the Sioux nation at Standing Rock in 2016. The optics of women of color as active organizers of these movements has made mainstream American women's activism during the contemporary crisis almost imminent. In an age of activism in which social media has played a pivotal role in organizational efforts, American cisgender white feminists are stepping out of their homes, and following the lead already taken by women of color in other parts of the world. In this respect as well, just as in the leadership and diversity of banners representing multiple women's struggles in the marches, there seems to be a change in the current wave of feminist organizing compared to the first and second waves.

In a recent survey "of issues that motivated participants to attend" the 2017 march on Washington, researchers came up with the following results:

Women's Rights (53%) was the top motivating reason. Four other issues—Equality (41.5%), Reproductive Rights (23.4%), Environment (22.5%), and Social Welfare (21.7%) – were reported by more than 20% of respondents. In addition, more than 15% of respondents reported that Racial Justice, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) issues, Politics/Voting, and Immigration were issues that motivated them to attend. (Fisher et al. 2017)

The authors of the survey rejoice that factors other than women's rights motivated participants with diverse concerns to join the march albeit they comprised only fifteen percent of the participants. Implicit within this reaction is the assumption that "women's rights" do not represent systemic violence, institutionalized racism, or other issues relevant to poor, under-represented, and people of color.

Once again here as in previous waves of the feminist movement, the slogan popularized by Hillary Clinton during the 1995 Beijing Conference, "Women's Rights Are Human Rights" only works to the advantage of the women who are championing it. The lack of inclusion of issues affecting women of color in mainstream feminism is the central reason many black women felt they didn't belong in the mainstream feminist movement as well as in the Women's Marches:

This has always been my problem with traditional feminism. Its lack of intersectionality is exclusionary. When feminists proclaim 'women's rights are human rights' it feels more like they mean 'white women's rights are human rights.' I am a black woman, and I will not be made to choose between my womanhood and blackness. So while white women can choose to ignore racism and systemic oppression, I cannot. My very survival is dependent on confronting these issues head on.... In cities all over the U.S., black women, some I knew and some I didn't, expressed their frustrations over feeling as though their voices, their issues, and their concerns and causes weren't given nearly as much as value as those of the majority. (Holloway 2018)

This concern was frequently expressed even during the organizing of the second March in 2018, prompting Women's March co-organizer Carmen Perez to remark, "If you don't see your community at the table, make sure to pull up a chair.... And if you're white, scooch your chair over a little. Make room for us" (Solis 2018).

Underrepresented Groups and the Marches

The substitution of white women's concerns for all feminist concerns in the women's marches is symbolized by the pink pussy hats that many women wore during the marches. The hats were popularized as symbols of resistance to Trump's misogynistic comments in a video that went viral a few days before the election. At the same time, they have been criticized for not being inclusive. Pink pussies are not representative of all women's anatomies or identities, they exclude women of color, non-binary, and trans women. Pamela Moss and Avril Maddrell (citing Boothroyd et al. 2017) sum this up by arguing that, "there is a politics of purity at play within the March that consistently, systematically and systemically sets up white women with female genitalia who display appropriate emotions as the ideal" (2017, 617-618). Moss and Maddrell's statement is part of the reason black women rejected the pink hats. Choosing symbols cisgender white heterosexual women identify with in a culture that already marginalizes certain groups of women, and then claiming them to be representative of all women's experiences, does not advance intersectionality.

"I'd had enough before it even began," Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza (2017) said in an essay last year about plans for this year's women's march. "Fifty-three percent of white women who voted in the 2016 presidential election did so for a man who aims to move society backward. Where were all of these white people while our people are being killed in the streets, jobless, homeless, over-incarcerated, undereducated?" (Solis 2018). As explained earlier using Crenshaw's warning regarding the tension between intersectionality and identity politics, hegemonic feminism has confined itself to a narrow definition of gender rights in spite of warnings by black feminist critics like Audre Lorde who professed, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (1984, 138).

The intersectionality Lorde is calling for is visible in the scholarship and activism of black feminist organizations like Black Lives Matter, INCITE, and the organized protests at Standing Rock. According to Cohen (2016),

feminism does a number of different things, in relation to racial justice movements today. I am especially thinking about the role of black feminism. I'll give you three things that I think it does: first, it makes us think differently about or, hopefully, expand where we look for victims of and resisters to state violence.... [Secondly, it] happens through the denial of state welfare assistance, and it happens in the ways we militarize the public schools that primarily black, Latino, and poor kids attend.

Like the movements organized by black civil rights, anti-war and LGBTQ organizations during the second and third waves, contemporary Black, Latinx, and Native American struggles have to a large extent addressed the institutionalized racism, sexism, and discrimination encountered by underprivileged, queer, cisgender, and transgender women of color today.

The large number of cisgender white women turning out to the women's marches, while a positive sign of feminist consciousness, was on a national scale compared to their numbers at Black Lives Matter or DACA protests. Cisgender white women's apathy towards critical problems faced by people of color and their participation only in issues that have direct consequences for their lives means they have the luxury of peacefully marching without any perceived threat or danger from law enforcement. These factors lead many black and trans women who frequently face violent threats and harassment from law enforcement

to stay away from the 2018 Women's March (Holloway 2018; Quarshie 2018; Tseselsky 2018; Wortham 2017). Tseselsky (2018) makes an important point when they argue that,

From deliberately branding itself a "march" rather than a protest to not having a specific list of demands or stances, the march strategically made itself appealing to almost everyone. But in that ambiguity, it lost its radical potential.... When your "protests" are deemed acceptable because they are escorted by police and granted city permits — in other words, sanctioned by the same state perpetuating the violence you're organizing against — who are you really resisting?

The Black community not only felt disengaged from the "feel good feminism" espoused by the marchers, it was outraged by the relaxed atmosphere of the marches and the friendliness with which law enforcement officers greeted and protected the marchers, compared to the violent treatment they encounter in the hands of law enforcement during Black Lives Matter protests. Activist and writer Luvvie Ajayi echoes this sentiment,

This march, the fact that it could go off peacefully and cops are wearing pink hats, and no one felt like they were in danger, and militarized police didn't show up, that's white privilege at its core... They have the access and ability to do the things the majority of black and brown people who protest don't have. (in Ramanathan 2017)

In addition, given that the Women's March is a national organization which worked in conjunction with sister organizations at the state level within the United States and a few countries abroad, the failure to network and mobilize grassroots organizations that work with local communities led to the failure to bring these communities to participate in the march in 2018. In Portland, Oregon for example, this disconnect between the national march and local groups led to the splitting of the march into four different events, each led by a different organization and with Women's March Inc. not participating in any of these events. According to Candi Brings Plenty, founder Director of the Portland Two Spirit Society, which hosted the Indigenous Womxn's March, one of the four events held in lieu of the Women's March in 2018, this march is a "response to the under-represented womxn and allies who were offended by the white feminist narrative that took over the face of the march" (Acker 2018).

In the period between the two marches, the co-organizers of the Women's March on Washington applied to trademark the name Women's March Inc. Several organizations came together to file an opposition to it (Harnish 2018). By the time the second march came around in January 2018, cleavages appeared when local community organizations at the state level tried to use the name Women's March in their organizational efforts (Stockman 2018; Stuart 2018). While non-profit organizations registering their brands is not unusual (i.e., Black Lives Matter has done it), the problem here is that the women's march is not a unique brand name, it is a common description for marches led by women, and as argued by the group of organizations that came together to oppose this trademark application "the movement is large and diffuse, and that no single organization can control it" (Harnish 2018). Attempting to brand a movement and a march dominated by middle class cisgender white women participants as Women's March Inc. by none other than a group of diverse women who will be leading it, would represent yet another aspect of hegemonic feminism. In March 2019, however, the organizers officially withdrew their application after the US Patent and Trademark Office ruled against their request, stating that, "the process has become a distraction from important work in our movement" (Lang 2019).

The holding up of banners and signs supporting Black Lives Matter and veiled Muslim women during women's marches are effective only to the extent that they provide a visual image of diversity. They are not accompanied by structural changes in the organizing of the marches, nor the participants. In order to achieve that, the Women's March organizers should reach out to local grassroots organizations and under-represented communities of color in each state, urging them to take the lead in the organization of these marches. From this perspective, while the massive women's marches of 2017 and 2018 introduced changes in leadership and optics, they represent a continuity with rather than a break from, the mass movements of the first and second waves of the feminist movement. The solution lies not in discouraging white women from participating in these marches because the point is not to exclude them or delegitimize their concerns; rather, it is to consciously build coalitions around problems faced by oppressed populations. This could also be one way to bring disenchanted white working class and poor white women to the feminist movement, so that they become part of the solution rather than the problem to the political crisis facing America today.

Conclusion

Hundreds of pictures from the women's marches of 2017 and 2018 reveal white women in pink hats carrying diverse banners and signs supporting a range of causes including reproductive rights, women's political representation, Black Lives Matter, anti-Trump slogans, images of veiled Muslim women, and support for immigrants. While these are a welcome change from the single-issue focus of the suffrage movement and the second wave, they are not a substitute for the lack of significant presence of people of color who felt marginalized during these marches. There are other factors that are different about the contemporary marches. The leadership of the March committee includes women of color who have community organizing experience, and espouse a vision of diversity and inclusion that is unprecedented in mainstream feminist activism. This welcome change in the leadership of the women's marches is a direct consequence of years of scholarship and activism by black feminists. The marches are also a result of the continuing emphasis on intersectionality in feminist and Women's Studies curricula for over two decades. There is currently, however, a gap or discrepancy between the organizers mission and vision of intersectional feminism, and the reality of the marches themselves, which leads one to conclude that the marches represent the continuity with, rather than a break from the hegemonic feminism of the past.

The massive women's marches of January 2017 and 2018 had more people of color, banners, and slogans representing diversity than in the past. However, these are mere tokens within a movement that is still largely dominated by white cisgender middle class American women. While intersectionality has just entered the vocabulary of this movement and has been embraced by its leadership, the life and death struggles of cisgender and trans women of color have to be recognized as significant aspects of the American feminist movement alongside other issues like reproductive justice, sexual assault, and equal pay, which currently dominate its agenda. While these are factors that affect all women, cis and trans, Black feminists and women of color have taken the lead on how to address these issues from radical intersectional perspectives. It is time for them to take the lead in marching the feminist movement to its next stage.

Notes

1. Three out of the four members of the Women's March on Washington organizing committee are women of color with long histories of social justice work: Tamika Mallory is a grassroots black rights organizer with years of experience working in the National Action Network organizing marches. Linda Sarsour is a former executive director of the Arab American Association of New York. Carmen Perez is the co-founder of Justice League of New York and Founder of Justice League, CA, having spent twenty years doing activist work fighting the prison system. Bob Bland is a fashion designer who is CEO of an organization promoting environmentally friendly manufacture and distribution of textiles.

2. There were diverse speakers at the Washington 2017 Women's March, which included Angela Davis, Janet Mock, America Ferreira, Madonna, and Ashley Judd. The 2018 Women's March organized event in Las Vegas had among its speakers Alicia Garza, Co-Founder of the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

3. The term was first used by Rebecca Walker who declared in an interview with *Ms. Magazine* in January 1992: "I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave."

4. The backlash against feminism lasted through the 1990s. Discussion of this episode of backlash is reflected in Pulitzer winning author Susan Faludi's (1991) book, *Backlash*, and in a *TIME Magazine* (1998) cover entitled, "Is Feminism Dead?" The picture accompanying the caption in *TIME Magazine* tried to cover the entire sweep of the feminist movement using pictures of early organizer, Susan B. Anthony, second wave stalwarts Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, and finally resting on the character Ally McBeal from a popular television show of the time. Needless to say, black women were missing from this picture.

5. During the 2014 Video Music Awards function, Beyoncé performed her song Flawless with the word FEMINISM embossed on a giant screen behind her. Her performance included a video clip of author Chimamanda Adichie providing a definition of feminism in one of her TED Talks (Valenti 2014). A few years later during the Golden Globe Awards in January 2018, on the heels of the Weinstein sexual assault revelations and the rise of the #MeToo movement, actors wore black in protest and spoke in support of the brave women who broke the silence on sexual harassment and assault.

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