The sound of silence: Racism in contemporary feminist theory (Canada).

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THE SOUND OF SILENCE:

RACISM IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEORY

by

Jacinth Samuels

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research through the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1991
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ABSTRACT

THE SOUND OF SILENCE: 
RACISM IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEORY

by

Jacinth Samuels

Feminist women of colour have argued that mainstream feminism makes unfounded generalizations about the experiences of all women based on those of the white, middle-class female. Such generalizations elide differences between women, particularly those resulting from race and class. Rather than take the exclusion of racism (as a topic within mainstream feminism) as a point of departure this thesis seeks first to explain such exclusion through the use of feminist poststructuralism and illustrative case studies.

The historical experience of Afro-American women during slavery and the cult of true womanhood, as well as the experiences of black women within the context of early to mid-twentieth-century Canadian immigration policy, demonstrate a relationship between racism, sexism and classism which shows them to be equal and integral components in the oppression of black women. This multivariate relationship not only problematizes the mainstream feminist assertion that sexism is the primary oppression in women's lives but also illustrates an experiential difference between mainstream feminists and feminist women of colour. Since experience plays such a major role in the formation of feminist
theoretical premises, the experiential differences between feminist women of colour and mainstream feminists result in a socially constructed feminist discourse. In light of this, the thesis concludes that the aporias within feminist theory may begin to be resolved through the rejection of mainstream feminist claims to universality and essentialism in deference to the adaptation of subject positions and partial perspectives as the point from which to make legitimate knowledge claims.
DEDICATION

For my mother
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simone de Beauvoir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kate Millett</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shulamith Firestone</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Betty Friedan</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zillah Eisenstein</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michèle Barrett</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catharine MacKinnon</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminist Women of Colour</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>THEORETICAL ORIENTATION</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>SORROW’S KITCHEN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slavery</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Cult of True Womanhood</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>THROUGH THE LOOKING-CLASS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historical Transition</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The West Indian Domestic Scheme</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Immigrant Women'</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VITA AUCTORIS</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The struggle for civil rights in the United States and a politically incipient New Left were but two elements in the societal unrest and mass protest which characterized the 1960's in North America. The general dismissal of women's concerns and their exclusion from positions of authority within these movements fuelled the creation of an internecine organizational environment and the disillusionment of many female activists. The reality of a gender-based hierarchy and corollary exclusivity within various socio-political organizations were conducive to the development of a new activism among women on their own behalf. Hailed as the contemporary women's movement, this pragmatic activism reflected an inherently political component which would become essential to the construction of a feminist praxis and was the basis of the feminist aphorism "the personal is political" (Evans, 1979; Freeman, 1975).

The contemporary women's movement also produced copious amounts of literature which served as a popular medium through which to validate and voice the concerns of women. The exposition of the complexity of women's oppression required an interdisciplinary approach which appealed to women both within and outside the sphere of academia. Feminist theory was the underlying and unifying constant among otherwise diverse critiques of an oppressive social system. (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988:195-196).
Mainstream contemporary feminist theory (i.e., that written by white, Western academic feminists) has challenged the androcentric nature of science and has illustrated the ways in which women have been excluded from the formulation of such epistemology. As such, feminist scholars have prioritized the assertion of "the validity of women's experience of the world" and the incorporation of "that experience into the 'naming' or the definition of the nature of reality" (Sydie, 1987:211). This dual concern with the denial of the female experience and its exclusion from the process of defining reality is ironic in that these are the very issues which form the basis for the criticism of contemporary feminist theory. Women of colour (i.e., non-white women) have been primary instigators of a dialogue which has sought to expose the white middle-class bias of the women's movement since its inception. Consequently, their literature has illustrated the manner in which feminist theory's failure to acknowledge the primacy of racism has essentially silenced the voices of women of colour (hooks, 1981; hooks, 1984; hooks, 1989).

The basis for this argument is two-fold. First, the conspicuous absence of dialogue pertaining to racism in mainstream feminist discourse is indicative of a belief that oppression by race is separate from and/or secondary to sex and class oppression. If, as some white feminists argue, racism is indeed a secondary issue then the subsumption of
this issue under sexism and classism is justified, ipso facto. However, such explications are unconvincing to feminist women of colour who contend that racism is neither subsumed by, nor can be separated from, sexism and classism (Bourne, 1983).

Secondly, feminist women of colour argue that mainstream feminism constitutes a 'hegemonic discourse' which is characterized by its proclivity to subsume the experiences of some women in deference to the universal and equal oppression of all women. This theoretical preponderance reduces the experiences of all women to one common experience: that of the white middle-class female. Thus, any claims to universalism are, in fact, false since they mask the reality of substantial differences among the forms of oppression which different women may or may not experience. Consequently, feminist women of colour argue that the realization of true universalism or sisterhood can only be achieved when they are able to define themselves within the context of their own experiences (Mohanty, 1988; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981).

Perhaps the first step towards establishing racism as an issue worthy of and relevant to feminist discourse is to demonstrate how it relates to sexism and classism. Feminist theory has often used the analogy of slavery to describe the experience of women's oppression (de Beauvoir, 1974; Millett, 1970). Examining the experience of Afro-American women through the use of historically significant case studies will, however, demonstrate a relationship between racism, sexism and
classism that goes beyond simplistic analysis. More specifically, the examples of rape, within the context of slavery, and the cult of true womanhood, illustrate how racism, sexism and classism contributed equally to the experience (i.e., oppression), consciousness and hence, everyday world of black women (Burnham, 1978; Davis, 1981; Dill, 1979; Giddings, 1984; Hall, 1983; Jennings, 1990; Mann, 1989; Omolade, 1983; Simson, 1983; Wertz, 1984). Similarly, the examples of the West Indian Domestic Scheme in Canada and Roxana Ng's (Ng, 1986; Ng, 1988; Ng and Estable, 1987) research on 'immigrant women' demonstrate that the relationship between racism, sexism, classism and the everyday world of black women is not strictly an American phenomenon.

Examining how racism is not addressed by contemporary feminist theory does not, however, explain why this is so—a question which in fact constitutes the main focus of this research. The approach to this question entails a critical analysis of the social construction of feminist theory through the use of the case studies outlined above and feminist poststructuralism. This particular methodological and theoretical approach will be used to demonstrate that racism, sexism and classism interact to construct a distinct everyday world for feminist women of colour: one in which experience and subjectivity are not conceptualised as universal and, therefore, one which differs from that which is traditionally associated with mainstream feminism. The consequence of this
phenomenon for feminist women of colour becomes apparent in that the extent to which their everyday world is dismissed or ignored, by white feminists, is the extent to which they have been silenced by mainstream contemporary feminist theory.

Finally, the intent of this research is not merely to expose the aporias within feminist theory but also to offer direction toward their resolution. Such resolution is essential to the development of a feminism which is founded on inclusion rather than exclusion. This endeavour is, however, far too complex a task to be assumed adequately given the time and space permitted herein. For this reason, any proposed resolutions will necessarily be adumbrative. The detailed formulation of a resolution (or resolutions) of this conflict remains the optimistic hope of future research.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Through their use of the term 'hegemonic discourse,' feminist women of colour have so labelled the alacrity with which the voices of all women have been subsumed under one within mainstream feminism. In rendering problematic the mainstream feminist assumption that oppression (read: sexism) is universal and equal among women feminist women of colour have identified experience as the grounds for theoretical debate between mainstream feminists and themselves. Since mainstream feminist theory prioritizes sexism (at the expense of racism and classism) feminist women of colour argue that it is a theory which is not wholly representative of their own experience in which racism, sexism and classism are interdependent (King, 1988; Smith, 1979). The extent to which this experience has been silenced within mainstream feminism becomes apparent through a cursory examination of de Beauvoir (1974), Millett (1970), Firestone (1970) and Friedan (1963)--all of whom have been instrumental in laying the groundwork for the development of contemporary feminist theory--as well as the more recent contributions of Eisenstein (1981), Barrett (1988) and MacKinnon (1982; 1987a; 1987b; 1989). Collectively, these works exemplify the absence of dialogue pertaining to racism within mainstream contemporary feminist theory and thereby establish the basis for criticism by feminist women of colour.

In the examination of mainstream feminism it is, perhaps,
most appropriate to begin with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which was, in essence, a prolegomenon to contemporary feminist thought, particularly in the theorization of gender relations. De Beauvoir (1974:xix-xx) posits that the inherent inequality within gender relations is rooted in "the expression of a duality [or dialectic]" between the Self and the Other. She argues that in order for men to establish themselves as subjects and as essential, it is necessary for them to define women as the Other (i.e., the object or the inessential). Thus, "if the subject can be posed only in being opposed," the Other/object is essential to the identity and existence of the Self/subject, yet remains subordinate to it. In fact, de Beauvoir (1974:210) asserts that woman as Other "is so necessary to man's happiness and to his triumph that . . . if she did not exist, men would have invented her."

De Beauvoir's concept of alterity, or duality of existence, becomes problematic when she attempts to compare women's oppression to the Hegelian analogy of the master/slave relationship, which, she argues, is in some respects more applicable to the relationship between men and women than that between master and slave. De Beauvoir (1974:73) notes Hegel's contention that the reality of the mutual dependence between master and slave creates a situation wherein the assertion of the master's sovereignty and the empowerment of the slave occur simultaneously. However, de Beauvoir (1974:88) asserts that this relationship to the slave affords
the master "a much more radical confirmation of his sovereignty than in the limited authority he held over woman."

Defined as the Other, venerated and feared because of her reproductive capacity, woman, in essence, "held man in dependence upon her" while simultaneously being dependent upon him. This reciprocity, however, differed from that of the master and slave in that it was enjoyable to the woman and, ipso facto, represented her escape from slavery. The slave, by comparison, had no escape from bondage since "he was nothing but a man in servitude, not different [i.e., an Other] but inferior [to his master]" (de Beauvoir, 1974:88).

According to de Beauvoir (1974:88), the reciprocity between man and woman was short lived because the "tyrannical authority" which the Master exerted over the slave exalted his pride and caused him to turn against woman. Any assertion of the man's authority was, therefore, done at the woman's expense since "the more powerful he [man] became, the more she [woman] declined." This inverse relationship suggests that the man/woman relationship represents a more marked opposition, or polemic, than that between master and slave (Simons, 1979:386).

Although de Beauvoir's conclusions were based on her interpretation of ancient slavery, they are hardly applicable to the American slavery which she also refers to extensively (Simons, 1979:386). In fact, when placed within the context of American slavery, de Beauvoir's analogy fails to
acknowledge that slavery's very existence was dependent upon a racist ideology which maintained the concept of difference between master and slave. While slaves were indeed considered 'inferior' to their masters, the justification for this belief stemmed from differences which were attributed to race. Physiological differences between blacks and whites were categorically accepted by racists as proof of black 'inferiority' and justification of their enslavement (Samuels, 1988). Racism, therefore, confined slaves to the category of Other as thoroughly as women were confined there through sexism.

Furthermore, de Beauvoir's depiction of slaves and women as dependent and passive ignores both the history of slave resistance and the potential of female agency, while reflecting a class bias and an ethnocentrism which ignores cultural and social differences in deference to an absolute notion of patriarchy as women's primary and/or sole oppressor (Simons, 1979:386-387). Lastly, her consistent depiction of the slave as male creates an image wherein the woman/Other and the slave/male are presented as mutually exclusive categories. This image becomes problematic in the presence of the bondwoman who symbolizes the synthesis of these concepts. The use of an analytical model which ignores the reality of the bondwoman suggests that de Beauvoir has failed to fully grasp the complexity of the racism/sexism analogy.

De Beauvoir's (1974:88) assertion, that the man/woman
dichotomy is more substantial, indeed oppressive, than that between master and slave, can therefore only be sustained within an analogy which is uncomplicated by race/racism. The same can be said of her unproblematic separation of slaves and women. Together, these points are indicative of the extent to which de Beauvoir has prioritized gender oppression, at the expense of racial oppression, and has therefore created the basis for critique by feminist women of colour.

Kate Millett (Millett, 1970) also draws on the woman Slaves, sexism/racism analogy in Sexual Politics. For example, she notes the rapid disappearance of "groups who rule by birthright" (an implicit reference to slavery) while stressing the continuation of "one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another--the scheme that prevails in the area of sex" (Millett, 1970:34). By describing women as a "dependency class... [who, like slaves] identify their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them" Millett (1970:53) is able to postulate sexism as a universal and equal oppression. This conception of sexism both necessitates the stereotypical depiction of bondwomen as passive and ignores the perennial resistance of slaves and the unique experiences which this resistance produced (Simons, 1979:391).

Also, as the title suggests, Millett's preoccupation with sexism precludes a more holistic analysis. This is reflected in her laconic acknowledgement of racism as a contributing
factor in women's oppression: "[a]s race is emerging as one of the final variables in sexual politics, it is pertinent...to devote a few words to it as well" (Millett, 1970:53). It is difficult to determine from so 'few words' whether Millett realizes that sex is also a variable in racial politics (Stember, 1976).

Millett's (1970:49) hierarchical perception of sexism, racism and classism is illustrated in the following example:

[i]n a society where status is dependent upon the economic, social, and educational circumstances of class, it is possible for certain females to appear to stand higher than some males. Yet not when one looks more closely at the subject. This is perhaps easier to see by means of analogy: a black doctor or lawyer has higher social status than a poor white sharecropper. But race, itself a caste system which subsumes class, persuades the latter citizen that he belongs to a higher order of life . . . .

Her contention that the high socio-economic status of some women is invariably nullified by racism and sexism is based on her concept of women's economic position as one of dependency. While this analysis ignores the economic independence of many minority women it also ignores the fact that race and class privilege are very real elements in the oppression of some women and men by other women.

Millett's analysis of women's oppression therefore suffers from many of the same shortcomings as de Beauvoir's. By subsuming all other forms of oppression under patriarchy, Millett cannot address the differences in women's oppression
which result from the experience of racism. In light of this omission, her assumption that women's oppression is equal and universal remains unsubstantiated.

Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* best exemplifies the inherent reductionism in an absolute notion of patriarchy. Firestone (1970:122) notes the inextricability of racism and sexism but proceeds to describe racism as a 'sexual phenomenon' understood only "in terms of the power hierarchies of the family" wherein "the races are no more than the various parents and siblings of the Family of Man." For Firestone (1970:123), race relations in America are analogous to "a macrocosm of the hierarchical relations within the nuclear family: the white man is father, the white woman wife-and-mother...the blacks, like children, are his property...."

Firestone's use of this family analogy is problematic in that while it is used to describe the oppressive power relations that exist in the United States between whites and blacks, it may easily be construed as legitimating racist stereotypes which ascribe puerile characteristics to black people. Furthermore, she portrays the white woman (mother) and the black man (child) as united in an Oedipal struggle against the white man (father). Although this struggle allegedly creates a "special bond in oppression" (Firestone, 1970:123) between white women and black men, Firestone neither accounts for the role of black women or acknowledges the fact that white women may also themselves be oppressors.
Firestone's analysis of women's oppression, while linking racism and sexism, does so in a manner that prioritizes the latter. As such, her theory of women's oppression is that of white women only. It is this reductionism which enables Firestone (1970:122) to conclude that "racism is sexism extended."

Other influential and corrosive analyses of women's oppression (Delphy, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Horney, 1967; Miller, 1986; Mitchell, 1974) merely make truncated references (or none at all) to racism. Similarly, Betty Friedan's (1963:18) classic work, The Feminine Mystique, attributes the 'dissatisfaction' of women to the post-World War II ideology which gradually became the core of American culture. The feminine mystique espoused that a woman's highest value and commitment lay in the "fulfillment of her own femininity" through "sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (Friedan, 1963:43). Having imbibed the mystique of feminine fulfillment:

[...]

Friedan (1963:61) argues that the feminine mystique
transformed the nature of woman's problem from "barriers to higher education, political participation, discrimination or prejudice in law and morality" to anything which might impede her ability to be a housewife (e.g., career, education, political interest). The mystique of feminine fulfillment produced a general 'dissatisfaction' and loss of self-identity in women which Friedan (1963:61) termed 'the problem that has no name.' The problem was characterized by "a vague undefined wish for 'something more' than washing dishes, ironing, punishing and praising the children" and, according to women's magazines, was remedied by "dyeing one's hair blonde or by having another baby."

Friedan's analysis suffers from a total disregard of the role of racism and classism in women's oppression. While struggling to find the appellation which best described what was essentially the boredom of white middle-class housewives she remained oblivious to the reality of non-white and working-class women for whom work was not an option but, rather, a necessity. At the height of the civil rights movement, these women could ill afford to believe that the nature of their problem was no longer one of prejudice and discrimination or that the solution to such problems lay at the bottom of a bottle of peroxide.

De Beauvoir (1974), Millett (1970), Firestone (1970) and Friedan (1963) have had a considerable influence on the work of their contemporaries. More recent contributions to
mainstream feminism have, however, also failed to prioritize the issue of racism. Many mainstream feminists within some areas of liberal, socialist and radical feminism have acknowledged the need to include racism in feminist analysis (Eisenstein, 1979; Eisenstein, 1983; Fox-Genovese, 1990; Frye, 1983; Palmer, 1983; Rich, 1979). However, mainstream feminism generally has yet to bridge the gap between the mere acknowledgment of racism and its inclusion as a central component of feminist discourse.

In *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* Zillah Eisenstein (1981:4) argues that all feminism is liberal in origin in that the universal feminist claim of woman's independence "is premised on the eighteenth-century liberal conception of the independent and autonomous self." She notes, however, that as a political ideology, liberalism is rooted in patriarchal notions of societal structure (e.g. the uncritical acceptance of private and public spheres of activity) which stand in contradiction to the liberal roots of a feminism founded on the rights of individual freedom and equality of opportunity. This contradiction between liberalism and liberal feminism constitutes a dialectic which prescripts the radical potential of liberal feminism as a vehicle for social change (Eisenstein, 1981:5-6).

Eisenstein (1981:6) contends that such potential exists because liberal feminism is not merely "feminism added on to liberalism" or a quest for the "bourgeois male rights" which
were denied to women. Rather, the difference between liberalism and liberal feminism lies in feminism's recognition of women as a sexual class. Since such identification is a fundamental claim of radical feminism, Eisenstein (1981:4) concludes that all feminism, in addition to its liberal origins, is also inherently radically feminist.

Central to Eisenstein's (1981:209-210) analysis is the concept of women's oppression as a sexual class which she illustrates through an examination of the sexual ghettoization of women within the labour market. Her data demonstrate a significant discrepancy in the wages of women and men (women's are consistently lower) as well as the "sexual and racial restriction of women in the job ghettos of clerical, service, waitress, nursing, and teaching work." Eisenstein (1981:213) asserts that the sexual ghettoization of women breeds the potential for a "mass-based feminist politics" which transcends racial boundaries.

In support of this assertion she cites statistics which reveal that from 1970 to 1977 the rate of labour force participation between women of colour and white women had narrowed to a 3% difference (Eisenstein, 1981:213). Based on this difference, Eisenstein (1981:213) contends that although married black women have traditionally been wage earners in greater numbers than their white counterparts, the increasing numbers of married white women entering the labour force has enabled them to "share the reality of the double-
day of work with the black woman."

Eisenstein interprets her data only to the extent that they demonstrate an increase in the number of white female wage earners. Given the long history of black women's participation in the labour force, it is surprising that the question of why their rate of participation has always exceeded that of white women is neither asked nor answered. Black women (married or not) have traditionally worked outside the home to supplement the wages of black men (which, throughout the 1970's, had failed to rise above 71% of those paid to white men). Thus, in spite of improvements in the occupations and incomes of married black women the relative importance of their income, to the maintenance of the family, has not decreased (Palmer, 1983:161; Stone, 1979:578). Although both black and white families have experienced declines in the proportion of intact families (especially due to separation, divorce and desertion), this proportion for whites was 85% in 1981 and 54% for blacks in the same year (which, for blacks, represents a 12 point decline in ten years) (Palmer, 1983:161). The result is that by 1981, the proportion of black women who were solely responsible for earning the income which supported their household had nearly quadrupled that of white women (Palmer, 1983:161).

The salient point which Eisenstein neglects to mention is that although more white women are now in the labour force, and hence experience the reality of the double-day, the wages
of black women continue to remain more essential for both intact and single mother families. Therefore, although Eisenstein is correct in her assertion that women of colour and white middle-class women now share the reality of the double-day, she does not emphasize that this newly shared reality is, in fact, shared quite differently among women. The economic reality of the woman whose double-day incorporates racism, sexism and classism is different from that of the woman whose double-day results solely from patriarchal oppression. Eisenstein asserts the commonality of women’s oppression despite significant differences in the manner in which this oppression is experienced. Therefore, while acknowledging that black women consistently earn less than white women and are more commonly employed in blue-collar or service jobs, Eisenstein (1981:213) offers no explanation for this hierarchical phenomenon.

The radical future of Eisenstein's liberal feminism is contingent upon the development of a sexual-class consciousness among women and the subsequent subversion of the capitalist patriarchal state. However, race and class oppression create deep divisions of experience and consciousness that prevent the growth of a unified sexual-class consciousness. The minimization of the differences in women's oppression enables Eisenstein (1981:191) to attribute attempts to do otherwise to the liberal individualist nature of patriarchy which undermines unity through the promotion of
dichotomy. Eisenstein (1981:218) does acknowledge (in a footnote) that "it is not sufficient to build a feminist politics solely on the common grounds of woman's oppression" but, rather, one on which such commonality creates a politics committed to "understanding the differences between black and white women in all its richness." However, if, as Eisenstein (1981:218) argues, this is essential to the development of a "feminist politics inclusive of black women's needs" one wonders why a concept of such obvious significance and importance has been reduced to a footnote.

Michèle Barrett's Woman's Oppression Today offers a cogent socialist-feminist analysis of the social structures and institutions which contribute to the oppression of women. Her rather unorthodox introductory remarks are, in part, composed of a candid discussion of the book's deficiencies, primarily in the area of racism. Barrett uses 'the family' (which is central to the book's argument) to demonstrate the manner in which racism has been omitted from her analysis of this institution.

In light of criticism from feminist women of colour Barrett (1988:vii, 135) acknowledges that her analysis of the 'male breadwinner-dependent wife system,' in which the income of a male is sufficient to support a wife and family, does not apply to black families to the same extent as it does to whites. As noted previously, the consistently low wages of black men (in comparison to those of white men) have resulted
in the sizeable labour force participation rate of black women (Palmer, 1983:161). Feminist women of colour have also challenged Barrett's indictment of 'the family' as the primary site of women's oppression. Rather, they contend that the family functions as a support group in the wake of state racism, which is most commonly manifested in discriminatory immigration legislation, the exploitation of migrant workers, and police violence (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986:86-89).

In her defense, Barrett (1988:xx) argues that since "there is no easy identification between that which is emotionally supporting and a general entity known as 'the family'" the fact that some families are havens, while others are not, is a phenomenon which transcends ethnicity and race. In accordance with this logic, however, there is also no 'easy identification' between that which is oppressive and 'the family.' Barrett's declaration of 'the family' as a central site of oppression has, in this manner, been rendered problematic. In recognition of the fact that "social institutions frequently perform different and conflicting functions" (Lees, 1986:98), Barrett (1988:xxi) concedes that there is room for a more 'comprehensive account' of women's oppression. Such an endeavour would require an increased sensitivity to "the causal roles of work and state" and a corollary shift in emphasis away from 'the family' as the primary site of women's oppression.

Barrett (1988:x) acknowledges that the gravity of her
omissions has had considerable consequences for her work. In her opening chapter, she centres on the concepts of patriarchy, reproduction, and ideology, but notes that not one of her conclusions concerning these concepts would "survive intact, a serious consideration of race and racism." She also posits that the instability of her conclusions is not necessarily as endemic to her own work as it is to social thought in general. Although social theorists have made progress in the area of class/gender analysis they continue to experience difficulty when attempting to integrate racism into the recalcitrant paradigms of existing theories of social structure. The more flexible vocabulary of 'discourse' has enabled theoretical perspectives in the general area of ideology, culture and subjectivity to address racism, sexism and classism without ranking them "in what is essentially a zero-sum game of structural determination." This flexibility accounts for the proliferation of work on these themes in the area of literary criticism and the comparative paucity of such work in the social sciences (Barrett, 1988:x).

In response to accusations of racism in socialist-feminism, Barrett and McIntosh (1985:26) argue that although racism exists, the category 'race' is a social construct with no 'biological referent' (unlike gender). As a result, it is

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"For example, see Leslie A. Adelson's "Racism and Feminist Aesthetics: The Provocation of Anne Duden's Opening of the Mouth." Signs, 13, no. 2 (Winter 1988), 234-252."
not the 'absolute reality' of racism which is captured by empirical data but, rather, "the construction of a particular time and place." On the other hand, ethnicity, according to Barrett, is "a more transparent term" which simply describes the "distinctive differences in culture, custom, history, language . . . between peoples." Since to ignore such differences is "to work from an ethnocentric position" Barrett (1988:viii-ix) concludes that socialist-feminism is not so much guilty of racism as it is of ethnocentrism.

Feminist women of colour have questioned the propriety of Barrett's use of the term ethnocentrism instead of racism. They contend that the 'central problem' for socialist-feminist theory is not ethnocentrism, but racism, "of which ethnocentrism may be a consequence" (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986:85). Furthermore, the use of the term ethnocentrism

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2This description of racism alludes to the problematic which arises from the use of conceptual and analytic categories which are themselves social constructs (e.g., race and gender). While the social construction of race is indeed a subject in need of further investigation, the focus herein will be exclusively on the 'concrete' phenomenon of racism which lays beneath the 'abstraction' of race.

3Bhavnani and Coulson (1986:85) define ethnocentrism as a "cultural bias [which favours that of whites], supported by ignorance." For a more detailed definition, see Robert A. Levine and Donald T. Campbell, Ethnocentrism, New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1972. pg. 1.

4Racism, is defined as "[a]n ideology which asserts the genetic superiority of one population over another; or a set of attitudes, values, behaviours or institutions which directly or indirectly discriminate against or systematically disadvantage, a minority defined in terms of 'race'" (Richmond, 1988:190).
masks the role of the state in the creation and perpetuation of inequality. Ethnocentrism implies that "the problem is one of cultural bias, supported by ignorance" (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986:95) rather than that of a "crushing, institutionalized racism" which has been imbibed by society (Ramazanoglu, 1986:84).

Therefore, feminist women of colour assert that accusations of racism within feminist theory are not reducible or limited to ethnocentrism but involve the eradication of an institutionalized ideology, which would require "a fundamental and radical transformation of socialist-feminism" (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986:85). Shifting the focus from racism to ethnocentrism only makes such a transformation more difficult to realize. Radical change is, in fact, contingent upon the ability of mainstream feminists to progress beyond the mere acknowledgment of racism in their work to integrating this self-criticism into the development of a feminist politics that accommodates the diversity of women's oppression (Ramazanoglu, 1986:84). With this goal in mind the transformation of socialist-feminism becomes more than just a 'worthy cause': it is a political necessity (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986:91).

The radical feminism of Catharine MacKinnon provides a brilliant insight into the role of sexuality in women's oppression. MacKinnon (MacKinnon, 1982; 1987a; 1987b; 1989) argues that sexuality is not unlike the Marxian concept of
work in that it is a socially constructed, historically specific and universal activity. In fact, so central is the concept of sexuality to MacKinnon's (1987b:48) work that she concludes "sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism."
For MacKinnon (1982:529), feminism's identification of sexuality as "the primary social sphere of male power" is not rooted in 'Freudian conceptions' but, rather, in the reality of feminist practice on issues such as reproductive rights, rape, incest, prostitution and pornography. The result is the production of a "feminist political theory centering upon sexuality."

Drawing upon the connection between sexuality and radical feminism (in much the same manner as Eisenstein), MacKinnon (1987a:137) concludes that "[r]adical feminism is feminism." Furthermore, radical feminism (or what she terms, 'feminism unmodified') "is methodologically post-Marxist" in its conceptualization of all women as a sex. It neither borders on reductionism nor claims a universality which "subsumes its particulars." The task of feminism unmodified is simply to seek to "uncover and claim as valid the experience of women" (MacKinnon, 1987a:137).

Ironically, it is MacKinnon's (1982:520) emphasis on sexuality which necessarily limits the applicability of her political theory and causes her aspiration--the inclusion of all women--to fall short. MacKinnon (1987b:2) acknowledges the need to comprehend the manner in which sexism, racism and
classism intersect but makes no attempt to incorporate such concerns into her own analysis. The consequences are (as in the case of Barrett) that MacKinnon's generalizations do not withstand a serious consideration of racism.

For example, in the illustration of women's collective experience, MacKinnon (1987b:23) cites statistics which reveal that "44% of women have been the victims of rape or attempted rape at least once in their lives--including in their marriages." What is, perhaps, even more telling is that the figure for women of colour is higher. In fact, black women "are raped four times as often as white women" (MacKinnon, 1987b:82). MacKinnon does not (and cannot) offer any explanation for this discrepancy because her conceptual and analytical categories are the product of a theoretical premise which prioritizes sexuality, to the virtual exclusion of racism and classism. Thus, MacKinnon's feminism is an "inadequate" and "sophisticated expression of some important but only partial truths" which speak primarily of the reality of those women who are economically advantaged rather than of those who are disadvantaged by racism and poverty (Acker and Barry, 1984:179).

In response to this criticism, MacKinnon (1984:186) acknowledges that many women, regardless of race or class, do not perceive sexuality as fundamental to their oppression. However, she argues that this is only indicative of a 'substantive disagreement' between such women and herself and
does not prove that sexuality is not a factor in women's oppression. Furthermore, she contends that her conclusions are not undermined by the fact that they do not apply equally to all women because differences between women do not undercut the reality which they all share (i.e., the reality of gender). Thus, to demonstrate that a phenomenon is not the same for all women "proves only that it is not biological, not that it is not gendered." In this manner, MacKinnon (1987b:56) deems it impossible to "present isolated if significant counterexamples as if they undercut the specific meaning of the atrocities for the groups who were defined by their subjection to them."

It becomes apparent, from this rebuttal, that the 'disagreement' between MacKinnon and women of colour is not substantive, but cognitive. Feminist women of colour do not contend that sexuality is not a factor in their oppression: only that it is not the sole factor. They recognize that their reality is shaped by factors which are additional to, and inseparable from, their sexuality (de Lauretis, 1990:133-134; Spelman, 1982:42-46). Mainstream feminism's propensity to separate and rank sexism, racism and classism explains why Eisenstein (1981:213), Barrett (1988:xx) and MacKinnon (1987b:82) cannot account for why women of colour are at the bottom of the sexual ghetto, why they do not identify 'the family' as their primary oppressor, and why they are raped more often than white women. MacKinnon's (1987b:56) assertion
that the failure to incorporate racism and classism does not seriously undermine her arguments seems erroneous when the inextricability of racism, sexism and classism is considered.

The works of feminist women of colour have emerged in response to the omissions within contemporary feminist theory. These women argue that feminist theory has portrayed women as frail, passive and in positions of chronic economic dependency (i.e., women are victims) (hooks, 1984). In fact, it is argued that “feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization” (Bartky, 1978:26). However, the role of victim is not feasible to the women who are, perhaps, most oppressed since it is the bonding around shared strengths and resources with which to fight their victimization, rather than wallow in it, which has traditionally sustained them. Therefore, the irony by which those women who are the most eager to assume the role of victim, are also those who are the most privileged, is a direct result of their desire to absolve themselves of complicity in the maintenance of a racist, sexist and classist society (Bannerji, 1987; hooks, 1984; McKenzie, 1987; Murphy and Livingstone, 1985).

Feminist women of colour also contend that the subsumption of racism under sexism and classism within contemporary feminist theory is indicative of a belief that the elimination of these factors will inevitably lead to the elimination of racism. This belief is based on the notion that racism is secondary to sexism and classism as issues of
concern to women. However, the tendency to rank oppression in order of importance denies the fact that racism, sexism and classism are inextricable and interdependent. Pitting one struggle against others forces them to be conceptualized in binary terms which imply that women can only be primarily involved with one struggle. The ability to focus on one oppressor over others is not an option for women who experience racism, sexism and classism simultaneously (Beal, 1970; Bryan, 1985; Collins, 1989; Combahee, 1979; Dill, 1983).

Finally, feminist women of colour note that mainstream feminism's propensity to de-emphasize differences in women's oppression, in deference to the concept of a shared oppression, denies the fact that some women may oppress other women and, indeed, men through their ability to exercise race and class privilege over others. Therefore, the vision of Sisterhood which is espoused by mainstream feminist theory cannot genuinely be a unifying force among women since the notion of the universality (i.e., equality) of women's oppression is false (Minh-ha, 1987; Thornhill, 1985). Sisterhood will remain unattainable until recognition is given to the fact that contemporary feminist theory is a reflection of the society in which it has been constructed (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986; Lorde, 1984; Rodriguez, 1988).
THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The critique of Eisenstein (1981), Barrett (1988), MacKinnon (1982; 1987a; 1987b; 1989) and their predecessors indicates that mainstream contemporary feminist theory is generally not reflective of the experience or identity of feminist women of colour. In eschewing a 'hegemonic discourse' wherein the experience of racism is relegated to secondary status feminist women of colour have articulated their desire for a theory of women's oppression which enables them to define themselves in accordance with their lived experiences. This rejection of an assigned identity in deference to the construction of a self-identity is, in essence, a phenomenological approach to feminist theory wherein feminist women of colour define and construct their own reality: one in which the oppression of racism, sexism and classism is experienced simultaneously (King, 1988).

The emphasis on the experience of simultaneous oppression is not an attempt to quantify women's oppression in a strict arithmetic sense. The assumption that the relationship between variables is additive implies that women of colour merely experience sexism plus racism plus classism. This simple equation demonstrates the insidious nature of such additive analyses; if sexism, racism and classism can be added they can also be subtracted. The separation of these variables permits the prioritization of one, to the exclusion of the others, and thereby denies their interdependence.
(King, 1988:47; Smith, 1979).

For this reason, feminist women of colour assert that an additive analysis provides neither adequate nor accurate, depiction of any experience requiring articulation in sexual as well as racial terms (de Lauretis, 1990:134). For example, "[i]nsofar as she [the black woman] is oppressed by racism in a sexist context and sexism in a racist context, [her] struggle cannot be compartmentalized into two struggles—one as a black and one as a woman" (Spelman, 1982:44). In contrast to additive analyses, feminist women of colour advocate a more holistic approach to their oppression which treats the interaction of racism, sexism and classism as the object of study. They therefore propose the development of new theoretical interpretations of multivariate interaction rather than the incorporation of previously excluded variables into existing theoretical paradigms (Collins, 1986:520).

Given the necessity of self-definition to feminist women of colour, a phenomenological approach to feminist theory seems the most apposite. This process begins in an examination of the manner in which reality is constructed. Reality is defined as "a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:1). Reality is constructed within a subjectively meaningful everyday world which originates in, and is maintained by, thoughts and actions. By this process, the reality which is associated
with everyday life is unproblematically accepted as reality, and is, as a consequence, verified solely by its own existence (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:23-24). Social reality is therefore the negotiated and reified construct of social interaction within the everyday world.

Phenomenology's preoccupation with the everyday world does not connote esoteric indulgence in the pedestrian analysis of quotidian interaction. Rather, phenomenology has embraced the study of the everyday world as the foundation of all scientific inquiry. Since the everyday world (as constructed by the activities and practices of its inhabitants) is a valid area of sociological inquiry, it is thereforce "vital, necessary and constitutive of the outcome of any sociological work" (Smart, 1976:79).

Phenomenologists also assert the propriety of sociological interest in commonsense notions of social reality. The sociologist is urged to "stand back and reflect upon the everyday world and review the experiences taken for granted" since such actions are "contrary to living in a prescribed world whose meaning is not questioned." By participating in such activities the sociologist engages in 'phenomenological doubt' (Smart, 1976:80-82).

Participation in phenomenological doubt is the essence of that which feminist women of colour advocate. Contemporary feminist theory has been largely constructed from the experiences of an everyday world which has been accepted as
reality by white feminists. This reality, however, is not wholly valid for feminist women of colour whose experiences of the everyday world are quite different. Therefore, if feminist women of colour accept the reality of a prescribed world as their own, their identity is objectively defined by their location within that world and thus can only be subjectively appropriated in accordance with it (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). If to be given an identity entails assignment to a specific place within a prescribed world (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), then feminist women of colour have been given an identity which is not their own (through feminist theory's denial of their experiences) and have therefore been assigned to places of invisibility and exclusion within mainstream feminist discourse.

The 'erasure' of women of colour (within feminist theory) entails their desubjectivization and corollary development of a 'reified consciousness' which is characterized by the tacit acceptance of their negation (Adam, 1978:78). Rejection of this 'reified consciousness' and its 'rationality of domination,' wherein the subject's potential for freedom is abnegated, (Adam, 1978:79) is, in essence, a dialectic between identification by others and self-identification—between an identity which is objectively assigned and one which is subjectively appropriated (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). By adopting a phenomenological approach to this dialectic, feminist women of colour must define themselves
within the context of an everyday world wherein racism plays as central and important a role as sexism and classism. It is this triple oppression which forms the basis for the construction of their social reality.

Phenomenology offers a viable alternative to more conventional theoretical approaches to the analysis of women's oppression. Often, the monothetic nature of traditional paradigms may reduce racism to tangential analysis since this issue becomes problematic for theories based on the exploitation of a race-less oppressed. Phenomenology incorporates racism into an analysis of women's oppression by allowing feminist women of colour the freedom to define themselves according to their lived experiences. The essence of this freedom is aptly described by author Toni Morrison:

... she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her own reality she may well have invented herself. (quoted in Giddings, 1984:15)

A phenomenological approach to feminism, however, is not in itself sufficient to address the everyday world's intrinsic problematic. This problematic results from the fact that the everyday world is simultaneously constructed by social relations which are both internal and external to it (Ryan, 1982:22; Smith, 1987:88-94). By presenting the everyday world as a "self-contained universe of inquiry" phenomenology is methodologically precluded from social processes which are
indeterminable within the everyday world itself (Smith, 1987:90). The essence of this problematic may be likened to a Copernican revolution whereby the actor is no longer believed to occupy a central and immutable position but, rather, one in which she herself is in motion in relation to what is observed (Smith, 1987:99). Similarly, the everyday world can no longer be viewed solely in terms of its internal social relations but, rather, in terms of social relations which are themselves the constructs of social structures and processes.

One approach to redressing phenomenology's apparent solipsism is to incorporate the Marxian concept of 'autonomous social relations' wherein the conditions of the actions and experiences of individuals "are organized by relations external to the everyday world and beyond the power of [their] control" (Smith, 1987:95). Conceived as such, phenomenological Marxism offers an analysis of the everyday world which is not oblivious to the influence of the external social relations which determine its constitutive elements (Ng, 1986:14; Ng, 1988:19, 87-88). Phenomenological Marxism's reconciliation of the everyday world and its political economy is, however, somewhat limited in that a Marxist approach conceptualizes power relations primarily in terms of a capital-labour relationship. The difficulty incurred in attempting to analyze race and gender within a class paradigm is indicative of a theoretical lacuna and the need for a more
flexible approach to the analysis of social relations.

Poststructuralism offers such an approach through the concept of 'language.' Poststructuralism is not a theoretical edifice but, is rather a plural term generally applied to a variety of theoretical positions. In recognition of the fact that "[n]ot all forms [of poststructuralism] are necessarily productive for feminism" (Weedon, 1987:20) the use of the term herein, unless otherwise specified, refers explicitly to the 'feminist poststructuralism' proposed by Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. For Weedon (1987:20), feminist poststructuralism is a "specific version of poststructuralism" which is developed not in an attempt to "discredit feminist work which uses other forms of poststructuralism" but to articulate a "particular position and method [held] to be useful for feminist practice."

Poststructuralist use of the term 'language' connotes more than popular notions of speech and grammar. Rather, language is any system by which meaning is constructed and is thus the means by which actors perceive themselves and their social relationship to others. Language, therefore, goes beyond imposing "oversimplified models on the world [which] perpetuate conventional understandings" in deference to the creation of "new interpretive possibilities," by revealing not only how social relations work, but also the manner in which they are conceived (Scott, 1988:34-35).

The centrality of language to poststructuralism does not
imply a rejection of Marxism. To the contrary, the Althusserian structuralist Marxist concept of ideology has contributed significantly to the development of poststructuralism (Weedon, 1987:13). Althusser (1971:146-158) posited that ideological state apparatuses (e.g., educational, legal and political systems, the family, the media, trade unions and culture) function to reproduce the relations of production which are manifested in "capitalist relations of exploitation." Ideology governs and defines the beliefs and practices of the actor in the maintenance of the ruling-class interest. This is achieved through 'interpellation' which is the process whereby ideology constructs the actor's subjectivity (Althusser, 1971:163). Subjectivity is therefore more the product of ideology than of individual autonomy. By substituting the term 'language' for ideology, poststructuralism espouses that language both defines social organization and constructs individual subjectivity (Weedon, 1987:21). Language is therefore a precondition of social existence which mediates the individual (Weedon, 1987:31) and her perception of the everyday world.

The apparent contradiction between phenomenology and poststructuralism concerning the manner in which the everyday world is constructed does not vitiate either theory or render synthesis impossible. Rather, poststructuralism also asserts that:

... language, in the form of socially and historically specific discourses, cannot
have any social and political effectivity except in and through the actions of the individuals who become its bearers by taking up the forms of subjectivity and the meanings and values which it proposes and acting upon them. (Weedon, 1987:34)

In this manner, both language and the thoughts and actions of individuals play an equal and vital role in the construction of the everyday world.

Contrary to humanist conceptions of the "conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject" poststructuralism proposes that consciousness is neither innate nor fixed, but the socially constructed "site of disunity and conflict, central to the process of political change and to preserving the status quo" (Weedon, 1987:21). Consciousness is, in fact, a negotiated subjectivity whose social reality is given meaning through language (Weedon, 1987:86). Much of the criticism which has been directed at both non-feminist and feminist poststructuralism stems from this ostensibly 'anti-humanist' approach to subjectivity. Poststructuralism's 'decentering' of the autonomous, rational liberal-humanist subject—or the female essence central to much radical feminism (e.g., Eisenstein (1981) and MacKinnon (1987b))—is often interpreted by such feminists as an attempt to devalue subjectivity and, consequently, female experience. This anti-humanist tendency is viewed as pernicious to the feminist endeavour to venerate, revalue and celebrate women's experience (Weedon, 1987:74, 125).
Although feminist poststructuralism asserts that the subject is "socially constructed in discursive practices," the actor, nonetheless, remains "a thinking, feeling subject and social agent," fully capable of reflecting upon (and acting upon) the social relations which constitute her subjectivity (Weedon, 1987:125). A feminist poststructuralism is, therefore, not intent on denying the authenticity of individual experience but, rather, on depicting the individual as the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity. The political significance of such action rests in the fact that if subjectivity is indeed negotiated it must also be open to change (Weedon, 1987:33).

This concept is, in fact, essential to the practice of consciousness-raising (Weedon, 1987:33) which is, arguably, synonymous with feminist methodology itself. Consciousness-raising is premised on the ability to alter and enrich subjectivity through the exchange of experiences within a group setting. Such activity would not be possible, much less feasible, in the instance of an immutable consciousness.

Feminist poststructuralism thus represents a viable alternative to the theoretical and methodological limitations of a purely phenomenological approach to feminism. Through the incorporation of the latter, feminist poststructuralism not only emphasizes the role of subjectivity in the everyday world but also redresses the problematic inherent within it. In so doing, it recognizes that the everyday world is
simultaneously the product of the social relations of individuals and the social processes external to it which are manifested in language. Moreover, by theorizing consciousness in terms of a negotiated process feminist poststructuralism provides a theoretical paradigm for feminist women of colour which, unlike the 'hegemonic discourse' characteristic of mainstream feminism, enables them to define and articulate their own identity rather than have one assigned. In this manner, the reality of an everyday world constructed by the interdependence of racism, sexism and classism can be accommodated rather than subsumed.
METHODOLOGY

Due to the discrepancy between their everyday world and that proposed within mainstream feminism, feminist women of colour have advocated the development of an alternative theoretical perspective of women's oppression and subjectivity: one which conceptualizes racism, sexism and classism as interdependent. In the case of North American black feminists, this multivariate approach to women's oppression has, to a great extent, been founded upon black women's experience of racism, sexism and classism during the centuries demarcating American slavery and early emancipation.\footnote{The years in question span from approximately 1600 to 1900 (Tindall, 1984).} The sexual exploitation of bondwomen, and the cult of true womanhood, are but two of the many examples which can be used to illustrate the experiences of black women during this time period. Although these examples, or illustrative case studies, are historical in that their use has been informed by the methodological tradition of historiography, they are necessarily limited in scope and thus do not entail the detailed and comprehensive historical analysis which is typically characteristic of historiography.

The use of historiography as a methodology has not been as common as the more conventional qualitative and/or quantitative approaches to sociological inquiry. Sociologists have traditionally eschewed the routine use of historical...
inquiry on the grounds that it is idiographic rather than nomothetic in character. The idiographic concern with unique and particular events is thought to be incompatible with a nomothetic focus on the formulation of general propositions through which to explain classes of phenomena. Furthermore, subject matter pertaining to history is believed to warrant an unscientific methodology which results in the discipline’s reliance upon qualitatively imprecise methods of inquiry (Goldthorpe, 1984:163-164).

Such beliefs are based on the assumption that sociologists are exclusively concerned with purely theoretical and/or empirical endeavours. However, in "The Relevance of History to Sociology," John H. Goldthorpe (1984:167) examines the propriety of the 'classic' tradition within sociology which represents the intermediary between pure theory and absolute empiricism. Sociological inquiry associated with this tradition is not concerned with "establishing models of social change which are of universal applicability but, rather, with understanding and explaining particular processes of change which can be delimited in geographical and historical terms."

The classic tradition within sociology also entails the "adoption of an historical perspective and the extensive use of historical materials." This combination is central to the belief that:

. . . no clear boundary of any kind is in fact to be discerned between history and
sociology. They are seen rather as merging imperceptibly one into the other; differences between them in either their logic or their method are regarded as differences in degree not in kind. (Goldthorpe, 1984:168-169)

From this perspective, Goldthorpe (1984:168) concludes that sociology is, in essence, an historical discipline.

Goldthorpe's theory is not unlike those of his predecessors who also advocated the convergence of history and sociology as a mutually beneficial exercise (Carr, 1983:66). Similarly, Philip Abrams (Abrams, 1982) contends that sociologists have paid a methodological price for their reluctance to use historical methods since they are consequently forced to make generalizations (which are often inaccurate) about the past from their present findings. Historiography obviates such generalizations by allowing for an accurate analysis of the past from which to forge a future.

Historiography provides a viable means by which to analyze the particular and/or varying features of social structures and processes which are concretely situated in time and space. Of equal significance is historiography's sensitivity to "the interplay of meaningful actions and structural contexts, in order to make sense of the unfolding of [latent and manifest] outcomes in individual lives and social transformations" (Skocpol, 1984:1). In light of these features, historiography provides a sound methodological approach to understanding the role of agency and structure
in the construction of the everyday world.

The application of historical inquiry herein entails the use of illustrative case studies (which are historically significant) to elucidate the interdependence of racism, sexism and classism as well as their effect on the experience, subjectivity and consciousness of black women. As this is by no means intended to be a comprehensive examination, it is necessary to limit and specify the historical and geographic frameworks which are involved. The first case study is set in nineteenth-century America and illustrates the lives of black women during slavery (from 1810-1865), early emancipation and the height of the Victorian ideology—the cult of true womanhood.

The phenomenon of slavery has often appealed to many (including mainstream feminists) as an analytic concept due to its centuries-old lifespan and socio-historical significance. Emphasis on the United States (as opposed to Canada) is a result of the comparatively ephemeral nature of slavery in Canada, the corollary modicum of related Canadian literature and the centrality of the U.S. slave experience to the cultural and political definition of all North American black people. Similarly, the cult of true womanhood had a considerable, lasting and prescriptive effect on women's lives in the areas of the family, religion and sexuality. While the restrictions which arose from the cult of true womanhood were experienced by all women, the fact that this ideology was also
mediated by racism and classism was to have consequences which were unique to the black woman.

Set in twentieth-century Canada, the second case study describes the experiences of West Indian domestic workers (from 1955-1973) and 'immigrant women' in Ng's (Ng, 1988) ethnography of a counselling and job placement agency. Both accounts illustrate the role of state policy (mediated by racism, sexism and classism) in shaping the consciousness of particular black women in Canada. The intent is not to attempt to establish a historical continuity between the U.S. and Canadian case studies as this would necessitate historical research far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the purpose is to point out similarities between the case studies despite their historical, cultural and geo-political specificity. As such, historical data gathered from the study of nineteenth-century American slavery and cultural ideology is not necessarily limited in its applicability but can also be related to the contemporary study of the relationship between racism, sexism, classism and the everyday world of women of colour. In this manner, an historical analysis offers contemporary relevance through its interpretation of the propriety of past patterns for present choices and its subsequent ability to address real life concerns (Skocpol, 1984:5).

Due to the nature of the case studies examined herein, the focus will necessarily centre on the experiences of black
women. Although the common experience of racism strikes a resonant chord among all women of colour (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981), merely subsuming their experiences under those of black women would be equivalent to the 'hegemonic discourse' of which feminists accuse male academicians and which, in fact, characterizes mainstream feminist theory itself. Generalizations about all women of colour can only be validated through an examination of the historically specific, socio-cultural and/or geo-political conditions which have delineated their unique oppressions (Amos and Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1986; Lazreg, 1988; Lugones and Spelman, 1983; Ong, 1988).

Unfortunately, the stricutures of time and space do not permit an analysis of this magnitude herein. However, such limitations need not automatically imply relevance to black women only. An examination of the manner in which the everyday world is affected by the interrelationship of racism, sexism and classism is, in fact, an heuristic device which may be used in the construction of a feminist theory which is indeed inclusive of all women.
SORROW'S KITCHEN: BLACK WOMEN FETTERED AND FREE

'Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen an' ah licked de pots clean.' (Lerner, 1972:3)

Feminist women of colour have appealed to a historical relationship between the experience and consciousness of black women (among other women of colour) as the basis for the assertion that their everyday world differs from that of mainstream feminists in that the former has been the result of multivariate construction rather than the prioritization of sexism. As significant components of U.S. history, slavery and the cult of true womanhood provide a useful framework within which to examine the experiences of black women in nineteenth-century America. Both the rape and sexual abuse of female slaves and a Victorian cultural ideology which dichotomized blackness and womanhood illustrate particular manifestations of racism, sexism and classism which shaped the consciousness and everyday world of black women.

With the abolition of the international slave trade in 1810, reproduction was quietly on its way to becoming the leading source of domestic slave labour in the United States. Consequently, slave owners placed premiums on those bondwomen who demonstrated a high level of fertility (i.e., those who bore an average of ten or more children). Since "much of a young woman's worth was in her unborn children . . . [i]nfertile women could, therefore. expect to be treated like barren sows and be passed from one unsuspecting buyer to the
next" (White, 1985:101). In contrast, fertile women (known as 'breeders') could expect to be induced (via decreased responsibilities and/or material rewards) to reproduce the slave labour force. For example, "[e]very time a baby was born on one of Major Wallon's plantations, the mother was given a calico dress and a 'bright, shiny silver dollar'" (White, 1985:100). Similarly, "instructions in Plowden C. J. Weston's Plantation Manual advised that 'women with six children alive at any one time are allowed all Saturday to themselves'" (White, 1985:100).

Bondwomen who could not be induced to reproduce for the purposes of slavery were forced to do so regardless. When instructed by her master to cohabitate with a bondman who was not of her own choosing, the bondwoman knew all too well that failure to comply would result in her physical abuse and/or sale and hence, separation from her family (Omolade, 1983:355). It was, in fact, not uncommon for the bondwoman to be impregnated by the master himself (Davis, 1981:6-7; Gutman, 1976:75-78; Jennings, 1990:49). While such practices ostensibly stemmed from devolving the reproductive exigencies of slavery to bondwomen, they were themselves symptomatic of equally widespread, yet far more insidious, beliefs concerning the sexuality of all black women. The relationship between such beliefs and the sexual exploitation of female slaves is an example of theory informing practice to such an extent that rape and sexual harassment by their masters (and/or the men

History has generally remained conspicuously silent on the issue of sexual relations between bondwomen and white men (Omolade, 1983:364-365). Anecdotal references to such practices are, however, evidenced in slave narratives§ and in instances of white women suing for divorce because of their husband’s adulterous relations with slave women: "Susan Potts, in applying for a divorce in Oglethorpe County, Georgia accused her husband of 'illicit and adulterous intercourse with diverse persons'" (Burnham, 1978:372). The comments of a South Carolina plantation mistress are indicative of the awkwardness and secrecy which surrounded any discussion of this phenomenon: "[a]ny lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds" (Lerner, 1972:52).

The sexual exploitation of female slaves was greatly facilitated by the proprietorial nature of slavery. Under a system of enslavement which defined bondwomen as personal property, slaveowners were guaranteed an exclusive and

§Perhaps the most popular of which is Linda Brent's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, L. Maria Child, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, [1861], 1978).
absolute right to the bondwoman's body in addition to her labour (Burnham, 1978:371). Although this:

was beyond [the bondwoman's] concept of enslavement, it was not beyond her master's, for every part of the black woman was used by him. To him she was a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices were rarely considered. (Omolade, 1983:354)

The rape of the bondwoman was also justified by stereotypes which portrayed her as being excessively libidinous (Giddings, 1984:35). These stereotypes originated from initial contacts between Africans and Europeans whereby "[u]naccustomed to the requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook seminudity for lewdness" (White, 1985:29). Eurocentrism would also equate African rituals and tribal dances with an insatiable carnality and penchant for orgy on the part of African women (Omolade, 1983:350-351; White, 1985:29). The perpetuation of European conviction was greatly facilitated by agents of cultural transmission, namely schools, churches and the publishing industry. The contextual and temporal stability of the negative and stereotypical images of African sexuality which were produced by such cultural agents (Adam, 1978:30, 51) would later allow American slaveholders to draw correlations between sensuality and fecundity which substantiated their claims that the increase in the slave population was a natural result of the bondwoman's concupiscence (Jennings, 1990:45; White, 1985:31).
If the laws of conquest dictated that "African women captives were considered the sexual property of the European conquerors" (Omolade, 1983:350) then the rape of American bondwomen was "the ultimate expression of contempt for a defeated foe" (Lerner, 1972:172). Since "[p]rotecting black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy" (Omolade, 1983:359) the sexual abuse of black women (by white men) symbolized the helplessness of all black people with an effectiveness paralleled only by lynching (Hall, 1983:331-333; Lerner, 1972:172). Rape was therefore a weapon of social control, violence (Wertz, 1984:380-381), domination, repression and terror whose overt goal was to demoralize black people and extinguish their will to resist (Davis, 1981:23-24).

Although the slave experience was shared by men and women alike, the added dimension of sexual exploitation and abuse led bondwomen to the conclusion that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (Simson, 1983:231). Female slaves were not exempt from the extraordinarily arduous labour and severe physical abuse which was endured by their male counterparts. The exigencies of slavery exposed the sexual division of labour as a socially constructed artifice which (although rigidly enforced among whites) was hastily cast aside when it was expedient to do so (Davis, 1981:5-6; Jennings, 1990:46; Mann, 1989:779-780;

The sexual division of labour was, however, strictly maintained when the labour involved sexual intercourse. For "[a]lthough male slaves were subjected to forced sex as stock men, in the case of miscegenation, only the bondwomen could be subjected to the white man's passion" (Jennings, 1990:61). It was the bondwoman alone who faced the realization that "the white patriarch had the power to force [her] to mate with whomever he chose [including himself], to reproduce or suffer the consequences ...." (Jennings, 1990:46).

It was in this manner that the sexual exploitation of slaves had decidedly female implications. Through frequent subjection to rape and sexual abuse the bondwoman was perpetually reminded of the immutability of her gender (i.e., her subordination to all men) and the divestment of autonomy over her own fertility and sexual self-identity. This particular aspect of slavery epitomized a system of racial patriarchy wherein the imbrication of racism and sexism would have a significant and lasting effect on the everyday world of black women, for it was one in which the separation of the woman, and her colour, was impossible (Omolade, 1983:363). It is precisely the social reality and consciousness resulting from the inextricability of racism and sexism which has created the theoretical foundation upon which feminist women of colour have problematized mainstream feminism's tendency to separate the two variables while prioritizing the latter:
an exercise which was not possible in the everyday world of the bondwoman.

The black woman did not experience slavery solely as a black person or as a woman, but as both. If this dualism was characteristic of her experience it was also characteristic of her consciousness and, therefore, of her everyday world. Thus, the general emancipation of slaves in 1865 did not signify the end of the black woman's oppression. Rather, the racism and sexism which had sustained slavery had also been, and continued to be, sustained by the Victorian ideology known as the cult of true womanhood. Although this cultural ethic was most popular between 1820 and 1860 (Welter, 1980), it remained a constant influence on women's lives throughout the nineteenth century (Carby, 1987:39).

The cult of true womanhood had its American origins in nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. During this period, the rise of the factory system replaced the household as the centre of commodity production thus resulting in the transition of both market and family economies. The simultaneous development of wage labour obviated the servility to which white men were traditionally doomed had they had the misfortune of being born into a propertyless family (Matthaei, 1982:100-104). Therefore, the new economic system "established equality of rights between all white men" by extending to them "the freedom of self-advancement [and] the right to establish households of their own" (Matthaei,
These men were not necessarily guaranteed economic success, however, but merely the right to pursue it. As it was widely believed that success came only through hard work, those who attained wealth without the benefit of inheritance were venerated while those who remained indigent were chastised for doing so. The philosophy which espoused that hard work bred success, while laziness bred failure, became known as 'Social Darwinism.' Thus, men were not only given the opportunity to be successful but were challenged to do so. Since economic success was synonymous with masculinity itself this was a challenge to be declined by few (Matthaei, 1982:104-105).

The changes which were brought about by industrial capitalism were not limited to the economy. The inchoate economic system also hailed the emergence of a new middle-class family and corollary lifestyle which included increased incomes, expectations and standards of living. This new familial structure was based on the division of labour and concomitant creation of two separate spheres of activity: the public and the private (Woloch, 1984:113-114).

The public sphere referred to the realm outside of the home. It was thought to be the appropriate domain of men since it was replete with the instability, alienation, "greed, dishonesty and cutthroat competition" (Ryan, 1975:145) which characterized Social Darwinism. In contrast, the private
sphere (or the home) was the woman's domain. The creation of an exclusively female sphere in which the primary responsibilities were housekeeping and childrearing became known as the cult of domesticity (Matthews, 1987).

The cult of domesticity was not solely designed to alienate women from the public sphere but, rather, was also a mechanism by which they could complement it. In this manner, the cult of domesticity represented a tacit agreement of mutual benefit to white middle-class men and women. If familial status was determined by the husband's role in the public sphere then it could also be determined by the role of the wife within the private sphere. Therefore, proper maintenance of the home now became the measure of a woman's success and it was through the fulfillment of this role that the middle-class woman garnered the respect and influence which was previously unknown to her (Matthews, 1987:35-36; Woloch, 1984:114-115).

Through the cult of domesticity, the middle-class white woman became revered as the guardian of familial morality. As such, her femininity became linked with her total devotion to homemaking—the subordination of her needs to those of her family (Matthaei, 1982:113). For women, the appeal of work within the public sphere was superceded by the prestige afforded to those who stayed at home and reproduced the labour force (Giddings, 1984:47). Ideology was, in this instance, also aided by state intervention as early to mid nineteenth-
century legislation restricted the conditions of female employment to ensure that women remained in the home (McDonough and Harrison, 1978:35). Thus, it was hardly coincidental that the slogan, 'A woman's place is in the home' assumed an added harshness precisely when black and working-class white women began entering the paid labour force in large numbers (Giddings, 1984:48).

Although it was enclosed and limited, woman's new sphere was better than none at all since it represented a new and positive social space which had been absent prior to the nineteenth century. The value which had been placed upon domesticity and childrearing now "fostered a positive consciousness of gender, one that had not existed in the colonial era. And it necessitated a redefinition of female character, one appropriate to the middle-class woman's elevated domestic status" (Woloch, 1984:116). This redefinition of femininity was manifested in the cult of true womanhood.

The cult of true womanhood espoused that a female was not truly a woman unless she exuded the requisite characteristics of domesticity, submissiveness, piety and purity. However, the problem of attaining "widespread conformity to a single model of womanhood" was greatly facilitated by the relatively inexpensive printing and distribution of "literature by, for, and about women." Thus, "[f]or the first time in American cultural history, womanhood was a distinct and popular topic
of discourse" (Ryan, 1975:142-143). This literature primarily consisted of novels (written by both men and women) and numerous ladies’ magazines, the most prestigious of which was *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (*Godey’s*). According to *Godey’s*, Queen Victoria represented the archetype of femininity:

‘Victoria we consider as the representative of the moral and the intellectual influence which woman by her nature is formed to exercise.’ She typifies ‘all that is majestic . . . soft . . . soothing . . . bright, all that expresses the one universal voice of love in creation.’ (Ryan, 1975:143-144)

Avid readers of the new women's literature were also instructed that domesticity entailed a woman's recognition of domestic duties as her primary concern and of the home as "her appropriate sphere of action." Therefore, the neglect of her duties or sphere was desertion of the "station which God and nature have assigned to her" (Graves, [1841], 1972:144). Domesticity thus represented the element which was common to both the cult of true womanhood and the cult of domesticity and, in fact, allowed the former to incorporate the latter.

Submissiveness was another virtue which was characteristic of the true woman. The perfect wife was called upon to ‘repress a harsh answer, to confess a fault, and to stop (right or wrong) in the midst of self-defense, in gentle submission’ (Welter, 1980:201). *Godey’s* concurred by claiming that woman's greatest command was '[t]o suffer and to be silent under suffering' (Welter, 1980:202).
The true woman was also pious. Fervent devotion to religious activity was not deemed to be in violation of her proper sphere. The active participation of women within the church was, in fact, essential since they represented the majority of congregants. Women were therefore encouraged to use their moral and spiritual superiority to work towards the conversion of their families and thereby raise more money for pious endeavours (Graves; [1841], 1972:145; Woloch, 1984:120-121). Piety enabled women and their ministers to form an alliance which gave "clerical endorsement of female moral superiority in exchange for woman's support and activism" (Woloch, 1984:120). However, the authority which accompanied woman's status was not without its limitations, for the exertion of her pious influence was welcomed only within its proper place (Woloch, 1984:122). In other words, women could not expect to assume leadership roles within the church as these remained strictly the activities of men.

The final tenet of the cult of true womanhood was purity. This "vital component of the female character," (Woloch, 1984:122) espoused that women were to subdue, rather than kindle, the insatiable lust which allegedly characterized male sexuality. In contrast, the purported asexuality of the true woman was thought to be a result of her spiritual and moral superiority. Sermons which professed the centrality of purity were not uncommon: '[1]et her lay aside delicacy and her influence over our sex is gone' (Woloch, 1984:122).
The medical profession was hardly in consensus on the issue of female sexuality but many were involved in the promotion of a new ideology of asexuality for women. These nineteenth-century physicians asserted that the ejaculation of seminal fluid expended a man's vital energies. Thus, "excessive intercourse was sheer profligacy, destructive to a man's health, offensive to bourgeois frugality, and detrimental to the national economy" (Ryan, 1975:159). Consequently, doctors called on the asexual female to conserve men's energy. Marriage manuals echoed such sentiments by establishing guidelines for the frequency of sexual intercourse which ranged from "once a month" or "ninety times in a lifetime" to complete "abstinence for twenty-one months" (Ryan, 1975:159).

Piety and purity thus complemented one another as the twin pillars of femininity. Not unlike piety, purity also afforded women a measure of previously unknown authority within marriage. Such authority came in the form of sexual control whereby women's alleged moral and spiritual superiority gave them the right of refusal. Control over the frequency of sexual relations necessarily increased a woman's control over her fertility. This newly granted autonomy

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conveniently coincided with the rise of the urban middle-class home in which children "were no longer economic assets but, rather, liabilities" (Woloch, 1984:123).

The cult of true womanhood combined domesticity, submissiveness, piety and purity to redefine the female character and its role within the private sphere. Far from being passive recipients of their new identity, white middle-class women mobilized the tenets of femininity to obtain more respect, influence and authority within and beyond the home (Woloch, 1984:125). Critics note, however, that women's newly attained authority was, in fact, a Pyrrhic victory since their gains came at the repression of sexual passion\(^8\) (Ryan, 1975:159) and the loss of independence, mobility within the public sphere, and the freedom of religious non-conformity:

\[\text{[t]hat woman should regard home as her appropriate domain is not only the dictate of religion, but of enlightened human reason. ... It is in her home that her strength lies; it is here that the gentle influence, which is the secret of her might, is most successfully employed; and this she loses as soon as she descends from her calm height into the world's arena ...} \] (Graves, [1841], 1972:145-146)

Whether Pyrrhic or not, this victory was one to be celebrated by white middle-class women only (Davis, 1981:5; Dill, 1979:550; White, 1985:16). The black female was denied

the meagre benefits of the cult of true womanhood since she was believed to possess characteristics which were antithetical to those of the true woman. Domesticity, submissiveness, piety and purity were qualities which white patriarchy deemed foreign to black women.

White denial of black womanhood was not, however, echoed by blacks themselves. Many working-class and middle-class blacks recognized the tenets of the cult of true womanhood while decrying their racist and classist implications (Giddings, 1984:49). This was evident in the mandate⁹ of the antebellum club movement among middle-class black women which reinforced the importance of "female morality and respectability to racial advancement" (Higginbotham, 1989:58-59). Black publications, organizations and churches stressed that women were innately more nurturing and loving than men and chronicled the demise of those who did not accept and conform to prevailing gender roles as best as they were able (Horton, 1986:55-56). Since each black person was to be "a living refutation of racial stereotypes held by white society" (Horton, 1986:58) many blacks perceived conformity to be inextricably linked to the social mobility of their people.

Conditional acceptance of the cult of true womanhood, by many black women, nonetheless remained insufficient grounds

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⁹It was also expressed in the motto of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW): 'Lifting As We Climb' (Giddings. 1984:97-98; Higginbotham, 1989:53).
for their inclusion. In accordance with the prevailing white ideology, the tenet of domesticity—which stressed the importance of housekeeping and motherhood within the private sphere—ostensibly eluded black women on two accounts. First, slavery had effectively destroyed any association between the joy of motherhood and bondwomen, who were referred to as 'breeders' (Davis, 1981:7), rather than mothers. White attitudes toward black women and motherhood did not change with emancipation. Secondly, manumission did not entitle ex-bondwomen to a life of leisure. As the wages of black men were considerably less than those of their white counterparts, many black women were forced to supplement the family income by working outside of the home (Palmer, 1983:158). Since black women were effectively excluded from factory work to the point where 'there was not a single trade in which Negroes were allowed to work beside white people' (Giddings, 1984:48), their only options for employment were sharecropping (which was itself a form of peonage) (Mann, 1989), domestic and menial labour. The consequences of black women's economic position were obvious: if women who depended on their own wage labour were considered 'unfeminine,' then those who performed what was perceived as being the lowest of all wage labour were even more so.

Economic reality was not, in itself, sufficient to persuade black women to abandon a preference for domesticity. When postbellum southern black families attempted to keep
their wives and mothers out of the paid workforce, their efforts were interpreted by hostile whites as indicative of the black woman's indolence. Therefore, when economic exigencies necessitated the return of these women to the field or kitchen it was not at the expense of a continued idealization of gender roles (Higginbotham, 1989:57-58); as black women entered the labour force, black colleges instructed female students to maintain pristine and "cultured homes despite the poverty of their households" (Higginbotham, 1989:59).

Antebellum black newspapers and women's societies also emphasized the importance of black women's deference to their men. Conformity to the tenet of submissiveness was deemed necessary to bolster the sense of masculinity in black men which slavery had so severely undermined. The black woman's submissiveness was not, however, indicative of her inferiority to black men. Rather, black women (unlike their white counterparts) were routinely encouraged by their men to share leadership roles in abolitionist, anti-lynching and civil rights endeavours (Giddings, 1984; Horton, 1986:70-71).

Similarly, the strong sense of independence and self-preservation which slavery had previously instilled in black women was hardly conducive to nurturing the abject submissiveness which the cult of true womanhood had deemed essential to femininity. There was no room for passivity in the long history of resistance against slavery, as noted aptly
by Harriet Tubman: "[n]o man should take me alive. I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted" (Ryan, 1975:189). Bondwomen were not resigned to complacence but, rather, formed an instrumental and integral component of slave resistance (Burnham, 1978:374-376; Lerner, 1972:27). Resistance had a variety of manifestations: a midnight flight for freedom, an aborted fetus, arson, poisonings (Giddings, 1984:39-49) or even the simple instruction of a mother to her daughter: 'Fight. If you can't fight, kick, if you can't kick then bite' (Ryan, 1975:169). Ironically, the very attributes which had enabled bondwomen to endure and resist their enslavement were transformed by the cult of true womanhood into characteristics which served to degrade, rather than celebrate, black womanhood.

Piety was yet another virtue which whites did not readily associate with black women. This is a particularly curious phenomenon since religion had played a vital role in the slave's ability to cope with his/her enslavement (Blassingame, 1972:75-76). Perhaps in recognition of this fact, many slave owners made concerted efforts to limit the religious instruction of their slaves by insisting that they remain ignorant of "the potentially subversive tenets of Christianity (the brotherhood of all men, for instance)" (Blassingame, 1972:61). As a result, those slaves who expressed a desire to further their education were often forced to hold clandestine religious meetings for fear of
reprisal from their owners. This arcane practice was so widespread that slave religion became referred to as the "'invisible institution' of the antebellum South" (Tindall, 1984:558).

Although slave owners who were somewhat more religiously inclined encouraged their slaves to attend church, the slaves often refused such invitations since they deemed the master's behaviour between Sabbaths to be in stark contradiction to that which would be expected of him given his professed Christianity (Blassingame, 1972:60). Consequently, it was not uncommon for slaves to eschew their master's church in favour of holding their own 'praise meetings' (Blassingame, 1972:64) wherein the dances, exhortations and chants which were particular to their method of worship were undoubtedly perceived by whites as being exotic and mystifying (Tindall, 1984:558) and hence, sacrilegious. In any event, those slaves who did attend the master's church were invariably greeted with sermons that preached servility and obeisance to slave owners (Blassingame, 1972:62-63) rather than active participation in church affairs and the formation of alliances with members of the clergy. It becomes apparent, therefore, that whites refused to acknowledge slave propensity for pious behaviour by means of the specious labelling process which was characteristic of slavery: the denial of religious opportunity and freedom to blacks resulted in their rejection of white churches; this rejection was in turn interpreted by
whites as indicative of the African's heresy and inability to achieve standards of piety (read: obsequiousness) deemed desirable, given the prevailing ideology.

The ease with which whites had successfully labelled slaves as heretics was not to be the case among antebellum free blacks. Many northeastern blacks, for example, were active participants in the Baptist faith and church building endeavours. Women occasionally acted as temporary ministers (Horton, 1986:55) and founded organizations which preached the importance of cleanliness and Victorian morality in conjunction with racial advancement (Higginbotham, 1989:59). The obvious similarities between the pious endeavours of antebellum free blacks and those of whites suggests that racism was at least partially responsible for the reluctance of whites to acknowledge the religious activities of blacks as such.

Although black women allegedly lacked domesticity, submissiveness and piety, purity was the virtue which whites believed them to be most devoid of. Europeans had traditionally perceived the African woman's expression of sensuality (through dress and dance) as indicative of the absence of any sexual mores and the embodiment of "all that was evil and profane" (Omolade, 1983:351). It was this 'primitive sexuality' which stigmatized black women and formed the basis for the legitimization of their rape (Hall, 1983; Omolade, 1983; Simson, 1983). The absence of purity could be
singled out as the most serious flaw in the black woman's character because it was the one tenet of the cult of true womanhood which, once violated, simultaneously symbolized the violation of the other three. The alleged lasciviousness of the black woman was incompatible with the true woman's obligation to instill her family with morality. Similarly, her purportedly overt sensuality encouraged, rather than discouraged, sexual desire in men and could therefore hardly be reconciled with pious behaviour.

Once again, as with the other virtues in which the black woman was allegedly found wanting, her perceived prurience was more the result of white fantasy than black reality. The slave community had traditionally exhibited a cultural pattern which diverged markedly from that of whites on the issue of female sexual morality. Their respect for the mother-child bond facilitated slave acceptance of pre-marital sex and 'illegitimate' births. Although such births were not the norm among the slave population, they took place without the acquisition of stigma by mother or child (Higginbotham, 1989:54-55). Such cultural attitudes towards sexuality and fecundity were undoubtedly perceived by whites to be indicative of the black woman's immorality.

In contrast to the more 'liberal' attitudes toward sexual morality which were characteristic of the slave community, antebellum northern black newspapers reminded free black women to be "especially careful of any public display of sexuality,"
particularly in their manner of dress (Horton, 1986:58). Such caveats were less in response to any perceived need to curtail black women's sexuality than they were an attempt to deter the sexual advances of white men. As domestic servants in white households, black women were constantly subjected to rape and sexual exploitation by their white male employers. Given the availability of stereotypes about black sexual aggression which white men routinely used to absolve themselves of wrongdoings, black women could ill afford to engage in any behaviour which could be labelled sexually suggestive (Giddings, 1984:86-87; Horton, 1986:58). In adopting a more 'conservative' stance on sexuality, antebellum middle-class blacks were in fact reflective of the prevailing white ideology. Thus, the obvious discrepancy between the attitudes of bondpeople and those of free blacks suggests that class was a determining factor in black perspectives on sexual morality.

Challenged by an ideology which was never intended for their inclusion, black women (particularly middle-class activists) sought to redefine the notion of true womanhood. This strategy entailed their acceptance of the cult of true womanhood while circumventing their exclusion from it through the rejection of its racist and classist premises. Black

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10 For a discussion of how black women redefined womanhood through the use of literature, see Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
women activists did not believe that "morality and worth were inherent to a particular class or race" since "it was external circumstance rather than natural law that determined character, morality and 'true womanhood'" (Giddings, 1984:51). External circumstance referred to an experiential difference between blacks and whites due to slavery and poverty which, for blacks, made the economic requisites of womanhood--especially a wife at home--impossible. Thus, when the economic reality of black people (compared to whites) is considered alongside their unique cultural values--particularly those concerning sexual morality and piety--it becomes reductionist to conclude that the black woman's endeavour to redefine womanhood arose solely from a mere rejection of white ideology.

In light of the defiance of black women, successful maintenance of the cult of true womanhood was, therefore, entirely dependent upon the ability to promote and sustain an intricate relationship between racism, sexism and classism. By advocating the relegation of white women to the private sphere, the tenet of domesticity clearly exhibited a race and class bias which excluded both black and white working-class women. Even the unproblematic separation of the public and private spheres was itself the creation of a capitalist patriarchy which required submissive, pious white women to remain at home and reproduce the labour force. Furthermore, the entire ideology was also implicitly racist in that the
perpetuation of racial stereotypes (which had developed as a result of the economic exigencies of slavery) meant that the exclusion of black women was all but ensured.

In requiring white females to be domestic, submissive, pious and pure, the new ideal of femininity could not easily be applied to the majority of black women, who by this strict definition of womanhood, were little more than anomalies. However, these tenets were themselves symptomatic of the racism, sexism and classism which defined the black female's womanhood and everyday world. The result was a multivariate subjectivity which was both the impetus behind the black woman's desire to redefine womanhood and the theoretical foundation from which feminist women of colour have since criticized mainstream feminist discourse. Given the influence of the prevailing white cultural ideology, the black woman's attempt to redefine femininity was bound to be a Sisyphean task since that which nullified her claim to womanhood would also pervade every other aspect of an everyday world whose harsh reality stood in stark contrast to ethereal notions of femininity.

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It seems that the new ideal of femininity was not readily applicable to white women either since "most contemporary women's historians assert that the majority of white women in the antebellum period were not living embodiments of true womanhood..." (Carby, 1987:23).
Nineteenth-century America provided an invaluable historical framework within which feminist women of colour could base their theoretical arguments concerning the multivariate construction of the black woman's consciousness and everyday world. However, the experiences of racism and sexism which were characteristic of slavery and the cult of true womanhood did not end with the turn of the century. Rather, the interdependence of racism and sexism continued to be the tie which bound black women to each other while maintaining their experiential separation from white women.

The post-emancipation transition from slavery to sharecropping did not significantly lessen the oppressive and exploitive conditions under which black women laboured. Faced with no alternative other than domestic work or sharecropping, hundreds of thousands of black women chose instead to migrate north in search of better job prospects during the first World War (Jones, 1986:241). Such hopes were seldom realized unless there was a shortage of white labour, as was the case during both World Wars when black women gained entrance to manufacturing and transportation industries (Lerner, 1972:238). Jobs vacated by white men in wartime "were converted to women's work and . . . downgraded to a lower pay and status, but others were converted to black women's work of even greater inferiority" (Jones, 1986:241). Black women's jobs were also the most dangerous and least desirable
in the factory. Exposure to poisonous or hazardous materials, unbearable temperatures and routine assignment to "'discouraging' night shifts," which only complicated their familial obligations as wives and mothers, were endured "without the prospect of job advancement or promotion" (Jones, 1986:241). Black women were, not surprisingly, the first to be fired from these jobs in the post-war periods and, as a result, were often forced to return to domestic or menial labour (Lerner, 1972:238).

The black woman's experience of racism was not limited to the factory. Although clerical and sales work had been performed in large numbers by white women since the Civil War, black women continued to be excluded from these occupations until the early 1940's. The few who were admitted were subjected to quotas, discrimination and segregation. Furthermore, only "the most light-skinned applicants" were accepted (Lerner, 1972:320-321).

The late nineteenth-century transition from agriculture to industry "created new employment possibilities for white women [to which] southern black women had virtually no access..." (Jones, 1986:169). Although there were increased employment opportunities for black women, these gains were always in the shadow of one constant: domestic work characterized by "substandard wages and employment conditions [which] reflect[ed] not only the general vulnerability of female labour . . . but [were] a specific result of race
prejudice" (Lerner, 1972:226). The racism which had been central to the black woman's experience of slavery and the cult of true womanhood was now a central factor in her labour force marginalization. Similarly, the sexism which had 'naturalized' black woman's labour--first as 'breeders,' then, as 'domestics'--did not decrease with their entry into industrial and clerical work. Although the wages of black women had approached those of their white counterparts by the 1970's, sex discrimination maintained the disparity in the wages and employment opportunities of women and men of both races (Lewis, 1988:52-63).

Racism and sexism in twentieth-century America thus continued to be as central to the black woman's consciousness and everyday world as they had been the century before. Given this continuation, the relationship between racism, sexism, classism and the everyday world of black women is neither limited to an historical or an American framework. This relationship may also be examined within a Canadian context since the history of black people in Canada is also one in which these variables have played a central role.\textsuperscript{12}

Canada's early history of racism against blacks differed from that of the United States. Since the Canadian climate was not conducive to plantation farming racism in Canada did

not revolve around slavery to the extent that it had in the United States (Bolaria and Li, 1985:163-166). Rather, Canadian racism was primarily directed at black immigration to Canada. The first significant immigration of free blacks to Canada took place during the American Revolution when Loyalists emigrated to Nova Scotia from the U.S. These early black settlers were segregated from white communities, schools, churches and public facilities (Walker, 1984:22). When the number of blacks emigrating from the Caribbean began to increase marginally in the early nineteenth century white Canadians called for restrictions on West Indian immigration to Canada. These restrictions were highly successful in that not only were they maintained until well into the twentieth century but they also ensured exclusion to all but the most highly skilled and educated West Indian immigrants. Due to the educational and social class background of these 'preferred' immigrants their experience of racism also differed from that of less educated indigenous Canadian blacks since that of the latter was mediated by class to a greater degree (Walker, 1984:23).

Early to mid twentieth-century Canadian immigration policy thus provides a framework for examining racism within the context of West Indian immigration to Canada. In the case of West Indian domestic workers, however, Canadian immigration policy represented more than an encounter with state racism: it symbolized an inextricable matrix of racism, sexism and
classism which had a significant effect on their consciousness and everyday world. In addition to the example of West Indian domestics, the operation of this matrix is also apparent in Ng's (Ng, 1988) research on the role of the state in the construction of 'immigrant women.' Both the West Indian Domestic Scheme and Ng's (Ng, 1988) ethnography demonstrate the complexity of the everyday world of women of colour. It is this multivariate construction which feminist women of colour have espoused as a theoretical premise from which to base their criticism of mainstream feminism.

In 1908, Opposition Leader Robert Borden declared that "the Conservative Party stands for a white Canada" (Walker, 1984:9). Borden's declaration was, at the time, reflective of the racism which had become central to Canadian immigration policy. Explicitly discriminatory attitudes in regards to the admission of people of colour to Canada had, since the late nineteenth century, resulted in the government's commitment to the restriction and control of non-white immigration. Head taxes, the denial of civil rights, language tests and medical examinations were just a few of the tactics employed by the Canadian government in an effort to dissuade and/or prevent non-European immigration (Bolaria and Li, 1985).

Such tactics were obviated when, in 1947, Prime Minister Mackenzie King declared that 'the people of Canada do not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to make a fundamental
alteration in the character of our population' (Satzewich, 1989:78). According to immigration minister Walter Harris, the people most likely to make this 'fundamental alteration' to the Canadian 'character' were 'persons from tropical or sub-tropical countries' (Walker, 1984:10). In light of Harris' revelation, a new Immigration Act was passed in 1952 which legally prohibited admission to Canada on the basis of "nationality, citizenship, ethnic group and geographical area of origin" (Walker, 1984:10). The policy of restricting the entry of non-white people to Canada was so effective that "between 1947 and 1962, only 9.6% of the people admitted to Canada as permanent settlers were from outside Western Europe, the United States and Australasia" (Satzewich, 1989:79). During this fifteen year period, only 12,841 immigrants from the West Indies (Satzewich, 1989:79) and 21,877 immigrants from China (Bolaria and Li, 1985:92) gained entrance to Canada. In addition, quotas placed on Indian immigration in 1952 limited entry to 150 immigrants from India, 100 from Pakistan and 50 from Ceylon (Bolaria and Li, 1985:148). Canadian immigration policy continued to be overtly discriminatory until mounting international and domestic pressure forced the government to introduce changes in 1962. Under the new policy, skills, education and training replaced ethnicity, race and national origin as the criteria for admissibility to Canada (Walker, 1984:12).

Despite restrictive legislation, non-white immigration
to Canada had always been permissible in the event of a Canadian need. In the case of West Indian immigrants, such exemptions from exclusion allowed highly skilled and educated people to emigrate to Canada "even during the most restrictive years" (Walker, 1984:10). The practice of admitting people to Canada based on their ability to fill a Canadian need was also the impetus behind the introduction of the West Indian Domestic Scheme. From its inception in 1955, to its termination in 1973, the domestic scheme permitted single, healthy West Indian women who were between the ages of 18 and 35, and who possessed a minimum grade eight level of education, to emigrate to Canada as domestic workers (Henry, 1968:83; Walker, 1984:10). The government's decision to admit West Indian women to Canada as domestics was largely the result of political pressure 'by influential persons [who at one point included the conservative Minister of Citizenship and Immigration during the early 1960's and Lester Pearson] seeking domestics for their own employ' (Satzewich, 1989:91).

The majority of West Indian women who emigrated to Canada under the domestic scheme had not been domestics previously but, rather, had held professional positions as secretaries, teachers and nurses (Henry, 1968:85; Walker, 1984:10). In fact, the socio-economic status of many of these women assigned them to a middle-class ranking within the West Indian social strata (Henry, 1968:84). As a result of their membership within a social class "not normally associated with
domestic service . . . the majority of [the women] experienced downward social mobility" upon arrival to Canada. Domestic work was, therefore, not the occupation of choice among such women but the only vehicle by which they could gain entrance into Canada (Henry, 1968:88).

The recruitment of West Indian domestic workers was, therefore, in sharp contrast to that of earlier British domestics, for example, whose recruitment in the early 1900's had played a vital role in a developing and incipient Canadian nationalism. Private agencies had actively sought British recruits who were "of the 'right' national and racial stock and character [and who] would, in the long run, constitute the 'pure and virtuous mothers of the ideal Canadian home and the foundation of the moral Canadian nation'" (Arat-Koc, 1989:45). Nationalistic appeals to the cult of true womanhood were not limited to the private sector. Immigration literature which was directed at potential British recruits, and published by the Ontario government, "reinforced the image of Canada as a British country . . . [and] an integral part of the British Empire" (Barber, 1986:57). Ontario, in particular, was described as 'one of the nearest-to-England Provinces of Canada' where 'the same old flag flies' (Barber, 1986:57). The obvious intent of government and private domestic recruitment agencies was to entice the true woman (whether in reality or potentiality) to Canada by way of reassurances that Canada was a home away from home, a place
where she belonged. Such reassurance would be conspicuously absent during the later recruitment of West Indian domestics (Arat-Koc, 1989:45).

Entrance to Canada under the aegis of domestic service had sexist implications for all participating women. State recruitment of women (as opposed to men) for the sole purpose of domestic labour was deemed unproblematic within the context of commonsense notions of gender roles and expectations. Women's emigration was, therefore, contingent upon an ability to function within a specific capacity: one that was perceived to be a natural extension of both female ability and responsibility. For West Indian women, however, the inherent sexism of the domestic scheme was further complicated by its intrinsically racist premise which was itself a reflection of a much more systemic, discriminatory national immigration policy. Unlike British women, for whom domestic service had merely been a means of obtaining assisted passage loans and guaranteed employment (Barber, 1986:57), many West Indian women turned to the scheme as the only means by which they could gain entrance to an otherwise unreceptive country. It was this intricate balance of racism and sexism which allowed the Canadian government to extend conditional acceptance to West Indian women while ensuring that virtually all doors remained closed to their men.

West Indian women who emigrated to Canada under the domestic scheme were granted landed immigrant status on the
condition that they work as domestics for the period of one year. Successful completion of her tenure ensured a woman's right to reside in Canada and sponsor members of her immediate family (Henry, 1968:83). Fear of a potential 'West Indian sponsorship explosion,' arising from the numbers of family members and fiancés being sponsored by domestics, prompted the Canadian government to place additional restrictions on West Indian immigration. For example, a West Indian domestic was required to verify the nature of her relationship to an alleged fiancé by surrendering love letters which were read by immigration officials. Similarly, if a couple did not marry within thirty days of the arrival of the male fiancé, he was deported. While these restrictions were rigidly enforced among West Indian couples, "[n]either of these practices was applied to the white fiancé of white immigrants" (Satzewich, 1989:91).

Immigration restrictions were also applicable to West Indian domestics themselves despite the continual demand for their services. The Canadian government embraced sexual stereotypes depicting black women as libidinous in order to justify a policy which required only West Indian domestics to undergo compulsory 'medical examinations' upon their arrival to Canada. These 'medical examinations' were, in actuality, extensive gynaecological examinations (i.e., tests for venereal disease) which were carried out without the express knowledge (or consent) of their home governments (Satzewich,
The commonsense and sexist ideology which deemed domestic work suitable for females (rather than males) played a significant role in the everyday world of all women regardless of whether or not they were paid domestic workers. The recruitment of West Indian women for domestic service was, however, unique in that it also occurred within the context of a racist immigration policy which restricted their entry to Canada under any other pretense.\(^{13}\) Social class was not to be exempt from this matrix either since racism and discrimination effectively inhibited the ability of West Indian domestics to reverse the downward mobility which they experienced upon arrival to Canada (Silvera, 1986).

The domestic scheme was therefore characteristic of the governmental policy and commonsense ideology within which it was construed. Discriminatory immigration policies, gynaecological examinations and the unproblematic association of women with domestic labour were the products of the interrelationship of the racism and sexism which was central to the scheme's maintenance. It was in this manner that the racist and sexist foundations of the scheme (in addition to its social class implications) had a unique and lasting impression on the everyday world of West Indian domestics; if

\(^{13}\)Unless, of course, they were 'cases of exceptional merit such as graduate nurses and qualified stenographers' (Satzewich, 1989:79).
the domestic scheme was the product of racism and sexism then so was the consciousness and everyday world of the women who worked within it. Immigration to Canada under the domestic scheme—and subjection to the discriminatory practices which this type of immigration entailed—was, for the West Indian domestic, both the consequence of being black and of being female. It is this dualism of subjectivity which feminist women of colour have argued that mainstream feminism is incapable of reflecting due to its prioritization of sexism.

Yet another example of the multivariate construction of the consciousness and everyday world of women of colour is evidenced in the work of Roxana Ng (Ng, 1986; Ng, 1988; Ng and Estable, 1987). Ng's (Ng, 1988) ethnography of a counselling and job placement agency\(^ {14}\) for non-English speaking and immigrant women revealed that not only is the term 'immigrant woman' a social construct but that the agency itself was complicit in this construction.

Ng and Estable (1987:29) note that the term 'immigrant woman' is generally defined in accordance with popular images of women who are non-English speaking, of colour, from Third World countries, or overrepresented in jobs at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy. Through the commonsense usage of this definition "a white, English speaking university professor from the United States" is highly unlikely "to be

\(^ {14}\) The agency was studied during the nine month period from February to November, 1981 (Ng, 1988:18).
perceived as an 'immigrant woman.'" The selective nature of the term's applicability renders 'immigrant woman' a problematic which is mediated by race, ethnicity, class and language. Not only does this give rise to methodological concerns (i.e., data collection and analysis) but also to concerns about the relationship between 'immigrant women' and a social agency which has supposedly been established on the basis of their needs. The nature of this relationship becomes apparent in the interview process which is central to the agency's operation.

During a typical counsellor/client interview in the job placement and counselling agency, the counsellor invariably highlighted those skills which the client possessed that corresponded to those specified by employers as desirable. While this process was beneficial to women with no marketable skills, it also perpetuated the ghettoization of 'immigrant women' within certain labour market sectors (i.e., those characterized by menial, repetitive and low-paying jobs). Furthermore, by placing a client solely on the basis of the skills and characteristics which were requested by employers, rather than those which the client actually possessed, "the counsellor in effect produced a client as a special commodity having these special characteristics" (Ng, 1986:14). Having been 'manufactured' as such was not without consequence for the client: upon joining the labour force, "she in fact became an 'immigrant woman' whom we recognize as such in the everyday
world" (Ng, 1986:14).

Through the act of funding (this and other) counselling agencies, the state in fact becomes an active participant in the construction of 'immigrant women.' While purporting to aid the women, this process actually assigns them to the class position most susceptible to exploitation within the context of a capitalist state. Given this phenomenon, the state can be conceptualized as "the embodiment of struggles between classes" constituted by "social relations . . . of domination and subordination" (Ng, 1988:89). This vision of the state is itself premised upon a particular conception of class as being more than a theoretical concept in need of operationalization through socio-economic indicators. Rather, class is "a relation which is discoverable in the everyday world of experience" (Ng, 1988:88). In the case of the job placement agency, class relations are manifest in the counselling process which reproduces and maintains the occupational segregation of 'immigrant women' (Ng, 1988:88).

It should not be inferred, from this exposition of the role of class in the social construction of 'immigrant women' (and, hence, their everyday world), that all variables are reducible to class. Since gender, race and ethnicity are essential to the definition of the term 'immigrant woman' they are also "essential ingredients in the organization of the working-class [of which 'immigrant women' represent a substantial number] in Canada" (Ng, 1988:88). Ethnicity and
gender are therefore "constitutive features of productive (class) relations" which cannot be understood adequately outside of this context (Ng, 1988:88).

Ng's (Ng, 1988) ethnography thus demonstrates a relationship between race, sex, class and ethnicity which, in its absence, would have severely compromised the operation of the counselling agency. In the process of facilitating the agency's operation this multivariate relationship also produces (i.e., through the interview process) an 'immigrant woman' whose consciousness and everyday world are a consequence of her multivariate and social construction. The complex and intricate determination of the 'immigrant woman's' everyday world is a practical example of the theoretical premise behind the feminist women of colour espousal of a multivariate subjectivity whose components cannot be subsumed. Furthermore, the interdependence of class, gender, race and ethnicity is not solely of importance to 'immigrant women.' Racism and class bias are endemic aspects of the Canadian social structure which are also experienced by Canadian-born women of colour. Although all 'immigrant women' are not necessarily women of colour, and vice versa (Ng and Estable, 1987:29), the multivariate construction of their everyday world is an experience which is shared by both.

The significance of the West Indian domestic scheme and Ng's (Ng, 1988) research, for feminist theory, lies not just within the insight which they provide into the complexity of
women's lives but also in the issues which this complexity brings to light. Mainstream feminism's failure to place immigration and citizenship issues on the feminist agenda reflects an inadequacy in theorizing the role of the state in organizing the political and ideological conditions which are conducive to its own maintenance and reproduction. When 'patriarchal logic' is combined with racially and ethnically discriminatory immigration and citizenship laws, the result is a matrix of sexism, racism and classism that has profound effects on the everyday world of women of colour (Stasiulis, 1990:286). It is in recognition of this that feminist women of colour have problematized "racially specific gender ideologies" that 'naturalize' the suitability of women of colour for low status sex-segregated jobs, domestic service and differential treatment in the administration of social services (Stasiulis, 1990:288).

The illustrative case studies which have been examined herein have each demonstrated the manner in which racism, sexism and classism shape the consciousness and everyday world of black women. What is significant is that although the case studies are historically, culturally and geo-politically specific they each nonetheless construct a social reality which is surprisingly uniform. The implication is not that experience within this social reality was shared equally by black women since oppression had a variety of manifestations which could only add individuality to experience. Racism, for
example, could be in the form of slavery or gynaecological examinations. Similarly, sexism could take the form of rape, the relegation of women to the private sphere or a commonsense ideology which equated domestic work with females. What the case studies do illustrate are unique and different combinations of racism, sexism and classism which were experienced by particular black women at various points in time. The similarity between the case studies is therefore not in the black woman's experience of oppression, per se, (since both her experience and her oppression would have been mediated by any number of variables—perhaps the most predominate of which would be class) but in the multivariate construction of her consciousness and everyday world, or social reality. For feminist women of colour, this reality is one in which race, class, and gender are conceptualized as "interlocking systems of oppression" which are "part of one overarching structure of domination" (Collins, 1990:222). The assumption that this multivariate relationship symbolizes "social relations of domination" within a more generalized "matrix of domination" is a "distinct theoretical stance" (Collins, 1990:222,226) among feminist women of colour which reflects a strong belief in the "interdependence of experience and consciousness" (Collins, 1990:24·25).

If experience and consciousness are indeed interdependent, then it follows that varied experiences among women result in the plurality of subjectivity, and vice versa.
Experience then, can be seen as a "process whereby subjectivity is constructed through continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality" (de Lauretis, 1984:182). The relationship between experience and consciousness dictates that consciousness is itself "never fixed, never attained once and for all" but, rather, is negotiated by "discursive boundaries [that] change with historical conditions" (de Lauretis, 1986:8). It is the experience of black women within the 'discursive boundaries' of slavery, the cult of true womanhood, the West Indian Domestic Scheme and as 'immigrant women' within a job placement and counselling agency which has constructed their subjectivity in a manner unique to them. Since the varied experiences and subjectivity of both women of colour and white women form the basis for much of their theoretical premises it is in this manner that feminist theory becomes a socially constructed discourse.

An emphasis on the malleability and plurality of subjectivity reflects a poststructuralist stance wherein subjectivity is not seen as fixed or characterized by an 'essence.' The rejection of essentialism is often equated with the dismissal of the experience, subjectivity and agency of the individual in favour of her/his 'total construction' by social structures and processes. Feminism's (particularly radical feminism's) criticism of poststructuralism is premised on the belief that the rejection of essentialism concurs with a classical liberal humanist conception of subjectivity which
espouses the irrelevance of individual particularities (i.e., race, gender and class) in deference to a generic human subject (Alcoff, 1988:416-421). The generic human may be equated with the modernist Kantian subject who, unencumbered by ascriptive characteristics and affectivity, is thus free to be concerned solely with the pursuit of truth and reason (Kant [1790], 1973; Young, 1987:57-63).

Radical feminist, assert that poststructuralism's rejection of essentialism is done at the expense of feminist theory: if 'woman' does not exist then it is not possible to make demands in her name (Alcoff, 1988:420). This criticism of poststructuralism is based on the notion that the rejection of essentialism is equal to, or invariably leads to, the rejection of subjectivity. While this is indeed characteristic of non-feminist poststructuralism (Alcoff, 1988; Weedon, 1987:19-20), feminist poststructuralism renders essentialist notions of subjectivity problematic without rejecting the concept of subjectivity itself. This is made possible by creating and maintaining a separation between eschewing subjectivity and eschewing a universalist notion of one subjectivity. The assumption that experience and consciousness are negotiated need not deny their existence. Experience and subjectivity are in fact constitutive elements of the feminist poststructuralism which affirms their centrality in the mediation of the individual social relations and language which construct the everyday world.
The radical feminist assertion that the rejection of the female 'essence' threatens the very foundation of feminism . . . appeal[s] to a unifying substratum of female experience [and thereby] merely reiterate[s] existing ideologies of gender, differing only in a privileging of the feminine pole, and [thus] remain[s] trapped within an inherently limited model of dualistic thought. (Felski, 1989:220)

Moreover, an essentialist feminism employs "dangerously erroneous generalizations about women [and implies] that this identity is innate rather than socially constructed" (Alcoff, 1988:411). The idea of an innate 'womanhood' thus requires a degree of conformity among women, without which, they risk being "deemed either inferior or not 'true' women." Essentialist arguments are therefore premised upon "universalist conceptions of female experiences" which are untenable within the context of the multivariate relationships which construct the everyday world of women of colour (Alcoff, 1988:412-414).

The critique of essentialism is also of methodological significance to women of colour in that it allows for the deconstruction of stereotypical notions of identity while creating the opportunity for self-definition.\(^{15}\) In the case of black women, essentialism signifies commonsense beliefs about their sexuality and 'natural' predisposition to certain

\(^{15}\)In the words of black feminist theorist Audre Lorde "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others - for their use and to our detriment" (Lorde, 1984:45).
types of labour. Through the critique of essentialism, black women can also acknowledge the manner in which their experience of racism has been mediated and differentiated by class. The resulting affirmation of "multiple black identities . . . challenges colonial imperialist paradigms . . . which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy" (hooks, 1990:28).

The rejection of essentialism therefore does not spell the 'death of the subject' but, rather, a new approach to consciousness which emphasizes the historical specificity of a negotiated subjectivity and the role of agency in its formation. A feminism which is inspired by this perspective is found:

not in femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, the body, or the unconscious, an essence which inheres in women . . . but rather in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women. (de Lauretis, 1984:186)

Through this combination of theory and practice, a truly inclusive feminism thus embodies and advocates an emancipatory politic based on the rejection of universalist tendencies in deference to a:

plurality of discourses not founded upon dogmatic postulation of any 'essence of the social' but on the affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every 'essence,' and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:192-193)
A social theory which is grounded in plurality creates an opportunity for the recognition and expression of numerous subject positions whether they be determined by one or any combination of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, culture, religion, etc.

Eschewing universalist tendencies for a 'plurality of discourses' is not tantamount to a defense of relativism but, rather, is an appeal for an epistemology constructed from situated and partial perspectives. Partial perspectives are those associated with particular views of social reality (Haraway, 1988) which, in the case of women of colour, arise from the impact of racism, sexism and classism on their everyday world. Since a perspective which is forged by oppression creates a "knowledge that empowers people to resist domination," it becomes 'subjugated' through the dominant group's attempt to suppress any discourse which exposes the relationship between ideologies and "the vested interests of their creators" (Collins, 1990:234).

Partial perspectives are comparable to subject positions through which actors may engage freely in the production of meaning by posing oppositional readings of a text or discourse. Since social reality and meaning are structured in accordance with the ideology of the dominant group the re-reading and rewriting of texts enable the oppressed to resist the imposition of any meaning or reality which has been defined as such by their oppressors (Hodge and Kress,
1988:3). If, for example, the works of Eisenstein (1981), Barrett (1988) and MacKinnon (1987b) are treated as texts within a larger mainstream feminist discourse then their essentialist interpretation of women's experience, consciousness and everyday world simultaneously "elide[s] opposition and suppress[es] the possibility of counter-readings" (Hodge and Kress, 1988:12). Feminist women of colour have, however, challenged the notion of an essential female subject in deference to a reading of women's experience which is informed by the plurality (rather than the essentialism) of female experience and subjectivity. This oppositional reading constitutes:

a specifically dialogic text, in which one reading of the original text is reclaimed and incorporated into the text itself. However, even after this interaction the flow of discourses will still continue, situating the new text in relation to other agents of discourse and their interests. (Hodge and Kress, 1988:12)

Within a 'dialogic' text or discourse, social reality cannot be defined or imposed by any one dominant group since "[m]eaning is always negotiated" (Hodge and Kress, 1988:12) through the constant re-reading and rewriting of texts from the partial perspectives of varying subject positions.

In advocating a relationship between partial perspectives and the production of meaning the subjugated positionality of women of colour within the context of mainstream feminism would, in principle, suggest that such a perspective should
be preferred as it offers the promise of vision untainted by power. A subjugated perspective is, however, not exempt from criticism because it is a position rather than grounds for an epistemology (Collins, 1990:234; Haraway, 1988:584). Thus the perspectives of women of colour and white women are only partial: knowledges situated within the context of the everyday world in which they were constructed and therefore incapable of making claims to absolute 'truth' and universal experience (Collins, 1990:234-235; Haraway, 1988); if "subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision" (Haraway, 1988:586). A feminism founded on the plurality of experience, subjectivity and discourse is a feminism which has taken the first steps toward the inclusion of women of colour. It is a feminism which represents a politic and epistemology "of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (Haraway, 1988:589).
CONCLUSION

Mainstream contemporary feminist theory has made claims to universalism which are unfounded. Such claims are, in fact, tantamount to a 'hegemonic discourse' in which the experience of all women has been reduced to that of the white middle-class female. The extent of this reductionism is not limited to the realm of obscure and innocuous works but is evident in some of the most influential and popular contributions to contemporary feminist theory. Through their prioritization of sexism, the feminist theories of Zillah Eisenstein (1981), Michèle Barrett (1988) and Catharine MacKinnon (1982; 1987a; 1987b; 1989) are prime examples of how otherwise coruscating feminist analyses can be impoverished by their failure to address racism and, indeed, other variables which constitute women's oppression. Feminist women of colour have contended that prioritizing sexism is an insidious methodology in that it allows for absolution of complicity in the maintenance of an oppressive society and deferral of the acknowledgement that feminist theory is a construct of the same (hooks, 1984).

An emphasis on simultaneous and multiple oppression arises from the need for self-identity and self-definition among women of colour within a feminist discourse which is neither reflective of their everyday world nor of their experience within it. For feminist women of colour, theorizing experience within the everyday world incorporates
a phenomenological approach to feminist theory which takes individual social relations and their role in the construction of social reality as its starting point (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Smart, 1976). In adopting a purely phenomenological orientation however, it becomes apparent that phenomenology cannot address the problematic inherent in the everyday world: the fact that it is constructed not only by internal (i.e., individual) social relations but also by social structures and processes which are apparently external to it (Smith, 1987).

Although the presence of macrostructures and processes, and their impact on the everyday world, infers the suitability of a traditional Marxian analysis of political economy, such an analysis is, in this instance, inadequate. Issues such as race, gender, ethnicity, culture and sexual orientation are difficult to articulate within "traditional Marxist class-based models" (Felski, 1989:228). Since oppression occurs on "a variety of levels" an everyday world which is constructed within the historically specific discursive boundary of late capitalist society is also "characterized by intersecting and often conflicting ideological positions whose significance and effects cannot simply by reduced to an affirmative function in the self-reproduction of capitalism" (Felski, 1989:228).

The need for a postmaterialist framework, wherein gender, race and class can be accommodated, strongly favours that espoused by feminist poststructuralism and its concept of
language. By virtue of being any system by which meaning is constituted, language thus mediates the individual and her everyday world. However, since language itself has no meaning or effect except through the actions of subjects, both language and individual social relations share equally in the construction of the everyday world (Weedon, 1987:34). It is therefore through the incorporation of a phenomenological concern with individual social relations that a feminist poststructuralism emerges which is now capable of addressing the everyday world's problematic. By emphasizing the relationship between experience, subjectivity, political economy and the everyday world feminist poststructuralism provides an innovative and invaluable approach to feminism: one which is essential to feminist women of colour in that it creates a theoretical framework wherein racism, sexism and classism can be conceptualized as symbiotic.

The interdependence of racism, sexism and classism has been an historic and central theme in the everyday world of black women (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981). This phenomenon becomes apparent through the use of two illustrative case studies: slavery—specifically the rape and sexual abuse of female slaves—and the cult of true womanhood within the context of nineteenth-century America and secondly, the West Indian domestic scheme and 'immigrant women' (Ng, 1988) within the context of twentieth-century Canadian immigration. Despite the historical, cultural and geo-political specificity
of the case studies they are nonetheless consistent in their depiction of the multivariate construction of the black woman's consciousness and everyday world. The experience of the black women within this complex social reality was, however, quite varied—a phenomenon which was primarily due to the mediation of class in addition to other variables. It is therefore not essentialist notions of experience, subjectivity and social reality but, rather, their multivariate construction which feminist women of colour have adopted both as a theoretical premise and as the basis for their critique of mainstream feminism. The fact that this multivariate interpretation of social reality conflicts with that inspired solely by patriarchal oppression suggests that the aporias within feminist theory have, in part, arisen from an interdependence between women's experience and consciousness which in turn results in a socially constructed feminist discourse.

If feminist theory is a social construct the problem then becomes one of legitimation and the basis for knowledge claims. Within a feminist poststructuralist framework, a feminist theory which claims validity on the basis of an essential female experience must be suspect. By "ground[ing] itself in an essentialist conception of the female subject" mainstream feminism "ignore[s] the historical and cultural diversity of female subjects as determined by [micro and] macrostructural processes." (Felski, 1989:221, 224). The
antithesis of radical feminism's appeal to an essential female subject—as in the work of Eisenstein (1981) and MacKinnon (1987b)—is often equated with the poststructuralist denial of essentialism. Although both the advocacy and denial of essentialism are perceived as diametrically opposed theoretical premises, deconstruction reveals their similarity and corollary existence within a logical dependency.

If the radical feminist espousal of essentialism elides differences between women by denying the historical and cultural specificity of their subjectivity then the ostensibly contrasting perspective on subjectivity—the 'death of the subject'—also elides differences between women by denying the existence of all subjectivity. By elucidating the manner in which both approaches result in the denial of difference it becomes apparent that the choice is not between two purportedly binary and mutually exclusive opposites but, rather, between either side of the same coin. When theorizing experience, subjectivity and consciousness, a tangible alternative is therefore found neither in the universal subject, nor its death, but in diversity. By distinguishing between subjectivity and one subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism creates an arena wherein difference, diversity and plurality among subjects may be accommodated rather than subsumed.

Furthermore, the recognition of an experiential diversity which is attributable to racism, sexism and classism is not
solely of relevance to women of colour. Racism, sexism and 
also affect the lives of many others just as they, 
as systems of oppression, do not in themselves constitute the 
totality of human subordination (Collins, 1990:225). As 
representative of just a few of the other variables which also 
determine the actor's experience, lesbianism, homosexuality, 
culture, religion and poverty broaden the discursive 
boundaries of subjectivity by placing it within the context 
of social theory predicated upon an emancipatory politic.

Ironically, then, a truly universal and all-inclusive 
feminism involves the rejection of universality as it is 
commonly perceived—a teleological, ahistorical meta-narrative 
(Nicholson, 1990) imbued with the propensity for unity known, 
in Derridean terms, as 'the metaphysics of presence' (Young, 
1990)—in deference to a universality based on a plurality 
which is not characteristic of relativism but of situated and 
partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988). The future and 
progression of theorizing in this sense is not contingent upon 
teleology but, rather, on the criticism (by self and others), 
appropriation and re-evaluation of knowledge claims.

The recognition of difference and plurality among women 
is essential to acknowledging the work of feminist women of 
colour as being an integral and vital component of 
contemporary feminist theory. Such recognition effectively 
erases the boundary between mainstream and marginalized 
discourse and represents a significant contribution toward the
active construction of an all-inclusive feminism. It is only when such boundaries have been effaced through persistent yet constructive criticism that the feminist theory of women of colour will cease to be relegated to footnote status or to be confined solely to 'special issues' on racism in mainstream feminist journals. For only with the effacement of the divide, and the recognition that racism, sexism and classism are interdependent, does it become apparent that a 'special issue' on racism is as redundant as a 'special issue' on sexism.
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