

# Not MY Intersectionality

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## Examining Epistemic Violence for Black Women in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Although Black women's college participation rates have increased, it has not led to corresponding increases in graduation rates. Through the evolution of intersectionality as a methodology, theory, and framework, this paper examines the epistemological socialization of Black women in historically white institutions (HWIs), examining what this can tell us about Black women's higher education experiences. Additionally, analyzing how Black women's intersections affect the legitimacy and illegitimacy of knowledge production in an evolving system of neoliberal globalization. Its objective is to go beyond superficial understandings of the systemic oppression of Black women to uncover the epistemological implications of intersectionality, which renders some invisible intellectually and socially while cultivating others. Thus, this paper builds on current scholarship on how Black women have contextualized their unique higher education experiences through an analysis of Afro-Pessimism, sociology of absences and emergences, and critiques of intersectionality to locate Black women's experiences with epistemic violence and imagine beyond. In the end, seeking to explore how Black women can embrace a new epistemic resistance by rejecting intersectionality.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Afro-Pessimism, Black Feminist Thought, Black women, Higher Education

### Introduction

On 20 January 2021, Kamala Harris became the first Black woman to become Vice President of the United States of America. Amid a global pandemic that disproportionately impacted the Black community and the turning over

from one fascist leader to another, many found a glimmer of optimism in her symbolic representation, epitomizing hope or promise in the supposed undoing of whiteness (Ahmed, 2009). To be Black and a woman and reach the heights of the White House was seen as the fundamental gesture of intersectionality and, ultimately, equity. Black women continued to show up in the political terrain in remarkable ways, with political leaders like Stacey Abrams making headlines in the fight to protect voting rights in Georgia and Black women distinguishably showing up to the polls (Fair Fight, 2022). While Black women made political history, they also became posited as the key to saving America, a sentiment that resounded loud as exemplified through Mexican American politician Jorge Guajardo's highly contested August 2020 tweet, "Black women will save the United States" (Nikki, 2020). However, Nikki (2020) asserts that despite society's desire that Black women turn states blue, Black women are expected to serve as America's foot soldiers and stand up for a country that has not stood up for them and wouldn't even call the same Black women for a job interview (Nikki, 2020).

While Kamala Harris was transitioning into becoming the first Black woman Vice President of the United States, Black women in higher education became their own symbolic representatives of intersectionality. Since the official coining of the term intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and the mainstream academic and societal interest in intersectionality, Black women have been at war. On the surface, the war boils down to who created intersectionality, whom it belongs to, who should be using it, and if intersectionality is only for Black women (Nash, 2019). Even with such inquiries, these questions do not capture the severity of epistemic violence surrounding intersectionality and what that means for the vitality of Black women intellectuals in the academy. This paper aims to understand the question: what does it mean for Black women to reject intersectionality and seek a theory that cannot be stolen? The question is of utmost importance as higher education post Covid-19 is witnessing a mass exodus of scholars of color, specifically Black women, leaving the academy (Gayles, 2022). The sustenance of Black women academics relies heavily on moving away from the conventional defense status and locating a space that allows free movement from merely surviving to thriving. To do so, there is a need to critically and intentionally interrogate the epistemologies and pedagogies that may be causing more harm than repair.

According to Marshall et al. (2021), Black women and Black men are overrepresented among those with some college and no degree. Just over 26 percent of Black women have some college and no degree compared to 21% of white women. This disparity persists when taking a close look at educational attainment by gender. Slightly more than half of white women (51.4%) have a college degree, compared to 36.1% of Black women (Marshall et al., 2021). The aforementioned statistics magnify clear barriers to degree completion among Black women and pose a call for a more targeted inquiry into what is going on inside and outside the classroom.

For centuries, Black women have relied on the ancestral pathways of freedom activists like Harriet Tubman to enact an emancipatory imagination. To some, there has been a spiritual-like, instinctual call to transgress on behalf of other Black women and ultimately toward the liberation of Black folks. Even in the fight for liberation, there is an ongoing battle to be seen, heard, and, ultimately, acknowledged for their contributions (Khabir, 2017). Often, this fight can be amplified through their educational journey at historically white institutions (HWIs), which are characterized as modern-day plantations, serving as a site of labor and knowledge extraction for Black students (Squire et al., 2018). Upon arrival to higher education institutions, many Black students face institutional barriers, social isolation/hyper-visibility, lack of representation, tokenization, microaggressions, and so forth (Patton, 2016). It is evident that Black existence, thoughts, and voices are not wanted or welcomed inside or outside the classroom. Institutions have tried to combat the lack of inclusion with outward commitments to diversity, implementations of inclusive frameworks, and the promise to strive toward “equality” (Ahmed, 2012). Most of which has shown to be hollow words and empty guarantees, with campus climates proving to still be violent for Black students (Ahmed, 2012).

Although there has been an increase in Black students’ access to education through *Brown v. Board of Education* and affirmative action, Black students have continuously reported HWI campuses as unwelcoming (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Black women, in particular, carry the double burden of being Black and women, navigating HWIs campus environments with hyper-visibility/invisibility, isolation, and marginalization (King, 1988). This mistreatment is transferable both inside and outside the classroom, as some women report having inadequate social lives (Harper & Hurtado, 2007); having less than satisfactory relationships with faculty members (Allen et al., 1991); feeling left

out of the curriculum (Rovai et al., 2005); and dealing with racial issues that permeate the campus climate (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014).

Even with these crippling environments, Black women continue to increase their yearly enrollment at HWIs. According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Black women's enrollment in post-secondary institutions increased from 35% in 2000 to 41% in 2018, with only roughly 9% of Black women students attending historically Black colleges or Universities (NCES, 2020). Although Black women's college participation rates have increased (Bennett & Lutz, 2009), corresponding increases in graduation rates have yet to materialize. According to Marshall Anthony Jr et al, Black women and Black men are overrepresented among those with some college and no degree. Just over 26% of Black women have some college and no degree compared to 21% of White women (Marshall Anthony Jr et al., 2021). This disparity persists when taking a close look at educational attainment by gender. Slightly more than half of White women (51.4%) have a college degree, compared to 36.1% of Black women ((Marshall Anthony Jr et al., 2021). The aforementioned statistics magnify clear barriers to degree completion among Black women and pose a call for more targeted support inside and outside of the classroom.

Black women are socialized in higher education at both the undergraduate and graduate student levels, which has shown to be detrimental to their mental, physical, and spiritual well-being (Walkington, 2017). Findings of a scan of sociological studies of Black women's college success asserts that Black students experience significant negotiations related to their identity, specifically at PWIs, sometimes resulting in the sense of loss of self or taking an emotional toll on students (L. R. Jackson, 1998; Settles, 2006; Stewart, 2008; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b, Walkington, 2017) Further, very little literature details specific socialization and identity development models for Black women in higher education to explain this phenomenon. The evident gap between participation and completion signifies a need to examine the unique experiences Black women have in higher education to create innovative strategies to promote holistic college success (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

This paper is interested in the epistemological socialization of Black women at HWIs through the evolution of intersectionality as a theory, framework, and methodology and what this can tell us about Black women's experiences in higher education. Epistemological socialization finds its roots in social

epistemology, which according to Goldman (2010), is a branch of traditional epistemology that studies the epistemic properties of individuals that arise from their relations to others, as well as epistemic properties of groups or social systems (Goldman, 2010). To that point, I seek to understand how under a system of evolving neoliberal globalization, the intersections of Black and woman impact the legitimacy and illegitimacy of knowledge production, relegating Black women to the peripheries where they are not seen or heard unless it benefits the institution. This exploration intends to go beyond the surface understanding of systemic oppression for Black women to uncover the epistemological implications of intersectionality that deem some invisible intellectually and socially while cultivating others—ultimately seeking to explore how rejecting intersectionality can move Black women to a new form of epistemic resistance. Through an analysis of Afro-Pessimism, the sociology of absences and emergences, and critiques of intersectionality, I hope to build upon my work on how Black women have historically contextualized their distinct higher education experiences. Ultimately, to locate Black women's experience with epistemic violence into the discourse and ultimately imagine beyond. Further, this paper will locate Black women in the theory of social death to further understand epistemic erasure. I will then analyze the contemporary conversations around the evolution of intersectionality and the ways it exemplifies epistemic violence in action for Black women in the academy. Next, there will be an introduction to the sociology of absences and its ties to epistemic oppression to provide a framework to better understand epistemological socialization. Further, I analyze the potential implications of rejecting intersectionality and what this means for Black women. Lastly, the paper introduces the sociology of emergences as a framework to actualize an emancipatory imagination for Black women in higher education.

## The Slave and its Plantation

Traditional explorations of Black women's experiences in higher education often begin with an exploration of intersectionality and, thus, Black feminist thought. Collins (1990) defines Black feminist thought as a specialized knowledge created by Black women that clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women (Collins, 1990). Collins continues, stating that Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it. She argues that Black women occupy a unique standpoint of

oppression composed of two interlocking components. First, Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups (Collins, 1990). Second, these experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality (Collins, 1990). For this analysis and to exemplify the iterative process of reframing; it is imperative to lay the foundation through an Afro-Pessimist theoretical framework to challenge the current understanding of Blackness in higher education being that Afro-Pessimism fundamentally engages with anti-Blackness at its roots and current higher education diversity, equity, and inclusion performances have made a spectacle of the reality of anti-Blackness. This will be done by examining *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* by Frank B. Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, Steve Martinot, Jared Sexton, and Hortense J. Spillers. At its core, Afro-Pessimism analyzes the totality of anti-Blackness through an analysis of slavery and race, with concerns of power at the political and libidinal levels (Wilderson III et al., 2017). The libidinal economy is an organization of signs and symbols at the level of the metaphysical that originate from a sexualized need for control. Further, the libidinal economy should be understood as an intersection between sexual desire and domination (Barlow, 2016). Moreover, Afro-Pessimism offers the tenant of social death to understand the positionality of Black people in the United States, which will foreground the epistemic violence illustrated through intersectionality and the possibilities of epistemic resistance in the academy.

Historical performances of slavery have created vivid imagery of enslaved Africans being forced into labor through whips and chains, recounting the Atlantic slave trade as a horrible moment in time that has left behind systemic oppression. In his work *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson further details the composition of slavery from a relationship of forced labor to a relationship of forced property (Wilderson III et al., 2017). This shift requires an analysis that moves the enslaved person from a human being to an object that can be used and exchanged without regard (Wilderson III et al., 2017). To that point, Patterson (2018) explains that the commodification of Black people was not just about labor but a commodification of the being, the whole existence of personhood. He details that slaves were

“not recognized as social subjects and are thus precluded from the category of human- inclusion in humanity being predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood and the valuation of life” (Wilderson III et al., 2017, 8).

Patterson underscores that the event of slavery excluded slaves and thus Blackness from social subjectivity because being human requires social recognition, and the slave, as an object, is socially dead. The legacy of this exclusion from personal, social, and spiritual recognition implies that not only the physical work but the intellectual and social contributions of Black people belong to the system of white supremacy. The point of ownership of the Black physical and intellectual is also highlighted by Douglass’ (2018) who states that “Black visibility is not without its violent anchors” (Douglass, 2018, p.108).

Confronted with the reality of slaves’ nonexistence, Afro-Pessimism offers three components of social death; 1) Slaves are subjected to gratuitous violence, devoid of actual or perceived transgression; 2) slaves are natally alienated, ties of birth are not recognized, and familial structures are intentionally broken apart; 3) slaves are generally dishonored or disgraced before any thought or action is considered (Wilderson III et al., 2017). As explained earlier, the social death of the slave goes beyond the means of production and into the mere essence and being of the slave. Defining the slave’s ontology through social death means that the slave is not just an oppressed subject but a being for the captor (Wilderson III et al., 2017). This being does experience exploitation and alienation but is an object of accumulation and exchange. This objectification positions the slave as a morphing object that shapeshifts to the captor’s ultimate desires. The stealthy nature of this shifting is the belief that it stopped when physical exploitation ended when in reality, the physicality was only the beginning.

A defining characteristic in Afro-Pessimist thought construction is moving away from the Black/ white binary and reframing it as Black/non-Black to decenter whiteness and hone in on anti-Black foundations of race and society (Wilderson III et al., 2017). By doing so, we more accurately uncover the systemic and social implications of Black existence in the United States and thus can truthfully challenge the system as it currently stands. According to Wilderson, alternative discourses fail to understand the fundamental relationship between Black suffering and the social order (Wilderson III, 2020). He notes that in the condition of social death, Blackness is rooted in “a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress-

no narrative of social, political, or national redemption” (Wilderson III, 2020, p.15). This ongoing social death means Blackness necessitates enslavement rather than whiteness granting freedom (Wilderson III, 2020). Further, Black people exist as the without that holds non-Blackness together; anti-blackness gives meaning to categories of non-Blackness such as white, worker, gay, i.e., “human” (Wilderson III et al., 2017). In these categories, non-Black establish their boundaries for inclusion in the human social fabric by having a recognizable self that is established by the Blackness they are not (Wilderson III, 2020). In contrast, the role of Black people is to serve as structurally docile props for the execution of white and non-Black fantasies and pleasures (Wilderson III et al., 2017). In summation, Black suffering is the lifeline of the social order, and using an anti-Black framework is vital to studying Black women’s experiences in higher education as current analyses have not grappled deeply with social death, which is the condition by which Black women are suffering from. For higher education institutions, specifically classrooms at HWI’s, to function, there must be a Black other to exploit. The next section will explore how this can be seen through intersectionality and what this means for Black women moving forward.

## Complicating Intersectionality

For many, intersectionality’s genealogy begins with Crenshaw’s (1991) *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color* and serves as a valuable exploration site for analyzing Black women’s intellectual contributions to the academy. Crenshaw (1991) coined intersectionality as “the study of intersections between different groups of minorities; specifically, the study of the interactions of multiple systems of oppression or discrimination” (p. 1244). *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color* took on the feat of critically and intentionally centering Black women’s positionality through an analysis of law, society, and culture. Expanding upon this, Crenshaw divided the concept into structural, political, and representational intersectionality to emphasize not overlooking how systems interact with certain groups versus others. For this section, I will focus on political and structural intersectional. According to Crenshaw (1991), “Political intersectionality highlights that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups, while structural intersectionality highlights the state in which institutional structures



make one visible or invisible based on structural concepts” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1250). Within political and structural intersectionality, being Black and woman often situates Black women as invisible under the formalized systems, yet politically they may be in a double disposition.

When discussing intersectionality, King’s (1988) work on multiple jeopardy is often missing from the framework, when in all actuality, her multiple jeopardy theory keeps one away from the inclusionary politics that form when trying to understand intersectionality. King (1998) explains, “Multiple refers not only to several simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism” (p. 297). To understand the unique positionality of Black women, the notion of additive intersectionality must be rejected. Instead, there must be a thorough examination of these identities and how they interact with systems. When the politics of inclusion come into play, which is often seen through the rhetoric of “everyone is diverse in their own way” and other colorblind rhetoric, society negates how to serve those who are being subordinated solely due to their identities. King’s work is foundational in getting moving from the individual to the systemic implications of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. When coupling multiple jeopardy theory with intersectionality, it is clear that the systems are always in play; predicting who can live free or not.

In the early conceptions, applications, and reinterpretations of intersectionality, Black women were at the center of the theory and the intended users, as the term “Black women” shows up 156 times in the article *Margins: Intersectionality Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color* (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality served as a vehicle to move Black women who had been deemed systemically hyper-visible or invisible, as both women and people of color situated within both groups, each of which has benefitted from challenges to sexism and racism (Crenshaw, 1991). This mobilization was done by providing an explicit term for the treatment Black women had been articulating for centuries, yet these articulations did not necessarily transfer into mainstream academic and social dialogues. Intersectionality extends a long line of Black feminist thought traditions and theories. It is of great importance to paint these Black feminists back into the discourse by exploring a few noteworthy Black feminist theorists that laid the foundation for intersectionality:

*A Voice from the South* (1892) by Anna Julia Cooper makes a point to locate colored women “in a unique position in this country” (Guy-Sheftall & Cooper, 1996, p. 45). Cooper states this position is “transitional and unsettled—ultimately being confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both” (Guy-Sheftall & Cooper, 1996, p. 45). This is followed by a call to action for colored women to take advantage of the shifting times, to build economic and political power via education to escape the confines of traditional gender roles and gain agency.

*Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* (1969) by Frances Beal served as a tool to examine the ways being Black and a woman carried a double burden with an emphasis on understanding how race and gender play out in a system of capitalism. Her work uses the gendered dynamics of slavery to suggest that Black Women in America can be considered the slaves slave (Beale, 1969). Due to the complete emasculation and destruction of the Black man she notes that Black women became sexually exploited and then economically exploited by the white colonizers. She points out the social and psychological degradation that went on from Black women being raped by white men while serving as maids and wet nurses for white women, all while watching their own offspring become enslaved. She then calls for reevaluating the white nuclear family roles enforced on Black women and men to perform “femininity” and “masculinity” in particular ways.

*A Black Feminist Statement* (1977) by Combahee River Collective emphasized “there can’t be liberation for half the race (CRC, 1977). In 1977 The Combahee River Collective created one of the first Black Feminist manifestos, which expressed the simultaneous forms of oppression Black women experienced while calling for the need to examine homophobia and realizing how central queer Black women were to the black feminist movement. What is important to tease out in this Black Feminist manifesto is the call for Black Feminists to define and clarify their politics and use Black Feminism as a movement that is actively committed to the struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression. This was done by realizing the ways all major systems are interlocking and due to this matrix, Black women were suffering, and only Black women would be dedicated to combating this type of oppression. This collective made a call to center this work as anti-racist and anti-sexist that was fundamentally socialist keeping in mind that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the

political- economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy (CRC, 1977)

Even with the hope of intersectionality's popularization making way for Black women in mainstream academia, Black women still face substantial erasure. Intersectionality has been appropriated as a metaphor that explains the many intersections of human existence, everyone is intersectional, and intersectionality is for everyone. More specifically, the theft and misuse of Black Feminist terminology is evidence of Black women's exclusion from academic and political spaces; the next example will explore the connotation of the ways that Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality has been appropriated by white feminists and across disciplines. Towards a Black Feminist Manifesto for Colorado State University (2017) states that many Black women have had classroom experiences that question our Black feminist epistemologies and minimize us as sources of knowledge about our lives and the world in which we live (Holt et al., 2017). Whenever Black women provide our perspective drawing on scholarly literature in classes, we are met with hostility and ridicule and have been called racist, emotional, angry, separatist, and misguided. Black women are met with reactions that leave us in silenced isolation and relentless rage. At the same time, people who are not Black women feel authorized to discuss and explain the lives of Black women through a lens that does not include the perspectives of Black women (Holt et al., 2017). As much as Black women would like our academic training to prepare us to work in complex, diverse, and dynamic settings and environments, its current state is useless until our lives in all their complexity are purposefully acknowledged. Black women remain unseen and unwelcomed in institutional spaces (Holt et al., 2017). The new life and reiteration of intersectionality pose the question, is intersectionality for Black women?

Contemporary Black feminist scholars such as Collins and Nash have taken on the task of contextualizing, challenging, and expanding beyond the current evolution of intersectionality. Collins (2019) frames the origin story of intersectionality as a familiar colonial narrative that positions Crenshaw as an explorer who discovered virgin territory and thus got the naming rights (Collins, 2019). This is reflected through the fact that although Crenshaw (1991) explicitly states that the use of the term intersectionality was birthed through a Black Feminist tradition, the aforementioned Black Feminist work is seldomly cited and thus leaving Crenshaw as the founding mother (Collins, 2019). When Crenshaw (1991) coined intersectionality, she underscored

the tensions between activism and academia, as she became the trusted translator between them. Yet, Collins (2019) exemplifies how this discovery narrative signals power relations of domination that start with discovery and end with ongoing pacification (Collins, 2019). To that end, Collins highlights intersectionality's specific moment of academic discovery, reflects an explorer bringing home something of interest to a colonist. Since 1991 and especially in the early 2020's we have seen intersectionality move from a tool to narrate Black women's lived experiences systemically to a profitable academic commodity in which Black women are relegated to the peripheries. It is noteworthy to mention that even Crenshaw's view of intersectionality has evolved beyond Black women. The subtle erasure can be seen in the contrast between her 2016 Ted Talk, *The Urgency of Intersectionality*, where she unambiguously states that intersectionality was Black women (Ted, 2016). Yet, in a more recent conference talk in 2020 at *The Makers Conference*, intersectionality is reduced to something everyone has that we should all respect, with no mention of Black women (Markers, 2020). Intersectionality's story has reinforced a long-standing shifting relationship between activists and academic communities, with the pressures of neoliberalism at the center (Collins, 2019).

While Crenshaw could not have been aware of the ways intersectionality would take off in the academy, it is crucial to engage the implications of said evolution. As iterated by Collins (2019), the coining story fits into capitalist narratives of expansion toward new markets and the extraction of natural resources and viability. Intersectionality as a tool that existed for and by Black women in Black feminist realms was not seen as valuable until it was removed from its natural marketplace, which was in Black political spaces, and incorporated into the capitalist academic canon, thus altering the boundaries of epistemic power and resistance (Collins, 2019). This insidious shift was the birthing ground for what would later be known as the "intersectionality wars" as Black women began to fight for what had always been theirs, as the academy touted intersectionality as their next best performative gesture of diversity and inclusion. Consequently, Crenshaw, through the naming of intersectionality, brought something valuable to the academy that could be used as a commodity and ultimately for capital inside and outside higher education. The utterance of intersectionality no longer signals the centering of Black women but instead a metaphor devoid of true meaning.

Intersectionality wars, as defined by Jennifer Nash (2019), describe the “discursive, political and theoretical battles staged around whether scholars are for or against intersectionality” (Nash, 2019, p.36). Nash distinguishes that these slippages between intersectionality, Black feminism, and Black women narrate the intersectionality wars, directly reflecting that discussing intersectionality’s critical limits is intrinsically linked to debates over racial politics and allegiances (Nash, 2019). She notes that these limited discourses around intersectionality fail to grapple with its nuances, complexities, and possibilities and challenge its migration. Instead, the intersectionality wars boil down to who is for or against intersectionality, which has become coupled with who is for or against Black feminism and, ultimately, who is for and against Black women (Nash,2019). In the wake of intersectionality finding its way into mainstream reinterpretations in the academy, the stakes of the intersectionality wars have risen as Black feminists have stepped into the fire to defend, amend misuse, and guard against inappropriate articulations, which have disproportionately impacted Black women. (Nash, 2019).

## The Sociology of Absences & Epistemic Oppression

As neoliberal globalization and its ties to knowledge production, legitimacy, and illegitimacy evolve, intersectionality has alongside it, which must be explored. As a tool for understanding epistemic resistance, Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ sociology of absences offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding intersectionality today. The work of Collins on epistemic power and oppression (2019) will be instrumental in bringing Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ work to life. This exploration intends to go beyond the surface understanding of systemic oppression for Black women to uncover the epistemological implications that deem some invisible intellectually and socially while cultivating and elevating others. Specifically, this section seeks to grapple with the epistemic violence involved with holding on to intersectionality for Black women.

Neoliberal globalization has forged hegemonic forms of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption of western-based modern science (Santos, 2006). At the center of this hegemony is the power to determine what constitutes credible knowledge and discredit rival knowledge by discounting its efficiency and truth (Santos, 2006). This form of hegemony necessitates policing and repression of counter-hegemonic processes and agents. This

repression is carried out by discrediting, concealing, and trivializing counter-hegemonic practices and stakeholders, with the intent of silencing that in which does not fit into the hegemony to maintain order (Santos, 2006). Upon confrontation with rival knowledge, hegemonic science either turns it into raw material for repurposing or rejects it based on falsity or inefficiency, all contingent upon modern science criteria (Santos, 2006). It is essential to note that a magnitude of non-western and non-scientific knowledge was destroyed, suppressed, or marginalized. With that, the lives of those carrying out this knowledge are in a compromising situation. Santos coined the term epistemicide to detail the destruction of knowledge production, citing that it often happens simultaneously with genocide (Santos, 2014).

The sociology of absences is the process in which what does not exist, or whose existence has been marked socially irredeemable, is conceived as an active result of a social process (Santos, 2001). The sociology of absences exposes social and political conditions, experiments, and initiatives that hegemonic forms of globalization suppressed or have prevented from existing (Santos, 2001). Ultimately, showcasing that what does not exist is produced as nonexistent, acting as a noncredible alternative to what does exist (Santos, 2001). It necessitates a confrontation of what is marginalized, suppressed, and what has not been allowed to exist in the first place (Santos, 2006). The sociology of absences aims to transform the impossible into possible objects and the absent into present objects. According to Santos (2006), nonexistence is produced whenever a particular entity is disqualified and rendered invisible, unintelligible, or irreversibly discardable (Santos, 2006). What solidifies the logic behind the production of nonexistence is that they are all manifestations of the same rationale of monoculture (Santos, 2006).

The sociology of absences, paired with the aforementioned theory of social death, narrates a reality of Black people in general and Black women specifically, by mere existence being deemed as the nonexistent other in the academy. But taking this notion a step further, one can see that being subversive in thought and pushing back on the system of neoliberal globalization will lead to an ongoing process of social death which requires a better understanding of the implications of epistemic oppression. Building upon the sociology of absences, Collins' (2019) defines epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice as terms that provide a "nuanced understanding of how epistemology constitutes a structuring dimension of social justice beyond the actual ideas of racism, heteropatriarchy and colonialism as ideological

systems” (Collins, 2019, p.129). With that, epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice name the structural contours of epistemic power in organisations that are imperative to the knowledge production process. Although there is a sentiment of epistemic equality in higher education institutions, in reality, the structures rely on epistemic oppression that grants certain groups epistemic agency while actively oppressing others (Collins, 2019). Without an intentional examination of epistemic power with the uses of intersectionality, it falls victim to recreating the hierarchies it sought to mitigate and becomes a tool to harm Black women analytically and socially.

## The Implications of Rejecting Intersectionality

To understand intersectionality as a theoretical framework and a methodology, Haynes et al., 2020, offer a synthesis of the literature on Black women’s experiences in higher education over the last 30 years. Using Crenshaw’s aforementioned work on intersectionality, they analyzed her three dimensions of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. So far, I have examined structural and political intersectionality, but it is necessary to add representational intersectionality to further elaborate on the uses of an intersectional methodology. Representational intersectionality refers to how Black women’s lives occupy public discourses, often in detrimental and stereotypical ways (Crenshaw, 1991). Representational intersectionality highlights how controlling images like Sapphire, Mammy, Jezebel, and Superwoman perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women as loud, angry, violent, hypersexual, and superhuman (Haynes et al., 2020). These images rooted in false historical narratives of Black women have real-life implications that often materialize in inferior treatment (Haynes et al., 2020).

Haynes et al., (2020)’s literature analysis was guided by the research question: how has Crenshaw’s intersectionality been applied across its three dimensions (i.e., structural, political, and representational) by scholars who published empirical studies about Black women in higher education in the past 30 years? (Haynes et al., 2020). According to Haynes et al., intersectional methodology “provides scholars with a nuanced methodological approach for taking up intersectionality in their study of Black women in education research and social science research broadly” (Haynes et al., 2020, p.752). An intersectional methodology should implore these four strategies (1) Centralize Black Women as the Subject; (2) Use of a Critical Lens to Uncover

the Micro-/Macro-Level Power Relations; (3) Address How Power Shapes the Research Process Feature; (4) Bring the Complex Identity Markers of Black Women to the Fore (Haynes et al., 2020). Their findings provide an essential window to the divergence of intersectionality in centering Black women's lived experiences. Of the 680 studies published about Black women in higher education, only 23 were published by researchers who engaged an intersectionality methodology. Furthermore, the limited research published about Black women in higher education recentered whiteness and ultimately maintains the neglect of Black women's experience in literature and the epistemic oppression of Black women in higher education and society at large (Haynes et al., 2020). This intensive study of intersectional methodology meticulously illustrates the nonexistence of Black women in the current life of intersectionality.

The troubling nature of the complex evolution of intersectionality is the inability to pinpoint its divergence. In intersectionality's early articulation, it was clear that it suffered from intellectual obscurity as it was not taken seriously as a legitimate pedagogical tool and made to be devoid of true merit. Anna Julia Cooper defined intellectual obscurity as "the deliberate restriction of knowledge—opposition to disseminating knowledge, which translates into a lack of critical care in handling Black women's intellectual contributions" (Cooper, 2017, p.2). As intersectionality currently stands, there is value in its intellectual contribution to the academy if it is separated from Black women. Although it was birthed in the Black feminist thought tradition, and it can be debated that there is no way to separate Black feminism from intersectionality, it has already been done.

Through theories such as intersectionality, Black women have achieved academic "success" and continue to do so. However, they are still noncredible alternatives to what exists and are perpetually subject to epistemic violence. Afro-Pessimism would reason that even if intersectionality was created for and by Black women, in the current system where Blackness is the equivalent to slaveness, Black women do not own intersectionality. In all actuality, the theory was meant for whiteness's utility, which is why Blackness has been obliterated. This unfortunate truth should serve as a catalyst for Black women to move from defending intersectionality to an offensive mode of finding that which cannot be stolen, imagining a system that transcends the current paradigm of white supremacist capitalist oppression.



## The Sociology of Emergences & Black Liberation

Moving beyond the realities of the sociology of absences and epistemic violence, Santos (2006) offers the sociology of emergences as a site for critical hope and emancipatory imagination. Cognitive justice does not call for new tools and resources to understand and advance global justice. Instead, it compels us to interrogate what is already there; it urges us to utilize the untapped potential of the existing way of knowing and seeing that has been discarded by the powers that be (Dawson, 2017). Further, cognitive justice calls for the recognition that western thought on its own is inadequate to create a more just world and often has impeded such progress (Dawson, 2017). Santos (2017) supports the quest for cognitive justice through the epistemologies of the south based on the following four assumptions:

1. The understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world.
2. Alternatives are not lacking in the world. What is indeed missing is an alternative thinking of alternatives.
3. The epistemic diversity of the world is infinite, and no general theory can hope to understand it.
4. The alternative to a general theory is the promotion of an ecology of knowledges combined with intercultural translation.

It is critical to draw attention to the ecology of knowledge which aims to generate a new relationship between scientific knowledge and other kinds of knowledge (Santo, 2001). He suggests that “different types of knowledge are incomplete in different ways and that raising the consciousness of such reciprocal incompleteness (rather than looking for completeness) is a precondition for achieving cognitive justice” (Santos, 2014, p212). The goal is to provide “equality of opportunities” to varying types of knowledge engaged in broader epistemological discourse in hopes of enhancing their respective contributions to build “another possible world” (Santos, 2014, 212).

The sociology of emergences functions as a space for actualizing emancipatory imagination. This sociological tool of imagination has two fundamental aims: to understand better the conditions that allow for hope as a possibility. Second, identify and define practices that promote said conditions (Santos, 2006). This imagination is stratified by what Santos (2006) introduces the Not Yet as proposed by Ernst Bloch (1997), which is how the

future is inscribed in the present, understanding that capacity and possibility have no direction, as it can end in hope or disaster.

While the sociology of emergences provides an entryway to imagining beyond, it does not necessarily give specifics for the Black community or Black women. Dumas' (2018) *Beginning and Ending with Black Suffering: A Meditation on and against Racial Justice in Education* will be used to specify the type of imagination for the Black community. Dumas contends with using the condition of Black suffering as an entry point to a more inclusive and accurate critique of race and racism in the United States, emphasizing the troubling ways "racial justice" is engaged (Dumas, 2018).

If intersectionality were meant to function toward a more socially just reality, Dumas would say that in its current iteration, intersectionality is insufficient, as it no longer centers anti-Blackness or the lived experiences of Black women.. He believes that what is required for Black people to be free is not racial justice projects that do not center anti-Blackness and thus Black suffering. Instead, what is required to actualize a Black emancipatory imagination is switching from racial justice to Black emancipation. Any other racial justice attempts will only impede the freedom of Black people and exacerbate Black suffering. While the true essence of Black emancipation is the abolition of systems like higher education, the interim space provides an opportunity to trouble the waters of what is impacting the lived experiences of Black people in higher education and society at large, be it negative or positive. Working toward an actualized space of Black emancipation is the space of opportunity that Black people, Black women specifically, can hold on to.

Considering the reality of Black women's relationship to intersectionality in the academy, it is evident that defending intersectionality to no end does not serve Black women's interests. From an intracommunity perspective, it has become exhaustive to exist as the ultimate symbol of diversity and inclusion and combat the type of epistemic oppression that intersectionality exacerbates. Nash offers her perspective on the importance of Black women, specifically Black feminists letting go of the cyclical intersectionality wars, stating:

"letting go untethers Black feminism from the endless fighting over intersectionality, the elaborate choreography of rescuing the analytic from misuses, the endless corrections of the analytic's usage. Letting go allows us to put the visionary genius

of Black feminism to work otherwise. It is, thus a practice of freedom” (Nash., 2019, 138).

Taking the reins away from intersectionality is where Black women must move forward to protect themselves and their intellectual property from the current performance of social death. By doing so, Black women can make space to confront anti-Black epistemic violence and imagine an existence beyond the current state of the academy.

## Conclusion

The sociology of absences serves as a framework to contextualize the intellectual restrictions of Black feminist thought construction in mainstream academic culture. With that, the sociology of emergences sets the stage for Black feminist thought to serve as a site for imagining beyond what the neoliberal hegemonic provides. Furthermore, Afro-Pessimism forces Black people to grapple with the daunting realities of anti-Blackness and Black suffering in a way that cannot be negated. Using intersectionality as a backdrop was imperative to uncover the depth of epistemic violence against Black women for a clearer vision to strategize properly.

Although this literature review served as a scan to begin understanding how epistemic violence materializes for Black women in the academy, my interest is in how this ties Black women’s attrition in Ph.D. programs. After engaging with the sociology of absences and the sociology emergences, I am now interested in how this work can be an entry point for understanding the less transparent forms of epistemic socialization for Black women in graduate degree attainment. Moving forward, I will interrogate this insight as a site of possibility, providing a more niched view on the attrition of Black women while opening the door to examine Black women’s experiences in Ph.D. programs at large in hopes of identifying barriers to completion.

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