Episode 5: Intersectionality Re-Rooted

Raquel Willis: “Intersectionality is rooted in understanding that there are, at any given moment, multiple systems of oppression that are impacting how an individual navigates the world. So it's not just stacking identities like Jenga, which I think a lot of folks like to do, that has its own term, interlocking oppressions and identity politics. But for me, intersectionality is really rooted in looking at the systems of oppression on a collective level.”

Krystal Klingenberg: You're listening to Collected, a podcast project of Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Crystal Moten: I'm Dr. Crystal Moten and my pronouns are she/her.

Krystal Klingenberg: And my name is Dr. Krystal Klingenberg. My pronouns are also she/her. We are members of the African American History Curatorial Collective at the National Museum of American History.

Crystal Moten: On this pilot season of Collected, we are talking about Black feminism and placing it in its original historical context.

Krystal Klingenberg: In this episode, we're focusing on the term intersectionality as defined by Black feminist and legal scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw.
Crystal Moten: We're going to tell you where this concept came from and how it helps us understand the oppression Black women face.

Krystal Klingenberg: There have been people talking about and organizing against oppression at the crossroads of race, gender and class for some time.

In the 1800s Sojourner Truth gave her famous speech “Ain’t I A Woman,” She spoke about the terror visited upon Black women and the differential treatment they faced.

Crystal Moten: In the 1940s Rosa Parks organized against sexual violence directed at Black women.

In the 1970s Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective wrote about interlocking oppressions in their famous statement.

Krystal Klingenberg: These people have been organizing in the tradition of what we now call intersectionality.

Of all the big concepts we've discussed on the podcast so far, intersectionality is the most connected with the scholar behind it, Kimberlé Crenshaw who created the concept in the 1980s.

So who is Kimberlé Crenshaw and what does she mean by intersectionality?

Crystal Moten: In addition to being a legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw is also the co-founder and executive director of the African American Policy Forum at Columbia University. She explains intersectionality as a lens or prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.

Krystal Klingenberg: While Dr. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, Black women lawyers and legal scholars have been fighting at the crossroads of race and gender for decades. She's part of a longer tradition in the history of Black women's legal activism.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. So take, for example, Pauli Murray. Pauli Murray was a Black queer lawyer priest, and also one of the founders of the National
Organization for Women. Murray famously referred to discrimination against women as Jane Crow, instead of Jim Crow.

Also, Florynce Kennedy was a Black feminist lawyer and early member of the National Organization for Women. Murray and Kennedy were active from the 1950s through the 1980s and were vocal in the legal arena, critically intervening on issues related to gender and racial discrimination.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, intersectionality as a term arrives in 1989 with Crenshaw's groundbreaking essay titled, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Anti-Racist Politics.” In this essay, Crenshaw describes the ways that Black women experience discrimination at the intersection of race and gender. Here’s a portion from the essay read by Fath Davis Ruffins Curator of African American History and Culture and member of the African-American history curatorial collective at the National Museum of American History.

“I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. “

Krystal Klingenberg: So, what is Crenshaw actually saying, intersectionality is here. Part of what we need to really take into account is we can't isolate parts of our identities. Everything has to be taken into account together, right? And that oppression can look different based on that compounded sense of identity.

Crystal Moten: This is really important because it allows us to see and understand how oppression impacts particular groups in outsized ways.
Krystal Klingenberg: And so if you’re going to center particular groups, you need to know about the ways in which the various parts of their identities may come together to encounter oppression in different ways, to different degrees and with different results.

Crystal Moten: Right. And so take, for example, Black women and maternal mortality rates. Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy related cause than white women.

And multiple factors contribute to these disparities, such as a variation in healthcare quality, underlying chronic conditions, structural racism, implicit bias. Social determinants of health have historically prevented many people from various racial and ethnic minority groups from having fair and equal access to economic, physical, and emotional health.

Krystal Klingenberg: If we look at just maternal health rates across the board, we may miss what is happening with particular groups. So then if we focus on that intersection of both, yes, maternal health, but also the maternal health of Black women and Black folks who are giving birth, right, that illuminates something different. And so if you’re going to address maternal health, looking at those rates intersectionally becomes very important.

Crystal Moten: Mm-hmm. Exactly.

Krystal Klingenberg: Another really important example, also concerns the news - and that's the disappearance and murder of Black women and particularly Black trans women. There was recently a case down in Florida where a young white woman tragically disappeared: Gabrielle Petito.

Her story received a ton of coverage as the police looked for her but there are thousands of Black women who disappear every year and we never hear about it in the news. For example Lauren Smith-Fields among many others whose names don’t make it to the same newscasts and you know those people are gone. Their families are left to wonder what happened. They’re petitioning the authorities to find out, “Where is my person, who is looking into it?” And we as the public sometimes never hear about this. We don’t know that these people are also missing.
Krystal Klingenberg: And so this concern about women being kidnapped, women dying, we have to look at who this is happening to and their intersectional identities to understand and address these issues. Right?

So, when it comes to the murder and disappearance of Black trans women, especially so, it is very dangerous in the world for Black trans women and Black trans people in general. And so part of this is if you really want to look at some of these issues, if you want to help some of these issues, looking at them through this lens of intersectionality becomes important in order to affect change.

Crystal Moten: One final example that I want to bring in is one related to something that many Black women think about a lot, our hair.

Krystal Klingenberg: Oh Yes.

Crystal Moten: For a long time, how Black women groomed their hair, particularly Black women who wear their hair in natural hairstyles or who wore locs, they were getting fired and reprimanded because they were wearing their hair in these styles.

And so in some ways, they were being banned from wearing their hair in these styles, but recently through grassroots organizing and through the advocacy of lots of Black women across the country in 2019, the state of California passed a CROWN Act and the CROWN Act protects Black people, including Black women from discrimination at work, based on wearing their hair naturally.

Krystal Klingenberg: And you would think, you know, 2019, we're pretty late in the game that it would be acknowledged that Black women get discriminated against for the way that their hair comes right out of their head. And the expectation is to adhere to various standards of beauty that are not possible without significant work effort and sometimes pain on behalf of the Black women who are meant to show up in the workplace in a particular way.

Crystal Moten: Pain and resources.
Krystal Klingenberg: Oh Yes. So then, we’re really zooming in on how does this affect particular groups of people? Black women experience this kind of discrimination in a very particular way.

Crystal Moten: Mm-hmm. And so these examples highlight how important it is to use an intersectional lens in thinking about the ways in which certain groups experience oppression in their daily lives.

Krystal Klingenberg: In the years since her landmark essay, Kimberlé Crenshaw has discussed intersectionality quite a bit. In an interview she did with Columbia University in 2017, she reflects on the idea in a contemporary way. Here’s Crenshaw in that essay as read by Fath Davis Ruffins.

“Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem here. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are at the subject to all of these things.”

Crystal Moten: Yeah. That concern about the place where power comes and collides did not end with Crenshaw. The need to view things through an intersectional lens has expanded over the years. And there are writers and organizers who continue to use intersectionality to shape their work and activism.

Raquel Willis: My Name is Raquel Willis.

Krystal Klingenberg: We spoke with Black feminist, activist and journalist Raquel Willis about her first encounter with intersectionality.

Raquel Willis: I am a Black transgender woman in these here United States and my whole entire vision of faith and liberation is rooted in Black feminisms, both existing and emerging.
When I got to college, I came in studying journalism and quickly learned that I was going to be taught from a very white cis privileged male heterosexual lens. And I just happened to stumble upon women's studies courses. And then that completely changed the entire fabric of my being. And I knew by the time I graduated that I wanted to figure out how to weave together journalism and an intersectional lens. So I kind of completely came to reject the analysis of objectivity being that you had to dilute yourself down as much as possible and reject the idea that anyone in this society of ours can be completely unbiased, you know?

Honestly, to be asked to be unbiased as a Black trans woman is for me to lay down and take up the mantle of white supremacy, and patriarchy, and classism, and all of these invisible values that exist, you know, and if we're not adamantly pushing against them, we're just supporting them.

Crystal Moten: I really appreciated hearing Raquel share, especially in terms of how she created a way for herself to nurture her own sense of self and voice, while also thinking about who and how she wanted to exist in educational and professional spaces, shouldering these identities. In some ways, I would say, these burdens and these joys. I really also appreciate how she engages with intersectionality and how she deepens our understanding of the idea.

Krystal Klingenberg: So taking a look at what she said, I think it's really important to remember her position here also as a journalist. So when she talks about objectivity being problematic, objectivity is such an important part for the journalistic process. So what does she mean about objectivity being problematic in her call to ask us to be and the call to be unbiased?

Crystal Moten: I mean, I think it's a recognition that no one can truly be totally objective, right? No one can truly be unbiased because we all bring all parts of who we are into whatever we do, including journalism, if that's our profession. Right? And then to ask someone to say, oh, be objective, be unbiased. It means, you know in Raquel's words, cutting off a part of yourself, right? And to be quite honest, it's usually people of color who are asked to be unbiased, to be objective, to develop these false boundaries between who they are and the work that they are doing.
Krystal Klingenberg: There is something about objectivity that on the surface feels very scientific and it feels very much like, if you want the best version of the outcome here, this writer, this author, this scientist has to come from an objective position. And that is of course, that's part of how we expect all of our news makers and journalists and authors to approach their subjects. But part of what Raquel is saying here is that, that's not possible. And that there is something problematic about that “ask” sometimes, when you're being told to let go of parts of yourself to engage with a story, to engage with an issue, and especially a part of yourself that actually can give a lot of richness to what you are talking about.

Crystal Moten: Exactly. But then another thought that I have been thinking about is the value that whatever the process or project or news media article, the value of bringing in a person's personal experiences and personal knowledges, there's a value in that. And one of the ways to think about that in connection to biases is to acknowledge that, “Hey,” for example, “I am a researcher studying Black working class women's history. I am a Black working class woman, or I come from those roots.” There are certain questions, there are certain knowledges that I have that will allow me to tell a certain story that I have access to.

Krystal Klingenberg: You have a different purchase on the material, right?

Crystal Moten: That's right. That's right.

Krystal Klingenberg: I think the core of this is addressing that no one is a blank slate. Right? We bring who we are to what we do. And so it's a question of the power who gets asked to leave parts of themselves behind in order to engage with what they're trying to do.

When who you are is considered the status quo, as it is with white people, your positionality is not at odds with the system around you. People of color's experiences disrupt the status quo, showing that the status quo is not universal.

Crystal Moten: For example, “nude” as a color is actually a very specific shade. If I go looking for stockings as a Black woman to match my skin tone,
chances are the nude shade will not work because nude doesn’t match everyone.

So in the end, the status quo is not real. Objectivity, in the way it’s described by the field of journalism, is not truly possible.

Krystal Klingenberg: And that's really the core of what Raquel is saying here.

Crystal Moten: So, these conversations about objectivity, while we've been talking about them as they connect to the field of journalism, they can be more broadly applied. But Raquel is a journalist. She's a journalist and an advocate who thinks in intersectional terms. Raquel's use of an intersectional lens also expands the concerns of Black feminism in a very productive way.

Raquel Willis: I think the more kind of concentrated piece of Black feminism is understanding, and maybe this is more of a Black queer feminism or a Black trans feminism, but the only way that I'm thinking of how to describe it is that, there aren't these kind of binaries of being oppressed or being an oppressor. We kind of all inhabit that at the same time. And so that means we can't just say things like, "Men are all privileged, and if we can just strike down this kind of limited notion of the patriarchy, everything will be solved.

Well, you know, obviously every man doesn't have the exact same privilege as the next man, whether, because of color, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, it isn't that easy. But I think it's also looking at patriarchy in a deeper way and understanding that it has its claws in how we look at people and treat people differently because of sexuality. It has its claws in how we look at and treat people differently because of what they decide to do with their bodies, and whether we believe they even have the right to do certain things or not with their bodies.

Krystal Klingenberg: So, she says that not all men can be looked at through the same lens as we consider the effect of patriarchy because not all men have the same background. And in imagining the perspective and the experience of a trans man, but also including them as part of men, we have to be thinking more expansively.

Crystal Moten: Yeah. And to continue on, just simply binaries, right? Binaries are not a useful way to think about oppression and privilege.
Krystal Klingenberg: So what is a binary? Right? A binary is a situation where you have an either/or, and very simply day, night. Right? But as we know with day and night, there's always the gray in between. There's sunset, there's sunrise, there's all of that time. And so, Raquel's asking us to not think in these Black and white terms, because they're not helpful for the overall framework she's tried to push us toward.

Crystal: Yeah

Krystal Klingenberg: Another point that she's making is that separate communities don't equate separatism. Just because we can look at a Black trans understanding of these things inside of Black feminism doesn't mean that that's a viewpoint that's pulling away in some way from a Black feminist viewpoint, or even just a general kind of Black nationalism standpoint or any kind of concern about the Black community.

Krystal Klingenberg: When you start to imagine things through a Black trans lens in particular, it expands our sense of what is possible as part of Black feminism.

Crystal Moten: Yeah, Black trans feminism will free us all. I mean, I think that that's where we want to get to, that when we center Black trans women, that our liberation is caught up in prioritizing Black trans women's liberation.

Krystal Klingenberg: And so this is what makes centering Black trans feminism so crucial.

Raquel Willis: I think oftentimes there is a tendency for Black cis people to think that when Black trans people talk about our particular experience, it is at the detriment of the larger kind of Black collective. There is an antagonism around this idea that, "Oh, well, then you don't fully see yourself as a part of this project that we're part of." But I don't think that that's true at all. I think all Black people should be invested in black trans liberation, because we've all been shackled by expectations that restrict us and tear us apart from each other. And so, you're not going to have healthy Black cis men without having a Black trans liberatory framework to work from. You're not going to have healthy Black cis women without having Black trans liberatory framework within it. You know I just don't think that we have as bountiful a future that we deserve without understanding that Black trans people have contributed
so much, continue to contribute so much alongside our peers and our loved ones and our communities.

Krystal Klingenberg: Yes. That’s going to be the final word.

Crystal Moten: Join us for the next and final episode of this first season of the Collected Podcast as we talk about the future of Black feminism.

Feminista Jones: But where Black feminism needs to go, it needs to go back into the streets and into the communities and it needs to be accessible to all people because there are very real material needs that are not being met, that I think Black feminism can help folks in the community.

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