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In the North American contexts, questions of race and ethnicity have been largely lodged in a black-white dialogue, a dialogue about the tense racial relations between black folks and white folks. In this paper, I will critique the limits of this black-white discourse. I will also examine how critical race feminism can complicate and add to this picture. I argue that feminist scholars need to move beyond the black-white dialogue if we are to open up feminist theories and debates to understand *the multiple, complex, shifting processes of identifications and political affiliations of various subjects-in-process and communities-in-the-making*.

Critical Race Feminism

Historically and still today, second wave liberal and radical feminisms have largely excluded women of color feminists from the women's movement. Critical race feminists have passionately and inspiringly wrote about racism and classism implicit within the feminist movement. Thus they have carved a dialogical space within North American feminisms for the emergence of critical race feminist writings and researches.

I use the term "critical race feminism" in a similar manner that Enakshi Dua uses and defines "anti-racist feminism": "as a body of writing that attempts to integrate the way race and gender function together in structuring social inequality" (Dua, 1999: 9). I believe that the idea of a "critical race feminism" can permit us to move beyond the black-white discourse. Critical race feminism can provide a more open and contested epistemological space to include not only the researches of black feminists but also other

colored feminists, mixed-race feminists, as well as “white” feminists who are engaging in critical race analyses. Not all theorists who write on the interconnections of race, class and gender oppressions are women of color. I want to include these writers within critical race feminism. Critical race feminism can allow feminists to move beyond the black/white binary by including those who can not fit on either side of the divide.

In general, critical race feminists argue against the absence of a critical race analysis in the second wave liberal and radical feminisms and the absence of the representation of people of color within feminism. Such renarrating of feminist history allows for the inclusion of the voices, representations, experiences, activism, writings and bodies of women of color. Critical race feminism, I suggest, is characterized by three central interventions within North American feminism: (1) it brings into feminist theorizing an analysis of the interconnection of race/racism with gender and other oppressions; (2) it argues for the notions of social difference and multiplicity within feminism; and (3) it offers a distinctive and different feminist epistemology.

Like Black feminism, critical race feminists engage with the dialogue about the inclusion/exclusion of women of color within second wave white feminism. Critical race feminists reclaim feminism by speaking of racism, colonialism and neocolonialism, to rethink the means of emancipation. Critical race feminism introduces the study of the racialization of womanhood, to rethink womanhood. They examine how colored women are othered, subjugated by various brutal histories such as slavery, colonization, genocide, lynching, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and globalized labour exploitation. Critical race feminists emphasize that people are part of a racial economy; race is always part of a transaction in everyday social interactions. Some individuals need to continually negotiate their racial identities, along with their gender, class and

sexual identities. Some individuals who have been subordinated and racialized with negative representations have invented and employed oppositional racial identities as a source of pride and resistance. (Examples of this reclamation of identities include the delabeling and relabeling of the terms “Negro,” “queer,” “black,” or “yellow” for instance.) Critical race feminism also denotes that race and racism produce difference amongst women, challenging the notion of a universal global sisterhood and solidarity, the notion of a common experience of gender oppression.

For me, there are two historical moments when critical race feminism entered and engaged with North American feminism, particularly in the US: bell hooks’ critique of Betty Friedan in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) and Audre Lorde’s “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” in *Sister Outsider* (1984). Both hooks and Lorde critique white liberal feminists for failing to recognize their racial and class biases and privileges. Audre Lorde, for example, challenges Mary Daly for continuing the history of white women’s inability to hear black women’s words, as well as their inability to maintain dialogue with black women. hooks claims that privileged white feminists have a tendency to focus exclusively on gender oppression, and thus fail to understand the inter-relatedness of sex, race and class oppression. hooks proposes that black women’s lived experience on the margin, in fact, gives them a site of awareness and resistance. Black women’s marginalized position gives them vision to critique the dominant racist, sexist hegemony and to envision and create a counter-hegemony (hooks, 1984: 15).

bell hooks and Audre Lorde intervene North American feminism in many ways. They critique the implicit racism found in the second wave liberal feminism. They argue for the need to theorize difference and diversity, as well as the interlocking systems of oppression. They suggest that race, class, sex and age identities create difference among

women. They challenge liberal feminist notions of a unified “womanhood” and a sentimental innocent “global sisterhood.” As bell hooks indicates: this vision of sisterhood, the idea of common oppression, was evoked by women’s liberationists, who were primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective. But as hooks asserts: “The idea of ‘common oppression’ was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality. Women were divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices” (hooks, 1984: 44). Audre Lorde also argues that white liberal feminists ignore their privilege of whiteness and redefine “woman” in terms of their own experience alone, thus othering black women. Feminists need to critique this “mythical norm” of white privilege and the “historical amnesia” of racism for “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (Lorde, 1984: 115-117, 110). In essence, hooks and Lorde argue for the need to include black women and black feminists within US feminism.

The Limits of A Black-White Discourse

At this point it is important to deconstruct the black-white dialogue which tends to dominate any discussion about race and ethnicity in North America. bell hooks and Audre Lorde, for example, have set their arguments in this black/white dichotomy, in order to understand the center/margin hierarchy within feminism, how black women have been excluded or marginalized from white liberal feminist discourses. But as Ella Shohat maintains, such black/white dichotomy ignores the complexity of our lives generated out of the multiplicity of communities and identifications. Such black/white dichotomy may

be dangerous to political coalitionary work. Fixed black/white dichotomy fails to address the relationship among and between black and Asian feminists/women, for example (Shohat, 2001: 30). In the writings of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, the black feminists/women often speak vis-à-vis a white Anglo-Saxon norm. Within the historical contexts in which these two feminist texts were written (in 1984), this was important since there was hardly any space for black or women of color to articulate themselves as “black” or “women of color.” Also within the historical context of Transatlantic slavery and racial segregation, particularly in Southern US, this black-white dialogue is important to fully understand the tense racial relations between blacks and whites. However, there may be a danger in creating neat binaries like black-versus-white. As Ella Shohat contends: “Unthinkingly, or unconsciously, these binarisms recenter white norms because a series of different minorities are positioned against white hegemony, but not positioned vis-à-vis each other. This binarism, which is critical of whiteness, ironically repositions whiteness as a normative interlocutor, and puts on hold everyone else who does not fit in either category...” (Shohat, 2001: 33). This “on hold” method ends up producing gaps and silences leaving the relationship among the diverse “Others” obscure.

Daiva Stasiulis also critiques the limit of the black/white dichotomy which is often assumed to structure the racist and gendered oppression of women. Stasiulis questions the analytical use of skin color as a demarcation of racism. She argues that a black/white binary poses many limitations: it is unable to deal with other “immigrant” women; it links racism to skin color instead of concrete social relations and structural location of the particular groups of women; it ignores different forms of racism such as racism built in language, religion and other cultural markers; and it treats women of color

as a homogeneous category therefore failing to consider different class positions (Stasiulis, 1990; Stasiulis in Dua, 1999: 20).

The Chinese journalist and law professor Frank H. Wu also argues that: “Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of ‘American’ as if it means ‘white’ and ‘minority’ as if it means ‘black.’ In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority” (Wu, 2002: 20). Wu proposes that: “Asian Americans may allow whites and blacks to express themselves through intermediaries” (Wu, 2002: 29). Wu argues for a theory of race relations which includes everyone, beyond the black/white paradigm, including whites, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Arab Americans, Jewish Americans and so on (Wu, 2002: 36).

I argue that there are many shortfalls to a black-white dialogue. While the black-white dialogue provides us with insights about the race relations between blacks and whites, it excludes those subjects who do not see themselves as “black” nor “white”: Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Laotian, Filipino, Southasian, Aboriginal, Chicano, Latin American, and mixed-raced women and men, whose sexual belongings may become hetero/homo/bi/transsexual. A black-white dialogue may fail to account for the multiple and fluid processes of identifications and political affiliations people may have in relation to various communities. In other words, a black-white dialogue may risk the narrow assumption that black people only identify with blacks, and white people identify with whites. Such dangerous moves towards ethnic absolutism may fail to address how a white person can positively identify and politically affiliate with the black communities, for example. Moreover, a black-white dialogue can not explain how mixed-race subjects can complicate the notions of “blackness” and “whiteness,” when

they can pass as either white or black. These mixed-race subjects may include, for example: a Ukrainian-black woman who can pass as black; a Chinese-black woman who can pass as black; a Chicano-white woman who can pass as white; and an Italian-Aboriginal woman who can pass as white. These mixed-race subjects complicate the black-white dialogue of exclusively “black” and/or “white” identities. For instance, the performance artist Adrian Piper in her article “Passing for White, Passing for Black” discusses about her negotiation within the black/white divide, as she moves between as a “paleface” for blacks and as a “nonauthentic black” for whites (Piper, 1998). A black-white dialogue may also ignore the politics of skin color gradation within black diasporic communities, in which lighter-skin blacks may be privileged over darker-skin blacks, or vice versa depending on the context. In other words, a black-white dialogue may alienate and exclude the mixed-race, the mulatto, the half breed, those subjects who can not identify nor affiliate with either side of the shore.

I suggest that a black-white dialogue has a tendency to speak within a politics of identity rather than a politics of identifications and political affiliations. I argue that the consideration of the processes of identifications and political affiliations can provide a more complex picture. Monika Kin Gagnon defines “identity politics” as the politics which emerged from the post-World War II civil rights movements, and which refers to: “the self-naming and self-identification of individuals and communities around a common identity category in order to make a political intervention” (Gagnon, 2000: 22). I maintain that feminists need to move beyond the rigid identities of *some* identity politics to the understanding of the more complex processes of identifications. While “identity” may risk the danger of emphasizing an essence - one’s essential gender, class, race, national, or sexual identity, “identification” and “affiliation” emphasize the *process*

(*es*) of how an individual or a community arrives at that particular identity category to make a political intervention. In other words, rather than focusing on the final product or the end results, feminists should examine the processes of transformation and intervention within various subject formations and community formations. As Monika Kin Gagnon reflects: a “cultural race politics” can become a more transformative process only if “the conundrum of ‘identity’” continue to emerge and re-emerge as a *process* rather than an essence, as the “shifting conjunctures of identifications” (Gagnon, 2000: 30). The notion of the “shifting conjunctures of identifications” emphasizes *processes* rather than an essence within subjectification, or what I refer to as the “subject-in-process.” The term “subject-in-process” may be more productive than the term “identity” for example, because it points to the dynamic processes involved, the negotiation and struggles within subject formations. The notions of the *subject-in-process*, *identifications*, and *political affiliations*, rather than rigid identities found within some identity politics, permit feminists to move beyond what Ella Shohat calls “a politics of chromatic alliance” (Shohat, 1998: 33). In other words, these concepts enable feminists to avoid reducing people to their assumed fixed racial/chromatic schema and the assumption that people can form communities and alliances only with their own racial/chromatic groups. It may be more productive for feminists to consider the ways coalitions and alliances can be formed across various different identity communities. By opening up feminist theories and debates to understand the multiple, complex, shifting processes of identifications and political affiliations of various subjects-in-process and communities-in-the-making, feminists can move beyond the black/white dichotomy, with its tendency to invoke a linear correlation between chromatic identities and chromatic alliances.

At this point, I wish to explore how Ella Shohat's "multicultural feminism" can provide exciting new directions for feminist theories beyond the limits of identity politics and the black-white dialogue.

Ella Shohat's "Multicultural Feminism"

While earlier women of color feminists have focused on the dialogue about the inclusion/exclusion of women of color within feminism (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1991; Minh-ha, 1989; Anzaldúa, 1999), recent women of color feminists are beginning to theorize a North American politics of transnational feminism. In *Talking Visions* (1998), Ella Shohat proposes what she calls a "multicultural feminism" with a reconceptualization of "intercommunal relations within and beyond the nation state" (Shohat, 1998: 2). In other words, how do feminists form multiple interconnected communities in a transnational age by recognizing intercommunal relations within and beyond the nation-state, while avoiding the innocent and sentimental turn to "global sisterhood"? One way is to recognize and to evoke the multiple voices and projects among diverse resistant practices: First World white feminism, socialism, Third World nationalism, Fourth World indigenism, anti-racist diasporic activism and gay/lesbian/bi/transsexual movements (Shohat, 1998: 2). Shohat's multicultural feminism refuses to offer "a unified feminist project, a single ideological position, or a canonical repertoire of subversive acts" (Shohat, 1998: 2-3). In other words, multiple conflicting voices and projects are recognized while tensions are left unresolved (Shohat, 1998: 2-3). Shohat's project questions the benevolence of "allowing" other voices to add themselves to the "mainstream" of feminism by looking at feminism itself as already a

multi-voiced arena of struggle (Shohat, 1998: 16). This notion of feminism as a multi-voiced arena of struggle allows for the move away from a center/margin framework.

While hooks and Lorde have set their arguments in a black/white dichotomy in order to understand the center/margin hierarchy within feminism, Ella Shohat questions such black/white, Chicana/white, and Asian/white dichotomies. I agree with Shohat that black/white dichotomies may be hazardous to political coalitionary work, since it fails to address the complexity of how our lives are generated out of the multiplicity of communities, identifications, and affiliations. Communities of ethnic, racial, national and sexual identities are not fixed. Moreover, identities are not analyzable within an either/or framework, as found in a black/white binarism. Such black/white framework poses restrictions on activism (Shohat, 1998: 31). As Ella Shohat argues: “Although the black/white binarism is strongly inscribed in the material and ideological structures of the US, it is crucial for multicultural feminist alliances to examine the interplay of diverse communities...” (Shohat, 1998: 36). Rather than engaging solely in a dialogue between black women and white women, or women of color and white women, Shohat is more interested in how various women of color relate to one another. For example, how does an Asian woman relate to (or feels alienated from) and politically affiliate with (or disaffiliate with) a black woman or a First Nations woman? Multicultural feminism addresses the shifting positionalities of women of color, not only in relation to white men, to white women, and to men of color, but most importantly among women of color themselves, which includes not only commonalities but also ruptures within the category of “women of color.”

Multicultural feminism avoids following “a color/racial schema whereby the diverse feminists of color stand in line to represent ‘their community’” (Shohat, 1998: 6).

This is an important and crucial new direction for feminist practices and theories. Often there is an implicit assumption within North American feminism that a feminist's ethnic or racial identity is based on her color/racial schema, and that she and her research should represent "her community" of the same color/racial schema.

What is interesting about Ella Shohat's argument is her observance that colonized women were deeply involved in anti-racist and anti-colonialist movements long before they enter dialogue with the women's movement. Yet, this anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist subversions within anti-colonial struggles remain marginal to the feminist canon, because only one kind of feminism retains the power of naming and narrating. Shohat argues that feminists need to renarrate feminist history and anti-colonial history towards a more "polycentric multicultural way" (Shohat, 2001: 32). By using the term "multiculturalism" within her critical race theory of "multicultural feminism," Shohat wants to de-label and then re-label the term towards more radical meanings. She recognizes that "multiculturalism" has been co-opted institutionally (as found in official multiculturalism policies), but she maintains that the term can be re-co-opted by activists, artists, and scholars, like the term "queer." She acknowledges, however, that the term "multiculturalism" has different histories in the US and in Canada. In the US, unlike in Canada, "multiculturalism" has offered a resistance site to articulate coalitions of diverse anti-racist struggles (Shohat, 2001: 33).

Shohat wants to read feminism in conjunction with multiculturalism and transnationalism, that is, within the racial politics of the US and within the debates about globalization, immigration and displacement (Shohat, 2001: 37). In other words, Shohat's multicultural feminism allows feminists to make links between the local, the national, and the global. I suggest that this reading of feminism in conjunction with the

racial politics of a North American nation-state (such as Canada and/or the US) and transnationalism, permits a wonderful epistemological space for the merging of feminist studies, critical race studies, and diasporic studies. I think her argument for a North American racial politics of transnational feminism, as invoked by her “multicultural feminism,” can provide new exciting directions for feminists beyond the limits of the black-white discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examines and critiques the limits of the black-white dialogue found within some North American discussions on race and ethnic relations. It explores the contributions of black feminist writers like bell hooks and Audre Lorde as well as challenges their binary black/white thinking. This paper also reviews Ella Shohat’s multicultural feminism as a North American politics of transnational feminism. Like Ella Shohat, I have argued that a black/white binary may be hazardous to coalitionary work and thus limits inter-communal activism. A black/white dialogue fails to address the complexity of how people create, identify with and affiliate with multiple conflicting communities. A black/white dialogue tends to speak within a politics of identity, rather than a politics of identification and affiliation. A politics of identification and affiliation is more productive for it can avoid reducing people to their assumed racial/chromatic identities and the assumption that people only affiliate and identify with their own racial/chromatic groups. A politics of identification and affiliation emphasizes processes rather than essences. It considers change, flexibility, negotiation, struggle, and rupture in people’s community formation, affiliation and identification.

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