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The Struggle of the Black Intellectual with Race and Gender Representation. (W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou)

Abstract:
The purpose of this article is to review theories of racial and gender representation in African American literature by highlighting several black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou. This endeavor aims to understand the links and differences between black intellectuals’ lines of thought, such as those formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois or Franz Fanon, by comparison to or in addition to the contemporary views displayed by Maya Angelou or Alice Walker. The emergence of black intellectuals was highly problematic, rising from the South’s fields and finding new economic opportunities in Harlem. After the two World Wars, the young generation of African American intellectuals succeeded to create a new cultural movement inspired from folk traditions simultaneously adapted to urban realities, claiming a new identity and defying old stereotypes. This article brings forward a discussion of the ideas that link the aforementioned intellectuals and could be the starting point for further investigation on the black intellectual history that necessitates a more extensive study than the present paper.

Keywords: race, gender, black intellectual, literature, intersectional feminism, history

Introduction
The ‘black intellectual’ is a special type of scholar, therefore tracing a short history of American black intelligentsia is especially challenging and rewarding, as it reveals how he/she enriches and completes the missing parts of History with his/her insights on the power relations and how the existing power relations can shape and distort a group while benefiting the other. I define History as a socially constructed narrative based on existing evidences written mostly by and about men and which includes certain social categories while excluding others.

At first, these intellectuals had to reject their black world because of the prejudiced society which did not acknowledge their merits and strived to be considered contributors to the European culture and civilization. Later, the black intellectual realized that his/her identity was incomplete without the African elements of culture and developed a ‘black aesthetics’.

The whole process of searching and rebuilding the fragmented identity has resulted in ideologies and perspectives that center black culture and life. Theories of gender and racial representation are particularly relevant today because in order to understand and accept differences among people “we find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did”, as Audre Lorde suggests (Lorde 117).

The Emergence of Black Intellectuals and the Three Types According to Cornel West
Until the second half of the twentieth century many African-Americans missed opportunities for financial reasons primarily, therefore two kinds of black intellectuals emerged. On the one hand, intellectuals trained in white institutions by liberal scholars, such as W. E. B. Du Bois (the first African-American to earn a PhD from Harvard University in 1895) or John Hope Franklin (historian and civil rights activist who also earned his PhD from Harvard University). And on the other, those who did not attend formal education institutions such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James...
Baldwin or Maya Angelou, but were nevertheless awarded honorary degrees and were part of the Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest African-American writers’ union.

Towards the end of the 1960s African-American students enrolled predominantly in white educational institutions (Williamson 92); and many intellectuals denounced the lack of major black academic journals and the lack of black community support. However, the existence of influential figures in the communities had great impact on their fellow members of that group, succeeding to convince others to read and write. They were usually teachers, as it is the case with Mrs. Flowers in Maya Angelou's first autobiographical novel, who read something that Maya had never heard before—poetry—, and inspired young Maya to cultivate her passion for reading and writing.

Depending on the sources which nurtured the intellectual tradition, two main streams informing that tradition resulted: the black Christian tradition of preaching, which had a great impact upon the identity, form and content of the African-American liberation theology; and the black musical tradition of performance, both of them “oral, improvisational and histrionic” (West 61). Besides these sources, black intellectuals were acquainted with the Western philosophy of Marx or Foucault. As a consequence, the models of intelligentsia were classified according to Cornel West, in his “Dilemma of the Black Intellectual” (1993), into the following:

First, the bourgeois model of intellectuals based on academic legitimacy, which is particularly problematic, since in the repressive white academic institutions of the last century there was a permanent need to prove the humanity of black people, causing black scholars to develop a defensive attitude. This model has been called the “inescapable model” (West 63) because it sets intellectual limits to African-American academics who can never fit into a world that refuses to acknowledge their merits. Moreover, the African-American bourgeois activists were especially capitalists who criticized Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism to white values.

Second, as an aversion towards the first model of intelligentsia which denies agency and social relevance, the first impulse of the black intellectual is to adopt a Marxist model precisely because of the need for social relevance, political commitment and organizational connection. However, this model has been criticized for restricting intellectuals to mere public speakers and rarely rendering them as creative theorists, therefore it becomes a false alternative to the radicalized bourgeois intelligentsia.

West puts forward the third model which renders the black intellectual as a postmodern skeptic, inspired by Michel Foucault’s philosophy, already capable of a deep understanding of the relations between knowledge and power, discourse and politics. This model provides intellectuals with a critical attitude towards power relations and a careful use of words, unlike the previous model. Foucault himself represented a new type of intellectual, a post-modern, antibourgeois, interested in the “political economy of truth” (West 65), he denounced the identity captive in institutionalized forms of control and domination. Questions about the power discourses revealed a new type of skepticism, specific to postmodernists.

This model may look like the latest fashion of black intelligentsia, but it is actually a part of the Western civilization, bringing to light the uniqueness of black intellectuals’ situation and urging the deconstruction of Euro-American “regimes of truth” (Foucault 132). Martin Luther King Jr. is the most representative figure of this category. At the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in 1967 he delivered a speech called “The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement”, which takes on many characteristics of Foucault’s methodology, and explains the distructive force of power relations for the black community:

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1West argues that at present there is a small percentage of black intellectuals in white bourgeois academic institutions, however the next level would require infrastructure that attracts people of any color to contribute to academic activities in a similar manner as black critics and psychologists do nowadays.
The policy makers of the white society have caused the darkness; they create discrimination; they structured slums; and they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance and poverty. It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society. When we ask Negroes to abide by the law, let us also demand that the white man abide by law in the ghettos. Day-in and day-out he violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; and he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provisions for civic services. The slum are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison. (4)

The solutions provided by scholars to these models were the creation of networks between intellectuals and the development of postcolonial theory, which examines the trauma of the black man’s experience of racism. Frantz Fanon describes the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer as a mutually destructive circle of violence where they define each other.

Reiland Rabaka critically engages in his Africana Critical Theory (1972) Du Bois and Fanon’s theories and the thought tradition their works developed. The context of the rise of these thought traditions that I intend to analyze is neo-colonialism itself and the twenty-first century capitalism that has created new criticism against Eurocentric values. On the other hand, from a more optimistic perspective it is also the opportunity to deconstruct the old and create new practices but not forgetting ‘the wretched of the earth’s’—to use one Fanon’s terms—combat against colonialism, racism, sexism and religious intolerance.

Cultural Underpinnings of Racial Theories

W. E. B. Du Bois’ work is similar to Frantz Fanon’s regarding their perspective upon the colonial subject’s consciousness, and his philosophy of race and gender, making him a Pan-African, a Marxist and a male feminist. Although his understanding of the concept of race changed over time, Du Bois’ idea of race is scientifically based, not on biology, but it rather has political, social, historical and cultural underpinnings.

Du Bois developed a gender sensitive understanding of race one century earlier than the actual feminist movements and considered that capitalism and colonialism deepened class conflicts, therefore class and race are inevitably crossing each other’s borders, constantly shaping each other. His theory targets the political economy of race and provides new insights on the relationship between race, gender and economy.

Du Bois’ theory of colonialism serves as a critique of capitalism; he defines both systems as oppressive and exploitive and expands his analysis taking into account a critical class theory. From this perspective his works have been considered close to the Western philosophy of Marx, although they could be denominated as non-violent socialist rather than revolutionary Marxist. Capitalism and bourgeois bureaucrats could not be endorsed by African-Americans because they lacked capital. On the other hand, communists advocated equality of rights for workers, when actually they meant only white male workers. Although a member of the Communist Party, Du Bois rejected Eurocentric Marxism and Asio-centric communism, but approved of a socialism applied to the realities of the African-American life.

Not only a critic of capitalism but also of patriarchy, Du Bois considered women had a great potential of social transformation. However, black women experience a different reality because of the triple jeopardy of being female, black and poor, therefore reducing Du Bois to his race theory means not paying attention to his studies which opened the path for later African-American women’s liberation activists and theorists. The Souls of Black Folk included those of women as well, as shown in works such as “The Black Mother” (1912), “The Burden of Black Womanhood” (1907), “The Damnation of Women” (1920). Recent studies on the relationship between Du Bois and feminism reveal that he actually possessed an idealized image of black women rather than being
profeminine\textsuperscript{2}. In his article “The Study of the Negro Problems” (1898), he disseminates black men’s struggle in society, without mentioning women’s problems as well, although he treats them separately in other studies, which suggest that he was reluctant to think of women as intellectual and race leaders, an ideology which characterizes even contemporary black academics.

However, Du Bois encourages the economic independence of women, the necessity of women’s control over their reproduction and their protection. Women protection has been interpreted as having two meanings. On the one hand, it is necessary to protect women from the abuses that they have suffered since their arrival in the New World, and on the other it implies their victimization and increases masculine authority.

**Racial Theory Revisited. From a Refined Psychological Perspective towards a Modern Black Aesthetics**

Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1959) was a reminiscent of Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness, the metaphor behind the masks suggesting that black people have to wear white masks in order to live under the power structure established by the dominant group. Fanon focuses on the more sensitive aspects of colonialism, especially how trauma deforms the lives of black men and women in colonial conflicts in Africa, France and the Caribbean. As a teenager, born on the island of Martinique in a bourgeois family, he learnt France’s history as his own, only to be enlightened later by his teacher Aimé Césaire with the philosophy of negritude. After studying psychiatry in France, during the 1950s when the Algerian war of independence against France erupted, he was in the paradoxical situation of treating at the same time the post-traumatic stress disorder of French soldiers and the trauma of the Algerian victims. He expressed a radical anti-racist humanism by resigning as a psychiatrist and devoted his life to the cause of African freedom from the imperialist France.

*The Wretched of the Earth* (1962) crowns his mission to depict the degrading and alienating effects of colonialism and to analyze the racist project of the European worldview. From his perspective, language is one of the most important weapons which carry racism in a culture. He exemplifies how in the French language white is associated with purity and black with malevolence, and his decolonization theory is still relevant today for many scholars in the fields of social justice and human rights because of his activism for the respectability of every human being’s dignity.

W.E.B. Du Bois was undoubtedly the pillar of Pan-African Marxism and critical theory whose intellectual legacy influenced the theorists of Negritude, Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor in particular. In turn, Césaire influenced his student Fanon who analyzed the consciousness of the traumatized colonized from a psychatrical perspective.

After the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude was another chapter in the history of the Africans and their diaspora which represented an opportunity to reflect upon the situation of black people in the world. The Negritude theorists were called ‘guerilla intellectuals’ (Rabaka 112) by R. Rabaka\textsuperscript{3} as they fully engaged in the anti-racist, anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist project, that even considers that Negritude was the first modern black aesthetic movement by bringing black art in dialogue with Pan-Africanism. Jean-Paul Sartre was surprisingly the first European interlocutor who proposed Negritude to whites and helped popularize Negritude amongst Marxists and academics.

\textsuperscript{2}Farah Jasmine Griffin observes in her 2000 study on “Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection and Beyond” that Du Bois’ position as a feminist supporter veiled a masculinist approach especially in his study on Negro problems, none of which mentioning women problems. The article provides further feminist intellectuals’ writings on Du Bois and their extended agendas.

\textsuperscript{3}Rabaka argues that the theorists of Negritude concentrated their energies in their struggle against racism, capitalism and colonialism through cultural and political movements such as Pan-Africanism, the radicalism of the Harlem Renaissance, Sartre’s existentialism and even Breton’s surrealism.
Black intellectuals strived to be considered contributors to the European culture and civilization, therefore existing in a contradictory situation, rejected by white academia and in their turn rejecting the black world. However, Césaire returned to the Caribbeans with the original project of rediscovering Caribbean history and culture and to deconstruct the white truth. For the first time a black scholar advocated the beauty of black skin and the decadence of a so-called civilization which is capable of colonizing and traumatizing other Non-European cultures. In his “Discourse on Colonialism” (1955) he analyzes the degrading effects this has upon the colonizer as well, which have often been overlooked by theoreticians:

The fact that the so-called European civilization- “Western” civilization- as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of “reason” or before the bar of “consciousness”; and that, increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less likely to deceive. (Césaire 31)

He shifts the focus from the traumatized colonized towards the powerful colonizer and emphasizes how this dreadful process works to decivilize, to brutalize the colonizer who awakens his violent instincts and his double standards. More than being an advocate for the decolonization of Africa, Césaire was an advocate for the ‘decolonization of the mind’ and the respectability of justice and human rights regardless of the color of their skin. His theory on the effects of power relations between the colonized and the colonizer is greatly significant nowadays and functions as a rejection of humility and oppression, a struggle against alienation and a search for identity.

Césaire successfully deconstructs the European mythologies regarding Africans: the psychologists and sociologists’ theory of ‘primitivism’, which rather than being objective used speculations and self-serving generalizations; the historians’ chauvinism and their passion to monopolize the glory of their past; and even missionaries who described the scarce morality in African philosophy or their ‘exoticism’.

**Intersectional Feminism as the Totalizing Theory of Race and Gender Representation**

Another myth of the era was the prevalent cult of true womanhood, the idea that society is separated into two separate spheres: the public sphere and the private sphere, the latter being reserved to women for activities of child rearing and care taking which they were ‘biologically’ programmed to perform. Du Bois disagreed with this perspective, in his 1920 work *Darkwater*, he claimed that the full participation of women in social, economic and political life is essential and it is next to the amelioration of the ‘color line problem’ and the peace movement.

As mentioned before, Du Bois was the first theoretician who analyzed the intersection of several aspects of black people’s lives which have an impact on the labor market as well: race, gender and class. Therefore he had supported, almost a century earlier, the feminist movement which started in the nineteenth century and broadened its debates in the 1960s and 1980s. In the 1950s the theory of intersectionality was incorporated into the field of psychology by Patricia Hill Collins who studied the effects of the intersectionality between race, gender and class materialized into stereotypes, judgments and biases. The actual term entered the field of feminism in 1989 in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” for the University of Chicago Legal Forum who argued that:

Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for
translating "women’s experience" or "the Black experience" into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast. (Crenshaw 2)

Another notable feminist who not only coined the term ‘intersectional feminism’, but wrote extended essays on how women’s identities and experiences are shaped by aspects such as race, age, sexual orientation and class is Audre Lorde who situates her work within transnational frontiers. She participated in the African-American civil rights and feminist movements. Through her essays, autobiographies and poetry, Lorde tried to reconstruct transnational women history by travelling and researching outside the United States and merging with European, Mexican, Caribbean and African culture.

Lorde tackled the racism within the feminist movement itself and concentrated her debates on differences, especially because of her own definition of herself as “a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong.” (Lorde 114)

I consider Audre Lorde’s thoughts the pinnacle of the African-American theorization on race and gender representation given the fact that she identifies herself at the intersection of those categories enumerated before, which automatically gives her legitimacy to speak from a broader point of view which takes into account as never before the differences between us and pleads not for ‘tolerating’ these differences but for ‘embracing’ them:

Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance. Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me”.4 (114)

As historical memory helps people remember events throughout time and avoid repeating the same mistakes as in the past, Lorde pleads for the creation of such a collective memory that makes intelligible black people’s experiences. Moreover, what Lorde actually advocates is a ‘women united in difference’ history made possible by their ability to identify new definitions of power; the old definitions need to be changed as they condemn to repetition. She argues that:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age and sex. But it is not these differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences. [. . . ] Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power. (115-117)

Some of the most common metaphors in African-American studies are two causes for black women’s need to self-define, invisibility and blindness, that characterize the situation of African-American women within the American society and the majority’s inability to understand the importance of difference as a creative force.

4Lorde deconstructs the very term for which she is renowned to have pointed out in her studies: ‘sisterhood’. She claims that the pretense for homogeneity within the so-called ‘sisterhood’ of feminists often ignores the fundamental differences imposed by race, sexual orientation, class and age and that such homogeneity does not exist.

5Audre Lorde does not use this particular expression, but the essence of her ideas expresses this concept of unity within difference as exemplified in the excerpt from her 1984 study “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.”
One of the fundamental themes of Lorde’s prose and poetry is the recreation of the self, of a multiple identity shaped at the crossfire of race, sexual orientation and class. She turned her experiences of marginalization and fragmentation into essays, journals and poetry that are by no means fixed into the traditional frames of each genre but extended and shaped as autobiographical.

Her years spent in Berlin, Germany as a visiting professor as well as in many parts of Europe, Africa and Mexico provided her with a special view on the interaction between women in civil rights organizations and the importance of transforming silence into language and action. The binary relationship between femininity and masculinity is too simplistic for Lorde, each category can be further classifiable into smaller subdivisions which deserve to be acknowledged and addressed, instead of pretending their non-existence.

The African-American women movement greatly benefited from Lorde’s contribution, her original perspectives on women’s culture and identity determined the twentieth century authors to expand and diversify their characters and even genres, Maya Angelou being a good example from this point of view. Starting with the first autobiography from a series of seven, Maya Angelou deliberately challenged the conventional structure of the autobiographical genre by using techniques specific to fiction such as dialogues and thematic development, although she maintains a chronological succession, a single author and a unique use of the genre. Autobiography became for her a process of scripto-therapy, in which she spoke about the profound effects that childhood trauma had upon her and the displacement from her family when her parents separated the two children, Maya and her brother Bailey.

The 1960s represented the most prolific decade for reprinted African-American autobiography, especially slave narratives, and during the 1970s criticism attempted to create literary histories of black autobiography in America. Maya Angelou’s editor, Robert Loomis, made an observation that led to Angelou’s decision to accept the challenge of writing autobiography after a long career of writing poetry and television series: “I’m rather glad you decided not to write an autobiography because to write an autobiography, as literature, is the most difficult thing anyone can do” (Cox 1). After accepting the challenge and publishing her first novel I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), James Baldwin called the book “a beginning of a new era in the minds and hearts of all black men and women” (Cox 7) and critics were amazed by the inner truthfulness that Angelou used to account her life story.

The fundamental themes tackled by Angelou are very similar to those that had previously been engaged in Audre Lorde’s studies, especially marginalization, oppression, stereotyping and discrimination with a special interest on women’s situation. However, their styles could not be more different. While Lorde decides to directly address the situation of black women in the world through sharp, straightforward calls for acceptance of their differences, Maya Angelou shifts the tonality of her feminist project. Instead of writing an almost naturalistic type of autobiography, she experiments with the limits of the genre and conceives a sensitive, poem-like life story that can be categorized as autobiographical fiction—a mixture of reality-inspired situations creatively contextualized into timelessness. Her novels appeal to the emotional intelligence of her readers, while at the same time addressing the eternal struggles that African-Americans had to suffer in a segregated society. Angelou not only experiments with the autobiographical genre but uses self-irony and a playful language when describing herself as a child, the boundaries between truth and fiction are blurred on purpose by the insertion of long dialogues between characters. Her readers can be of any color and shape because even though her experiences are relatable to any black girl in the South, her message of empowerment has a much wider target—that of a generation.

Angelou is not only an African-American intellectual. Her messages regarding the social equality and the human dignity make her one of the most ‘phenomenal women’, as the title of her poem goes⁶, of the twentieth and beginning of twenty-first century.

Conclusions
The study set out to explore how several theoreticians analyzed race and gender representation while at the same time facing a fraught existence in prejudiced societies. I imagined the process of analysis and redefinition of the African-American identity as a spiral that expands every time another intellectual delivers his/her perspectives. The spiral begins with the nineteenth century marginalized black intellectual who had to dismantle theories of race based on so-called ‘scientific’ evidence, then the discourse expanded yet with another step towards the twentieth century with a systematic critique of the power relations inside the colonial system which degraded both the colonizer and the colonized.

As we move towards a society that is increasingly diverse regarding religious affiliations, sexual orientations and ethnic backgrounds, it is necessary to recognize and accept differences among people, the intersectional feminist theory calls into attention this particular issue of acceptance that has been a problem for a long time even inside feminist movements. In order to understand intersectional feminists’ claims, a short history of race and gender representation that highlights the main stages of black intellectual theory is necessary, in order to understand the links and differences between black intellectuals’ claims at the beginning, such as those formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois or Franz Fanon, by comparison to or in addition to the contemporary views displayed by Maya Angelou or Alice Walker. This article brings forward a discussion on the ideas that link the aforementioned intellectuals and could be the starting point for further investigation on the black intellectual history that necessitates a more extensive study than the present article.

Categories until then ignored by theoreticians, by politicians and even by historians have risen and some have begun advocating for the civil rights until the emergence of the unconventional contemporary black intellectual who has learnt her predecessors’ lessons and repeats them and retells them in a completely new and inclusive approach.

Postmodern studies recovered the figure of the intellectual in its historical peculiarity, originally ‘les intellectuels’ dared speaking for universal rather than national values, W.E.B Du Bois was the embodiment of the intellectual as bearer of the universal (as nationless and spokesperson of the whole humanity, not as supporter of uniformity). Fanon and Césaire’s studies on African identity, nationalism and Negritude were not purposes in themselves, but critical stages towards universalism, they envisioned a raceless society without erasing the historical experience of racism that unites all colonized people. Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou expanded theories of intersectional feminism and addressed their message towards all races, ages and nations. Nevertheless, the relation between race and intellectual had been a difficult one, given the historical circumstances of African Americans in the United States.
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