

# SOUL SPACE

CRDP African American Technical Assistance Project

## Intersectionality: BLACK FEMINIST ORIGINS

*Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor of Law, coined the term “intersectionality” in a foundational 1989 article, entitled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Class.” There, Professor Crenshaw called for an entire rethinking of policy frameworks as they related to race and gender.*



Welcome to the Winter/Spring Edition of *Soul Space*. In this issue we discuss **intersectionality**, a framework for both analyzing the ways that multiple structures of power and oppression operate simultaneously against the vulnerable, as well as being a tool for organizing across differences to eliminate disparities in human well-being. Intersectionality is thus a tool of analysis and organizing.

This issue rehearses the history of intersectionality in the United States from its inauspicious birth in the anti-slavery movement to the rarefied, yet haunting, setting of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History Culture, and into public health institutions designed to protect the health and well-being of its citizens. Finally, in this issue of *Soul Space*, we highlight the intersectional efforts of the California Black Women’s Health Project, a grantee of the California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP), to address the mental health needs of African American Women.



## The Intersection Metaphor

*“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions.*

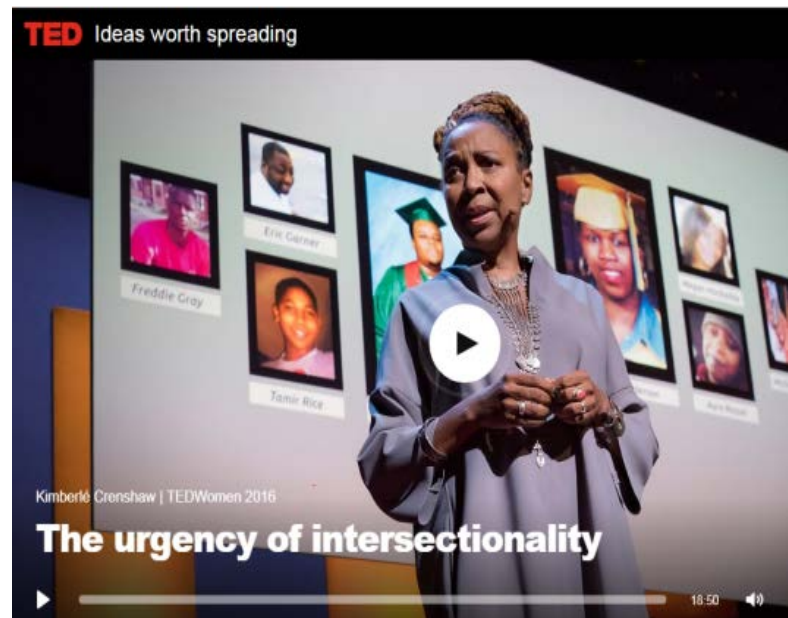
*Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination....But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.”*

—Kimberlé Crenshaw,  
*Demarginalizing the Intersection*

## Intersectionality: History

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School where she specializes in race and gender issues, coined the term intersectionality in a foundational 1989 article, entitled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Class,” which describes how employment discrimination law framed race and gender in a way that privileged Black men and White women without acknowledging how the subordinated status of Black women as both Black and female leaves them in a kind of double jeopardy, simultaneously discriminated against because of both their race and gender. Consequently, Crenshaw called for an entire re-thinking of policy frameworks as they related to race and gender.

Professor Crenshaw’s TED Talk in which she describes intersectionality and its current urgency in the #SayHerName campaign—related to the arrest and death of Sarah Bland and the many other Black women who have been victims of police violence—can be found here: [The Urgency of Intersectionality](#).

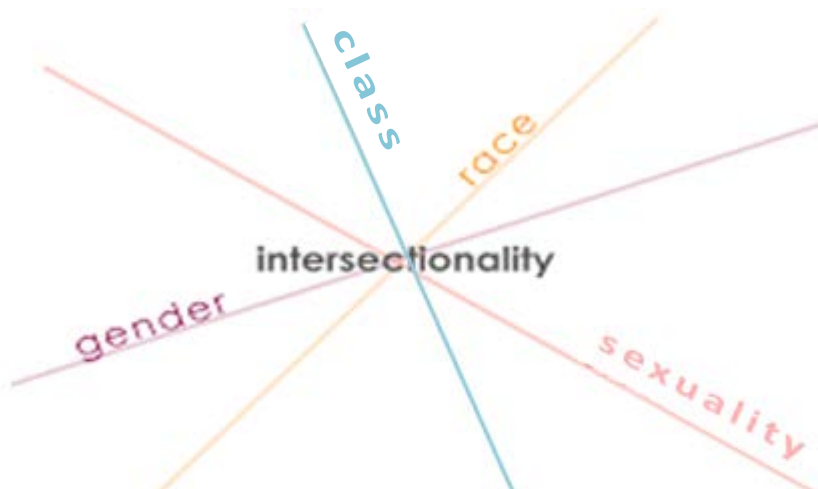


## Intersectionality: Political Origins

Professor Crenshaw’s formulation of intersectionality and Black feminist thought—like that of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins—drew on a specific aspect of the Black freedom struggle in which female activists wrestled with how one system of domination—racism—interacted with another system of domination—sexism—to uniquely disadvantage some groups of women more than others. Black female activists, such as Sojourner Truth, Ana Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells, simultaneously combatted racism and sexism. Their particular position was elaborated by Mary Church Terrell in 1940, whose opening lines to *A Colored Woman in a White World* spelled out how the twin systems of sexism and racism hobbled Black women: “This is the story of a colored woman living in a White world. It cannot possibly be like a story written by a white woman. A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in this country, which has two such huge obstacles to surmount. Colored men have only one—that of race.”

By the 1970’s, Black feminists had, along with racism and sexism, explicitly included classism and heterosexism as systems of domination that are “interlocking” and impact the lives of not just Black women, but also women of color (See sidebar on the *Combahee River Collective*, p. 4). What began as an effort of Black women to analyze the oppressive relationship between the American systems of sexism and racism on Black women had now travelled to capture the multiple forms of oppression among

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### Black Feminism

*“The colored woman of today occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country.... She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both.”*

—Ana Julia Cooper, 1892

*“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere,” she said. “Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman?”*

—Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman,” 1851

*“The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought.”*

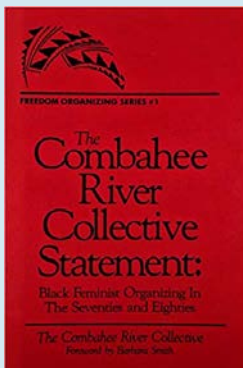
—Barbara Smith, 1983



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## Combahee River Collective

*We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. [1] During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.*



women of color. Additionally, the role of racism did not allow for Black feminists to participate fully in the general feminism of White women.

According to the Combahee River Collective (CRC) statement: “It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.” The statement continues, “Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle *with* Black men about sexism.”

CRC’s statement make clear two points about understanding the origins of intersectionality that challenge its wide-spread use today by those attempting to reduce disparities among people: 1) gender, class, race, sexuality are **identity categories**; 2) sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism are **systems of oppression**. Consequently, intersectionality is not a theory of identity; intersectionality is a critique, a frame for analyzing and dismantling systems of oppression that distort persons. In the words of the CRC Statement, “major systems of oppression are interlocking...and create the condition of our lives.” The oppressive system of racism has been the fiery brook that has divided activists who are impacted by heterosexism, sexism and classism from the women’s movement to the candidacy of Bernie Sanders to the present day.



## Appropriating Intersectionality as a Theory of Identity

Intersectional analysis travelled into the mainstream first through the civil rights movement, then through White feminists who saw its utility as a theory of identity and marginalization. This appropriation of the term as useful for describing marginalized and privileged group identities was most challenged by the system of racism. This [video](#) of Laverne Cox, an African American transgender woman from a working class background describes how racism is often left out of the analysis and formation of feminist and transgender movements with deleterious effects for African Americans across a range of indicators of health and well-being.



YouTube video: "LaVerne Cox Talks about Intersectionality at Harvard"

## Intersectionality and Health Disparities

Given that the impact of racism on African Americans is most evident in health inequities from infant mortality rates to life expectancy, it is not surprising that intersectional approaches to determining the causes of inequities are now emerging in public health. The World Health Organization, for instance, defines health inequities as avoidable inequalities in health and mental health between groups of people within countries

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## Mainstreaming Intersectionality

*"Intersectionality has been the banner under which many demands for inclusion have been made, but a term can do no more than those who use it have the power to demand."*

—Kimberlé Crenshaw

["Why Intersectionality Can't Wait," Washington Post, 9/24/15](#)

*"We need to recognize that it's an act of intellectual, discursive, and rhetorical colonization for White folks (and folks with other forms of privilege) to erase the critique of power from our use of intersectionality."*

—Jamie Utt

["We're all just different!" How Intersectionality is being colonized by White People](#)

*In the most basic sense, all of us are vulnerable; to be human is to be susceptible to misfortune, violence, illness and death. The role of government, however, is to offer forms of protection that enhance our lives and shield our bodies from foreseeable and preventable dangers.*

*Unfortunately, for many citizens — particularly those marked as poor, Black, Brown, immigrant, queer, or trans — State power has only increased their vulnerability, making their lives more rather than less unsafe.*

—Marc Lamont Hill,  
*Nobody*

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*“The standard isn’t how intersectional is your identity, but how intersectional is your analysis? Regardless of identity, the analytic tools are always available to help us solve problems for everyone.”*

*“The problem with making “intersectional” a form of identity is that it hides true dimensions of privilege and power. Class privilege is often improperly weighted. I’m not saying that class trumps everything else, but money at the very least gives us more options for dealing with racism or sexism.”*

*“Many people think of “intersectional” as a stand-in for “most marginalized.” But that’s problematic, partly because “intersectional” isn’t an identity in itself, but also because “most marginalized” is so often defined by our own “blind spots, created by whatever privilege we may have. Even those of us with disadvantaged identities have more power than some others. U.S. citizens have more power than immigrants; documented immigrants more than undocumented; undocumented children over undocumented adults. I could go on.”*

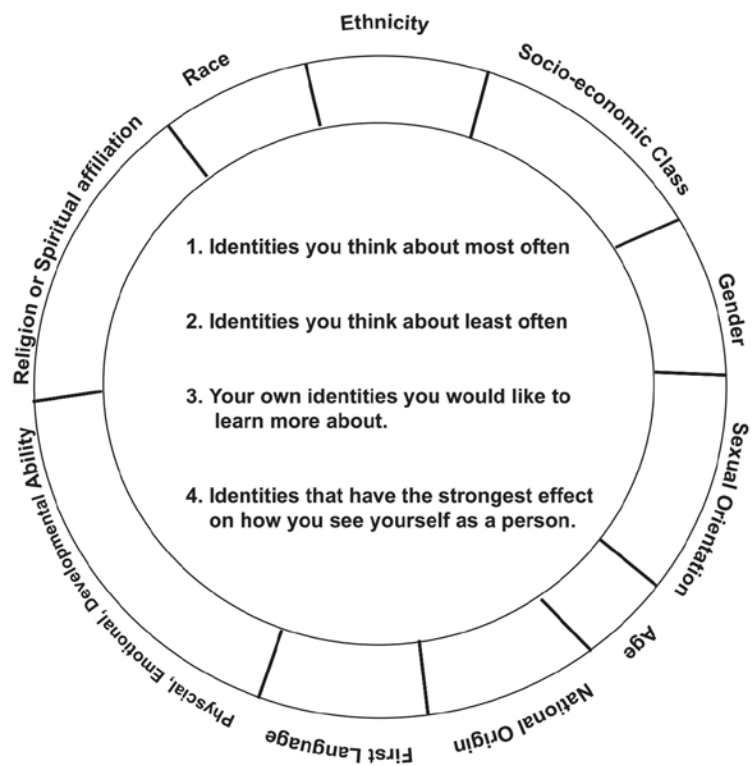
—Rinku Sen, [How to Do Intersectionality](#)

and between countries. These inequities arise from inequalities within and between societies....differences in health which are not only unnecessary and avoidable but, in addition, are considered unfair and unjust.”

According to psychologist Lisa Bowleg, two factors are important for public health in its efforts to reduce disparities: 1) people from multiple historically oppressed and marginalized groups are the focal or starting point 2) multiple social identities at the micro level (i.e., intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status) intersect with macro level structural factors (i.e., poverty, racism, and sexism) to produce disparate health outcomes. An intersectional lens shows that while health is experienced at the level of the individual, individual health outcomes and inequities, manifested in the body, are inextricably linked to interacting processes and structures of power at multiple levels.

## Social Identity Wheel

(Adapted from “Voices of Discovery,” Intergroup Relations Center, Arizona State University)



## CRDP African American IPP Spotlight:



California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP) Phase 2 is a demonstration project evaluating 35 organizations that are implementing culturally competent community-defined mental health prevention and early intervention (PEI) programs. In this issue of Soul Space, we feature *Sisters Mentally Mobilized*, a program of California Black Women's Health Project (CABWHP), a 501 (c)(3) organization based in Los Angeles, California serving African Americans. CABWHP is committed to advocating for policies and practices that promote and improve the physical, spiritual and emotional well-being of Black women and girls in California.

### Sisters Mentally Mobilized

Through its [Sisters Mentally Mobilized Program \(SMM\)](#) program, CABWHP makes use of a combined advocacy training and "Sister Circle" model to empower Black women and girls to become active participants in improving their own health status, and eventually, that of others. The women who participate in the program are often dealing with: 1) **intergenerational traumatic experiences**, which lead to internalized oppression, self-anger and hatred, which may be passed on to those with whom they have relationships, such as children; 2) **stigma/ shame/ fear/ isolation**, which may lead to under usage available mental health options from mainstream organizations; 3) **ongoing abuse and stress**. It addresses directly the complex factors that predispose to, or create risk for, depressive disorders and exacerbate mental health issues in Black women.

Sister Circles draw heavily on a community-defined tradition of Black feminism and thinking intersectional about the barriers to health and well-being.

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## Black Feminism Conditions

*"Sister Circles have been part of the Black female experience for over 150 years. From living rooms, community halls, college campuses, church basements and beyond, sister circles continue to be safe spaces for Black women to 'talk, deal, and heal.'"*

—Sonya Young Aadam

1) *"Black feminist thought may be recorded by others, but it is produced by Black Women, shaped by their historical and material conditions."*

2) *"The historical circumstances of oppression led to common perspectives among Black women."*

3) *"The diversity of class, region, age, and sexual orientation has resulted in different expressions of the common themes."*

4) *"Black feminist thought makes these themes clear to those who are immersed in it."*

—Quotes by Patricia Hill Collins





## Black Feminist Themes

### Self-Definition & Self-Valuation

*“An affirmation of the importance of Black women’s **self-definition and self-valuation** is the first key theme that pervades historical and contemporary statements of Black feminist thought. Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally defined, stereotypical images of Afro American womanhood. Self-valuation stresses the content of Black women’s self-definitions— namely— replacing externally- driven images with authentic Black female images.”*

—Patricia Hill Collins

### Interlocking Forms of Oppression

*“While different socio-historical periods may have increased the salience of one or the other types of oppression. Black feminists have always had a commitment to interlocking oppression.”*

—Patricia Hill Collins

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Patricia Hill Collins, one of the founders of Black feminism and intersectionality describes the four conditions and three key themes of this tradition in her essay, *The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought*. The conditions can be viewed in the sidebars on pages 7 and 8.

### Black Feminist Themes: Self-Definition and Self-Valuation

According to CABWHP Executive Director, Sonya Young Adam, “our approach to Sister Circles is consistent with Black Feminist Themes, as Collins describes. Our Circles begin most importantly with self-definition and self-valuation. The first question the mental health facilitator asks the girls and women who enter our program is to “name three great things about yourself.” This question takes us to the heart of “how the women who enter our program see and value themselves. It begins our efforts of stigma reduction. “Many of the women are silent for long periods of time, because they’d never really thought about the question. But one of the responses that frequently comes up is “strong, and then they begin to discuss what strength looks like.” This process of unearthing the reasons why Black women and girls feel they are strong takes us right into the interlocking systems—racism, sexism,

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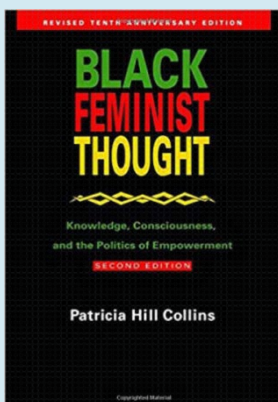






*“The black feminist attention to the interlocking nature of oppression is important for two reasons. First, this viewpoint shifts the entire focus of investigation from one at explicating elements of race and gender or class oppression to one whose goal is to determine what the links are between systems, ....without prioritizing one form of oppression.”*

*“The second reason is that Black feminists who see the simultaneity of oppression affecting Black women appear to be more sensitive to how these same oppressive systems affect Afro-American men, people of color, women, and the dominant group itself.”*  
—Patricia Hill Collins



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classism—that they must “go up against daily to protect their children and their families. “ What we are frequently left with is the lack of 'self-care' among many Black women, some with whom we work. Inevitably, Black women see how they function as superheroes, putting on the mask that combats the stereotypes they face in the world, while having to protect their families because their identities are wrapped up in the *wellness of their children and families.*

The Black women who come to us sometimes feel that we are the least desired people on the planet, but we care for our children. The Black feminist scholar, Janice Hale, captures the work of the Sister Circles in stating that “effective Black mothers are sophisticated mediators between the competing offerings of an oppressive dominant culture and a nurturing Black value-structure.” The analogy used by the Circle’s facilitator is of an “airplane experiencing turbulence. When the plane is wobbling because of the weather system, we need to put on our own oxygen mask before we can help our family and friends. It’s also like that with us, if we are going to be able to be truly supportive of our children, families and communities, we have to be able to first care for ourselves.”

### Interlocking Nature of Oppression

Sister Circles create a safe space that also allows women to discuss the interlocking systems of oppression that shape their lives. Ms. Aadam notes that “women are drawn to the program because it is an opportunity for Black women to gather and freely talk about anything in a way in which they are culturally comfortable....We talk about hair, and our children; about being a woman, and being Black, about being a wife and sexism.” Ms. Aadam is not exactly sure which of these systems shows most in the circles. “I’m not sure if we talk about the challenges we face with racism more than the challenges we face with our partners....The challenges with being a woman and the challenges we face with racism come up together. When we discuss our children, a woman may discuss her sexual identity as a lesbian. So, gender and race come together first, and then other systemic barriers such as sexuality come up. Yes, Black and woman are the first identities we speak of, then the others gain space to live and breathe after we lead with these. The tone and tenor of Black women’s culture we establish allow the other identities to emerge. So, we have an internal intersectionality that focuses

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## African American Women's Culture

*“Black women’s culture may help to provide...the symbols and values of self-definition and self-valuation that assist[s] Black women in seeing the circumstances shaping race, class, and gender oppression.”*

*“Sisterhood is the supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women through shared feelings of oppression.”*

*“If Black women simultaneously use all resources available to them—their role as mothers, their support of one another in Black female networks, their creative expression-to be self-defined and self-evaluating and to encourage others to avoid objectification, then Black women’s everyday behavior itself is a form of activism. People who view themselves as fully human, as subjects, become activists, no matter how limited the sphere of their activism may be. By returning subjectivity to Black women, Black feminists return activism as well.”*

All Quotes from  
Patricia Hill Collins

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on feminism and race first. Then, we have what I call ‘conditional intersectionality’ of our circumstances such as homelessness, ill-health and stigma.” These issues only emerge naturally within the Circles because of the “Black cultural environment the program establishes.”

## African American Women’s Culture: Approach to Mental Health and Healing

Central to Sisters Mentally Mobilized is the establishment of a Black cultural ethos and the enactment of everyday mental health care and activism. According to Mrs. Young Aadam, “we are unapologetic about the intrinsic value in the history and heritage of Black women. We establish a particular physical environment, including smells, with which Black women resonate. We talk about ancestors—fathers, mothers, children, and our hair—all while prioritizing their own self-care—we let the spirit move us. And the spirit moves us between where we have been to where we are now, and where we are going as Black women.”

Sister Circles provide judgment-free zones for Black women to share their stories and learn from each other’s lived experiences, to be mental health activists of their own self-care and to go out and share the information with others. “The goal is to provide enough Black women with information and skills that we’ve built a cadre of Black women in California that are knowledgeable and prepared to be advocates for better mental health in their communities.” For more information on Sisters Mentally Mobilized: <https://www.cabwhp.org/sisters-mentally-mobilized.html>



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