



African American Women in American Feminism, from the Late 1970s Onward: Inclusion, exclusion and Illusion of Belonging

Roan Jucourt

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MÉMOIRE DE MASTER 2

Langues, Littératures et Civilisation Étrangères et Régionales

Parcours Monde Anglophone



Final Study for Mother Earth, Ernie Barnes, 1999, Acrylic and Pencil on Paper, 41×49", Collection of Elliot and Kimberly Perry

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN AMERICAN FEMINISM, FROM THE LATE 1970s ONWARDS: INCLUSION, EXCLUSION AND ILLUSION OF BELONGING

Présenté et soutenu par :

Roan JUCOURT

Le vendredi 28 août 2020

Sous la direction du Dr. Ludivine Royer, Maîtresse de conférences au Département d'Etudes du Monde Anglophone à l'Université de La Réunion

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Membres du jury :

Pr. Alain Geoffroy, Professeur des Universités

Dr. Ludivine Royer

Le vendredi 28 août 2020

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“As Black women, we're always given these seemingly devastating experiences—experiences that could absolutely break us. But what the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls the butterfly. What we do as Black women is take the worst situations and create from that point.”

-Viola Davis, *ESSENCE*

INTRODUCTION

Very often, the notion of womanhood has but a small place in societies impacted by poverty, violence and other societal issues. However, tracking down these issues in smaller communities reveals itself to be quite difficult. Men and women from minorities who face systemic racism are more likely to remain silent regarding discrimination, so as not to disturb the illusion of tranquillity that floats above them. They believe that bringing the flaws in their own communities to light could affect their relationship with their relatives, co-workers and friends. More importantly, there is the fear of losing one's social, political and economic position within society. Gender, race and other forms of discrimination play a key role in the development of a society, from its history to its culture, economy and politics.

In a society impacted by patriarchy and male dominance, relations between men and women are often based on emotional and physical conflicts. Women are confronted to sexism and sexual harassment, as well as domestic violence. When the damages caused by sexism and patriarchy in communities are not silenced, women are often blamed for being the instigators of their suffering, based on the way they were dressed or behaved when conflict took place. In cases of sexual abuse and assault, women's trauma is often overlooked.

Women believe that their alleged wrongdoings caused the abuse they faced, while men appear as victims of women's perversion. Women's "evilness" originates from Biblical writings, as it is believed that Eve influenced Adam into eating the forbidden fruit, which unleashed all ills on earth. Thus, from time immemorial, various religions, especially Christianity, preached for the silencing of women's voices.

Patriarchy, greatly influenced by Christianity, only perpetuated gender-based inequalities between men and women. Linked to notions of economic dominance and politics, patriarchy is defined as a "system in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it."¹ Its main purpose is to ensure that the economic, social, and psychological influence of men over women prevail. Patriarchy tends to increase the gender-based belief that men's natural position is at the top of the social hierarchy while women are perceived as the eternal, weaker half of humans. In the introduction to *Appeal of One Half*

¹ Available on the *Oxford Dictionary website*: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/patriarchy>>

the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, To Retain Them in Political and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery, William Thompson and Anna Wheeler, both advocates for equal rights in Great Britain, encouraged English women to demand equal rights and recognition. Their commitment to women's rights would lead to the creation of a British feminism and influence an American feminist movement decades later:

Women of England! women, in whatever country ye breathe--wherever ye breathe, degraded--awake! Awake to the contemplation of the happiness that awaits you when all your faculties of mind and body shall be fully cultivated and developed; when every path in which ye can exercise those improved faculties shall be laid open and rendered delightful to you, even as to them who now ignorantly enslave and degrade you.

In numerous societies, patriarchy thrives on discrimination and gender inequalities. However, as expressed by French philosopher Henry Laborit in *Eloge de la Fuite*, forms of discrimination are not inherited but rather taught.² Men are so satisfied with their position of superiority that they perceive womanhood and gender equality as a threat to their well-being, rather than a progress for equal rights. Already as children, women are taught gendered roles and behaviour which subjugate them to patriarchal norms. There is then a never-ending feeling that few changes are made to improve women's rights. Feminism and women's rights are perceived as in direct opposition to concepts such as motherhood or marital submission, extolled by patriarchy.

On a local perspective, a 2019 article from French local news *France Bleu* reports that Reunion Island ranked fourth in femicide and domestic abuse cases, with 4.3%, in 2018.³ A 2017 report from the Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental (CESE) established that, during that year alone, 2.6% of women faced domestic abuse committed by their partners or ex-partners in Reunion Island. 1.6% of women faced sexual abuse by their partners or ex-partners.⁴ However, few changes are made to improve women's living conditions in Reunion Island.

Reunionese men and women are taught, from childhood, to remain silent on domestic violence so as not to impact the "Vivre Ensemble Réunionnais." Extolled by local

² Published in 1976.

³ Retrieved on the *France Bleu website*. Available on: <<https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/societe/carte-les-chiffres-des-violences-conjugales-en-france-1567501523>>

⁴ Retrieved on the *CESE website*. Available on: <https://www.lecese.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/Rapports/2017/2017_09_violences_femmes.pdf>

politicians, travel agencies and journalists, the notion of “Vivre Ensemble Réunionnais” embraces the idea of multiculturalism in which each religion and culture is respected and well-integrated within Reunionese society. As this sense of community is perceived as a touristic and marketing element of Reunionese society, one may wonder about the place given to gender within this “Vivre Ensemble.”

The socio-economic context of the island, marked by low-incomes and poor-housing allows but little place to women’s rights in Reunion Island. The complicated living conditions of women in Reunion Island thus became the main source of inspiration for this body of work. However, an in-depth analysis of gender-based relations in Reunion Island could not be possible without any knowledge on concepts such as womanhood and feminism. As both Reunion Island and the United States share a similar historical context - slavery- I believe that both Reunionese women and Black American women face common issues, regarding representation, due to the complexity of their historical backgrounds. Thus, this is the reason why I decided to focus on a country in which protests for women’s rights and feminism helped reshape its society: the United States of America.

There is one element that must be taken into consideration in the analysis of patriarchy and womanhood the United States: the notion of race. American history was marked by slavery which began with the importation of the first slaves from Africa in 1619, up until the *Thirteenth Amendment* of the United States Constitution which abolished slavery in 1865:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.⁵

However, the abolition of slavery did not put an end to racial conflicts in the United States. The belief in racial hierarchy birthed other forms of racial discrimination, such as the Jim Crow laws. As explained on the *Ferris States University website*, the Jim Crow laws were introduced right after the abolition of slavery to maintain control over Black people in the United States:

Jim Crow laws was more than a series of rigid anti-Black laws, they were a way of life. Under the Jim Crow laws, African Americans were relegated to second-class citizens. The Jim Crow laws represented the legitimization of anti-Black racism. Many Christian ministers and

⁵ Section 1 of the *Thirteenth Amendment*.

theologians believed that “Whites were the Chosen people, Blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation.”⁶

One of the direct consequences of the Jim Crow laws was racial segregation, a clear separation between Black people and White people. After centuries of slavery, the Black community of the United States -mainly composed of African Americans who were direct descendants of slaves- was now impacted by racial discrimination. From the two World Wars up to the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Black men and women were aware of their own difficulty to fit within an American society to which they belonged as much as any other American citizen. Even though the *1964 Civil Rights Act* put an end to the Jim Crow laws and prohibited discrimination in public places and workplaces, one can wonder whether these the Act had a lasting effect on American society:

Segregation on the grounds of race, religion or national origin was banned at all places of public accommodation, including courthouses, parks, restaurants, theaters, sports arenas and hotels. No longer could Blacks and other minorities be denied service simply based on the color of their skin.⁷

Decades later, racism and racial discrimination are still visible and criticized in the United States. According to an article published on the *Public Integrity website* in November 2018, entitled “Black Americans Are Still the Victims of Hate Crimes More Than Any Other Group,”⁸ African American men and women are more likely to face racial discrimination and brutality on a daily basis due to their ethnicity. In 2018, the California State University’s Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism published a report which reveals that “Hate crimes reported to police in America’s ten largest cities rose 12.5 percent in 2017. The increase marked the fourth consecutive annual rise in a row and the highest total in over a decade.”⁹ This report highlights the ever-growing racism within American society which also leads to other forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation, religion, and gender. The intersection of these forms of discrimination will be at the centre of this body of work. When analysing the impact of racial discrimination on Black Americans, one should

⁶ Definition retrieved on the *Ferris State University website*. Available on: <www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>

⁷ Definition retrieved on the *History.com website*. Available on: <<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>>

⁸ Retrieved on the *public integrity website*. Available on: <publicintegrity.org/federal-politics/Black-americans-still-are-victims-of-hate-crimes-more-than-any-other-group/>.

⁹ Retrieved on the *California State University website*. Available on: <<https://www.csusb.edu/hate-and-extremism-center>>

question the place and role of gender within racism: are there similarities in the way African American men and women perceive and face racism in the United States?

In her work *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*, published in 1991, Professor Philomena Essed analyses the complexity of Black women's relationship with racism in the United States:

We propose that the socio-contextual factors of racism and sexism intersect in the lives of African American women contributing to their experience of more stressful life events and an increase in psychological distress because African American women's experiences of being both a women and African American often cannot be easily separated.¹⁰

African American women began to question their position within American history quite early on. Many wondered whether or not the achievements and cultural contribution of their female ancestors had been rightfully valued by American society. By focusing their studies on their place within the American history and society, as early as the 1960s, African American women developed an overview of their own living conditions. They denounced discrimination regarding employment, healthcare and education. They also criticized what they perceived as one of the main causes for inequalities between White women and Black women in the United States: American feminism. Defined either as "an organized effort to give women the same economic, social, and political rights as men" or "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state"¹¹, feminism played a great role in the study of women's place within American society.

For decades, American feminists advocated for equal rights between men and women. Numerous studies have shown the impact of gender on women's condition in the United States, through sexism and misogyny. The earliest development of American feminism is dated back to the end of the eighteenth century, influenced by British philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Published in 1792, Wollstonecraft's work was a call for women's suffrage and for gender equality in England. Her influential writings would reach and coincide with American women's desire

¹⁰ Article retrieved on the *US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health Search* database. Available at <www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4197405/>. P. Essed's *Understanding everyday racism: an interdisciplinary theory*, published in 1991, is quoted in the article.

¹¹ Retrieved on <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/feminism>>

for economic and political emancipation. It marked the beginning of an American feminism, later divided into periodical waves: First, Second and Third wave American feminism.

American author and feminist Margaret Fuller became the leading figure of First wave feminism in the United States. She first described the rise of female protests as “a ravishing harmony of the spheres, as well as the emerging of female sea captains.” In her work entitled *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845, Margaret Fuller expresses the need for improvement regarding women’s rights in a male-centred, and controlled, American society. For almost a century, American women united under feminism to voice their concern regarding their rights. However, the newly developed American feminism would inevitably be influenced by the notion of race and create conflicts between Black women and White women. Margaret Fuller and other leading figures of the First wave American feminism shared one common point: they were White women. Their targeted audience was then mainly White women, which raised questions regarding the place given to the voice and existence of women of colour within American feminism.

As protests against racism took place through the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s, Black women expressed the need to speak on their own perception of racism and how it intersected with the daily sexism and misogyny. They considered that the fight they led alongside White women for decades had but little impact on their lives. The Civil Rights Movement only highlighted the complex position of Black women regarding American feminism and their own African Americanness. In an essay entitled *Lulls*, published in 1976, writer Alice Walker describes the place of womanhood within the African American community:

My mother can’t understand why her daughter wants to be a minister, either. She keeps trying to marry me off again. I believe she thinks if I’m not interested in the men she digs up for me, it must mean I’m gay. Black folks with unmarried daughters are running scared, in this age of women’s liberation.” She laughs. “I like men; I just don’t have time for them right now. But from the way my mother carries on, you’d think she never heard of a woman wanting to be independent.”¹²

In the years following the Civil Rights Movement, Angela Y. Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw and other Black feminist figures raised concerns regarding the degrading state of Black womanhood in the United States.

¹² Essay present in Alice Walker’s collection of essays and articles, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, Published in 1983. P.184

This allows us to question Black women's inclusion, exclusion, or possible illusion of belonging within American feminism, a key aspect of American society. More importantly, we are able to analyse how the racial and gender issues of the 1970s gave rise to identity crises amongst African American women. The study of African American women's living conditions in the 1970s cannot be complete without an analysis of the living conditions of all women at that time. From Black women's particular relationship with the first two waves of American feminism, to the disparities between Black and White women, we will see how gender studies and intersectionality worked as a criticism of the 1970s "White" American feminism.

Beyond a simple reinvention of American feminism, gender studies would reveal identity crises among Black women, based on the impact of patriarchy and sexism on Black women's education. However, the intersection of racism with conservatism on Black women's sexuality and womanhood would mark a discordance among Black women, leading to other forms of Black feminism.

As Black women would try to reassert their identity within American society, their work would then influence a third-wave American feminism in the early 1990s. Based on inclusiveness regarding women's ethnic background and sexual identity, we will see how this new wave, influenced by media, was perceived as a way out of identity crises. To do so, we will go beyond literary and historical studies on American feminism and analyse Black women's presence in media and online. Finally, we will wonder if Black women's representation in the entertainment industry, another key media, could be the key to inclusion. We will see whether or not the technological revolutions of the 1990s allowed Black women to value their culture and experiences or, if, once again, they provided for a more universal American feminism.

In an attempt to analyse Black women's struggle to be included in both past and modern American society, numerous sources written by African American feminists and women of colour will help us comprehend the bond between Black women and American feminism from the late 1970s onwards. The writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw's, on intersectionality and racism, will have a key role in the analysis of Black women's socio-economic inclusion in American society.

PART 1: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE 1970s
AMERICAN SOCIETY

1.1 Women's living conditions and the earlier waves of American feminism

Black women's place within American feminism, in the 1970s, was inevitably linked to the living conditions of American women at that time. Womanhood was barely acknowledged within American society before the rise of American feminism from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The 1848 Seneca Fall Convention, supervised by reformers Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, was regarded as the precursor of American feminism. The convention led 300 women to march in New York for women's rights. The National American Woman Suffrage (NAWSA), also created by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1890, enabled early conversations on women's rights and living conditions in the United States. Admittedly, gender inequalities came at the centre of discussions in the 1920s, influenced by birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger's *Women and the New Race*, published in 1920. Margaret Sanger's self-reflection on her childhood, marked by poverty, single motherhood and infantile mortality, inspired American women to debate on issues such as birth-control, abortion and equal wages.

Margaret Sanger became the voice of the birth-control movement but later faced criticism as she made use of controversial concepts, such as eugenics and racism, to uphold her theories on birth-control. However, her devotion to women's rights influenced American women in the 1920s, as well as the ratification of the *Nineteenth Amendment* of the United States the same year. The Amendment granted women the right to vote after years of protests. Two decades later, Margaret Sanger would create the 1942 Planned Parenthood Federation, formerly the American Birth Control League, which allowed American women to have a certain control over their pregnancies. Many of Margaret Sanger's writings shed light on the way sexism and misogyny conditioned and demonised women's use of birth-control.

Improvements regarding women's living conditions appeared alongside the different waves of American feminism. From the early 1920s to the racial crises of the 1970s, First and Second wave feminism allowed White women and women of colour to have a new insight on American feminism. Leading figures of American feminism, such as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1940s or writer Betty Friedan in the 1970s, later expanded the credibility of the movement through their speeches and writings. The implication of American women in American feminism helped them rethink their own conception of womanhood, what it meant to be a woman. In the introduction to her 1994 anthology on

women's studies entitled *Feminism, The Essential Historical Writings*, author Miriam Schneir writes on the impact of First and Second wave feminism on American womanhood:

The strategy of the old feminist movement was to reform the unjust laws relating to women. Simultaneously, as the feminist consciousness of a growing number of women was awakened, barriers to unconditional and vocational advancement were assaulted. Other women took [...] At present the new feminism is likewise primarily involved with attacking a wide variety of discriminatory laws and customs relating to such matters as abortion, work, divorce and contraception. Sexist practices in educational, religious, military and governmental institutions have been challenged by individuals who are supported and spurred on by the new women's organizations.¹³

However, the idea of an American feminism was not accepted by all women in the United States, due to their religious beliefs or economic status. More importantly, the improvements made regarding women's living conditions in the United States did not impact all American women. While White American women were the ones who benefited from birth control, wages and other positive outcomes, only a small minority of women of colour saw their living conditions improved.

Whether it was in the 1940s or in the late 1960s, racial discrimination was still impacting African American women's place within American society. They had but little involvement in suffrage, faced unemployment and racism at workplaces. The issue of race, always present within American society, led Black women to question their implication in American feminism, already during its first and second waves. Many of them felt as if they, sometimes unwillingly, fought for causes which had no impact on their lives. They felt excluded from the fight led by White American women. Though progress regarding women's rights in the United States were acknowledged, many women of colour criticized the part race played in the early waves of American feminism. Mariam Schneir writes that "the woman's movement by then [the early nineteenth century] was no longer a potent feminist force in the United States. It had grown more and more exclusive, fostering class, race and political division rather than feminist consciousness."¹⁴

Feminist authors from minorities, such as Chicana activist Cherrie Moraga, wrote on the feminist "revolution" which took place after the Civil Rights Movement. In the preface

¹³ Op. cit., p.XVIII

¹⁴ In the introduction to "Feminism, The Essential Historical Writings" (1994). Op. cit., p.XX

to *This Bridge Called My Back*, published in 2015, Cherrie Moraga accounts for the rise of identity crises amongst women of colour who considered themselves as feminists:

Many women of my generation came to the belief that based on the empowering historical conditions of our early years, the African Independence Movements of the early 1960s, the Cuban Revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian, Black Power and the Chicano Movements, the Anti(-Vietnam)War movement, Women's and Gay Liberation- all laid political ground and theoretical framework for a late 1970s feminism of colour.¹⁵

In the introduction to the article "Hidden in Plain View: African American Women, Radical Feminism, And the Origins of women's studies programs, 1964-1974", published in 2002, V.P. Franklin further describes the visible signs of crises amongst American feminists, mostly between White women and women of colour, during the mid-twentieth century in the United States:

The social protest movements of the 1960s, has added important qualifications and contradictions to the story as previously told and understood. In particular, the research on the contributions of African American women to the Civil rights, Women's Liberation, and Black Power movements has raised a number of important issues about the emergence of Black Studies and Women's Studies programs that have yet to be fully explained.¹⁶

Defined as an "umbrella term for the many varieties of activism that sought to secure political, social and economic rights to African American in the period from 1946 to 1968,"¹⁷ the Civil Rights Movement expressed the need to put an end to the ongoing segregation which deeply impacted the daily lives of African American men and women. The "Black Power" ideology was developed during these protests. According to African American militant Stokely Carmichael, "Blacks must redefine themselves -only they can do that. Throughout this country, vast segments of the Black community are beginning to recognize the need to assert their own definitions to reclaim their own sense of community and togetherness."¹⁸

¹⁵ Op. cit., p.XXI

¹⁶ Op. cit., p.433

¹⁷ Definition retrieved on the *Khan Academy website*. Available on: <<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/civil-rights-movement/a/introduction-to-the-civil-rights-movement>>

¹⁸ As expressed in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, written by both Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in 1967.

Many African American women felt empowered by the values shared through the “Black Power” ideology. Listed in an essay available on the *Library of Congress website* numerous African American women had a direct or indirect impact on the way the Civil Rights Movement unfolded. Founders and members of the *Student Non-Violent Committee* (SNCC) Diane Nash and Doris Adelaide, Derby Simmons and others helped give a purpose to the protests. Other women that are worth mentioning are Dorothy Height, president of the *National Council for Negro Women* and Septima Clark, leader of Civil rights workshops in Tennessee. During protests, the workshops monitored activist rallies and provided supplies to low-income families and protesters. Available in the “Civil rights History Project” collection from the *Library of Congress*, the list intends on recognizing Black women whose “effort to lead the movement were often overshadowed by men, who still get more attention and credit for its successes in popular historical narratives and commemorations.”¹⁹

In an era of changes, the late 1960s and early 1970s led African American women to question their inclusion within American society. Black studies, which developed alongside their identity crises, ultimately forced Black women to admit that, once again, they had but little place within American feminism and society. As their involvement within the Civil Rights Movement was overlooked by Black men, African American women felt as if the same scenario was taking place regarding American feminism.

Black Studies intended to highlight how African American women’s political involvement in racial and women’s rights protests led to positive outcomes on college campuses, households and at workplaces. Yet only few of these changes applied to Black women’s living conditions, while it promptly benefited to White women. Alongside Black studies, women’s studies appeared in the 1970s as a way to analyse the living conditions of American women. However, V.P Franklin stated that these studies on women within American society “totally ignored the experiences of African American women and rendered them invisible.”²⁰ Studies based on race, gender and women’s rights often ignored the living conditions of African American women in the United States. Once again, the lack of recognition regarding African American women in American society was criticized by Black feminists. Gender-based relations within the African American community only complicated

¹⁹ List and essay retrieved on the *Library of Congress website*. Available on: <www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/women-in-the-civil-rights-movement>

²⁰ In *Hidden in Plain View: African American Women, Radical Feminism, And the Origins of women’s studies programs, 1964-1974*” Op. cit. p.434

Black women's feeling of exclusion from both their community and from American feminism.

African American women's living conditions were influenced by two forms of discrimination: race and gender. According to V.P Franklin, "it is time that the definitions be made clear... Blacks are oppressed... Women are oppressed... and there is a big difference."²¹ Black women did not face racism and racial discrimination the same way Black men did. She further developed on the living conditions of African American women in the racial protests of the 1970s, expressing how:

During that same time period (1966-1972), many of the African American women, who denounced the sexist and male chauvinist behaviour of male Black Power advocates, also complained about the objectives and practises of "White" women in the Women's Liberation Movement.²²

Other African American female authors wrote on the issue of race in relation to gender inequalities. The early 1970s, marked by the end of the Civil Rights Movement, led Black women to change their perception of American feminism, as explained by Feminist writer Bell Hooks *Ain't I A Woman*, published in 1981:

It is a contradiction that white females have structured a women's liberation movement that is racist and excludes many non-white women. However, the existence of that contradiction should not lead any woman to ignore feminist issues. Oftentimes I am asked by black women to explain why I would call myself a feminist and by using that term ally myself with a movement that is racist. I say, "The question we must ask again and again is how racist women call themselves feminists." It is obvious that many women have appropriated feminism to serve their own ends, especially those white women who have been at the forefront of the movement; but rather than resigning myself to this appropriation I choose to re-appropriate the term "feminism," to focus on the fact that to be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression.²³

Bell Hooks' *Ain't I A Woman* highlights the difficulty for African American women to partake in American society. Racism, sexism and classism apply to the living conditions of Black women in the United States. Hooks criticized the way White feminists, before and

²¹ Op. cit., p.436

²² Op. cit., p.436

²³ Chapter 5: "Black Women and Feminism." [E-book]

after the Civil Rights Movement, defended a universal feminism in which all women -White women and women of colour, including Black women- spoke under one singular voice.

However, many women of colour pointed out how, in the end, this singular voice still belonged to White women and did not fit their specific needs. Racism was often ignored, also in women's studies which greatly focused on gender-based relations and interactions in American society:

Instead, the hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationships already established in American society merely took a different form under "feminism": the form of women being classed as an oppressed group under affirmative action programs further perpetuating the myth that the social status of all women in America is the same; the form of women's studies programs being established with all-white faculty teaching literature almost exclusively by white women about white women and frequently from racist perspectives; the form of white women writing books that purport to be about the experience of American women when in fact they concentrate solely on the experience of white women: and finally the form of endless argument and debate as to whether or not racism was a feminist issue.²⁴

In the collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, published in 1983, African American writer and activist Alice Walker describes Black women's never-ending struggle for self-identification within American society. For centuries, Black women's identity has been torn between gender and race:

We have been also called "Matriarchs," "Superwomen," an "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention "Castraters" and "Sapphire's Mama." When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats.²⁵

The historical and political context of the late 1970s and early 1980s only deepened the difficulty for African American women to find their place within American society and feminism. From 1981 to 1989, Ronald Reagan's presidency, which many women perceived as an anti-feminist agenda, increased racial disparities and gender inequalities between White people and Black people. There was now a focus on beauty standards and sexism in the United States, which amplified Black women's identity crises. In a 2015 article entitled

²⁴ Op. cit., Chapter 4.

²⁵ Op. cit., p.237

“Women, Ladies, Girls and Gals...: Ronald Reagan and the Evolution of Gender Roles in the United States,” writer Françoise Coste expresses how “his [Ronald Reagan] anti-feminist initiatives ran into many obstacles and his presidency paradoxically marked a period of progress for many American women.”²⁶

Ronald Reagan’s political ideas and ideals were first perceived as a threat to American womanhood as it would point out the ideological and physical differences between women of colour and White women. However, these differences helped women of colour to question their inclusion within what was considered as “American womanhood.” Many Black female writers became the leading figures of a collective consciousness amongst Black women. Their own economic, social, and political background became their source of inspiration. Studies led by Black women in the 1970s and 1980s would not only lead to changes in the way they perceived American society, but also in the way they wanted to reshape it to include Black women.

The link between race and gender within American society has always existed and altered the way Black men perceive Black women and vice versa. The racial crises of the 1960s onwards, led by strong male figures such as Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, only repressed the involvement of African American women in the many protests led by the Black community. As Black women’s existence was overlooked within their own community, they desired a way for their knowledge and experiences to be valued within American society.

The growing importance of Second wave American feminism provided them a sense of hope regarding American womanhood. However, as we will see, Second wave feminism did not put an end to Black women’s struggle for self-identification.

²⁶Retrieved on *Miranda* [Online]. Available on: <<https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8602>>

1.2 Black women's particular place in American society and feminism

In many countries, feminism has often been perceived as the nemesis of one systemic structure: patriarchy. In the United States, American feminism, as well as women's rights and gender rights, have disrupted the, almost ancestral, dominance of men over American society. In the early days of American feminism, American women criticized the psychological and physical abuse condoned by patriarchy. Women's confrontation to patriarchal norms inevitably painted them, and feminism, as direct opponents to social order. The complex and controversial relationship of American society with race has also been influenced by patriarchy. White men who are at the top of the social hierarchy only desire to maintain their position. Were American women to overcome male dominance, they would become the enemy of American society and face social exclusion and gender-based discrimination.

In *Conversation with Feminism: Political Theory and Practises*, published in 1998, Professor Penny A. Weiss reveals how "it is incumbent upon us to prove our manhood or womanhood repeatedly throughout our lives-every time we dress ourselves, get a flat tire, initiate a conversation, eat or play games."²⁷

Women's self-assertion within a society's socio-economic and political system involves notions such as race, sex and gender. Men who consider themselves at the top of economic, political and social structures seem to possess a gender-based advantage over women who struggle to be heard. They believe that men should always maintain this position of dominance whatever the cost. If a man were to disobey his patriarchal obligations, that is to say what makes him a man according to patriarchy, he would be perceived as defying his own gender and identity, whether it be his ethnic or his sexual identity. A similar situation occurs to women in American society. If they were to contradict male order, they would face sexism and misogyny. Women's exclusion from American society altered their fight for gender equality, described as "the act of treating women and men equally."²⁸ The intersection of race with the notion of gender equality inevitably led women of colour, including Black women, to question their belonging to American feminism.

²⁷ Op. cit., pp. 18-19

²⁸ Definition retrieved on the *Cambridge online dictionary*. Available on:
<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/gender-equality>>

During the Civil Rights Movement, Black women started to rethink their understanding of American feminism in relation to their African Americanness. Despite voicing the need for inclusiveness in the early stages of Second wave American feminism, Black women felt excluded from the movement due to their skin colour and ethnic background. The late 1970s and early 1980s marked the rise of African American feminist writings in which Black women penned their own requests for equal rights, taking into consideration the specific features of African American culture and history.

According to Penny E. Weiss in "I'm Not A Feminist, But...", "African American women's perception of American feminism often coincided with the general perception of the movement in the United States: "feminists are associated [...] with being outspoken, aggressive, macho, pushy, one-sided, narrow-minded, hard-line, cold and harsh."²⁹ The discrimination Black women faced within American feminism led to a negative perception of the movement, despite its action for women's rights. As the outcome of the first two waves of American feminism barely impacted Black women, their fight for equal rights became even more complicated.

According to a 1995 report from the US Department of Labour, the economic situation of Black women, especially Black women's employment, was ultimately linked to the notion of race. The report concluded that White women were more likely to find work than women of colour: "10,500 more African Americans, 19,300 more Latinos, 24,600 more Asian Americans and 57,250 White women were holding managerial jobs."³⁰ The economic and social environment of women in the United States was then impacted either positively or negatively depending on their ethnicity. As a result, the way women perceived feminism and women's rights also differed depending on their relationship with the notion of race. Second wave feminism marked the beginning of African American women's quest for inclusion in American feminism as well as in the White, male-centred, American society. Black women's perception of feminism took into consideration several factors: race, gender, sex and social classes. As they believed that the laws and acts passed before the Civil Rights Movement only benefited to White women, their first action was to denounce, through the act of writing, the denial of their voices and struggles. Many Black feminist writers began to write on the lack of recognition for Black women's influence on American society. V.P

²⁹Op. cit., p.13

³⁰ Retrieved on the <<https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/State-Study-Tracks-Diversity-Affirmative-action-3040217.php>>

Franklin, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alice Walker and other African American feminists expressed their own struggles, as African American women, to be heard by White feminists as well as White men. Black women denied the universal aspect of American feminism as they felt that it erased their cultural identity as African American women. In an essay entitled *And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You: Racism in the Women's Movements*, published in 1981, Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga emphasizes the difficulty for women of colour to fully comprehend and immerse themselves into Second wave American feminism:

We women of color are the veterans of a class and color that still is escalating in the feminist movement. This section attempts to describe in tangible ways how, under the name feminism, White women of economic and educational privilege have used that privilege at the expense of Third World Women.³¹

According to African American women, American feminism participated to the racial conflicts of the time, even before the 1970s Second wave feminism. White women never solely denounced, or criticized, the important place of racism within the movement. It would take decades for African American women to shift their negative perception of American feminism and embrace the new feminist ideology developed by Black feminist studies. Black women's exclusion from Second wave feminism forced them to reconsider the movement, eventually into a new branch of American feminism, influenced by Black studies, gender studies and women's studies. Ironically, it is Black women's exclusion from most of these studies that would help them reshape their perception of American feminism in the United States. Penny A. Weiss describes the continuous difficulty for women's rights to be applied to any given society, and how it affects Black women in the United States:

Every day that sexism continues, every day that women are oppressed across the Globe, women are battered, raped, denied, confined and killed. They are told who they can love and under what conditions, how many children they must bear and how they must raise them, where they can work and where they can stay safely.³²

In addition to sexism and patriarchy, American women were also subjected to beauty standards in the 1970s and 1980s. Embedded with racial stereotypes, beauty standards had a psychological and physical impact on Black women's lives. White women within American

³¹Extracted from "This Bridge Called My Back" Op. cit., p.57

³² Op. cit., p.23

feminism physically corresponded to the American beauty standards of the time. Thus, White women were less likely to be negatively impacted by beauty standards in American society. Just like it did for race, Second wave American feminism overlooked the impact of beauty standards on the movement and on women of colour, including Black women, who were already struggling for inclusiveness.

The first British settlers to reach the American soil in the seventeenth century brought with them what they called European beauty standards. Europeans believed that one's physical features and appearance could alter or improve their place within any society. The better they would look, the more they would be accepted and valued as humans. The upper-class, whose physical appearance was often favoured by their wealth, then lived with their own idealisation of beauty which considered light-coloured eyes, light skin colour and hair as the standards of beauty in Europe. Anyone who did not fit into the European "mould" were perceived as outcasts.

American slavery only increased such ways of thinking with the physical distinction made between White women and Black women. Beauty standards allowed racism and stereotypes to alter one's self-identification within American society. Beauty standards then had a lasting impact on the African American identity, including Black women's perception of both American society and American feminism, in the late 1970s. As African American Professor Tracey Owens Pattons develops in "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women And Their Struggle With Beauty, Body Image and Hair," the way White women defined themselves and defined American beauty was in direct contradiction to the physical features of Black women:

Given the racist past and present of the United States, there are several identity and beauty issues that African American women face. Since 1619, African American women and their beauty have been juxtaposed against White beauty standards, particularly pertaining to their skin colour and hair.³³

Beauty standards, based on racism and stereotypes in the United States, followed the course of American history and were not erased or lessened after slavery. The Jim Crow laws only increased the disparities between Black people and White people and later led to identity crises amongst African American women from the 1970s onwards. Black women

³³ Op., cit. p.26 Essay retrieved on: < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4317206>>

became the main casualties of beauty standards in United States. Improvements made regarding women's rights and gender equality mostly applied to White women's lives, due to their skin colour. From better incomes to better living conditions and healthcare, women of colour were less likely to benefit from Second Wave feminism because of their appearance or ethnic background.

Many Black feminist writers and activists criticized the psychological and societal impact of beauty ideals on American feminism. They believed that race and beauty inevitably overlapped in the fight for women's rights. Studies led in the late 1970s showed that women with pale skin complexion and specific physical features, such as straight hair, slim nose or light-coloured eyes were more likely to see positive outcomes be applied to their living conditions. Tracy Owens Patton quoted African American writer and essayist Michelle Wallace on the matter³⁴:

The Black woman had not failed to be aware of America's standard of beauty nor the fact that she was not included in it, television and motion pictures had made this information very available to her. She watched as America expanded its ideal to include Irish, Italian, Jewish ,even Oriental [sic] and Indian Woman [...] The Black woman was only allowed entry if her hair was straight, her skin light, and her features European, in other words, if she was as nearly indistinguishable from a White woman as possible.³⁵

Beauty standards further complicated racial and gender-based relations in the United States, and more importantly Black women's relationship with American feminism. According to Susan L. Bryant in "The Beauty Ideal: The Effects of European Standards of Beauty on Black Women"³⁶, published in 2013, the 1970s and 1980s beauty standards highlighted the complexity of the African American identity:

The educational system reinforces the messages surrounding skin color that are learned within the family and further encourages young Black girls to internalize beauty standards that emphasize lighter skin.³⁷

Discrimination from the male-centred American society and disparities between White women and Black women were not the only effects of American beauty standards on

³⁴ Op.cit., p.27

³⁵ Quote extracted from Michelle Wallace's 1979 *Black Macho and The Myth of Superwoman*. P.157-8

³⁶ Retrieved on <academiccommons.columbia.edu>

³⁷ Op.cit., p.83

Black women. Beauty standards increased Black women's struggle for self-identification as it introduced the issue of colourism within the Black community. Defined as the "prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin,"³⁸ colourism amplified Black women's identity crises as it created a hierarchy among Black women, based on their skin complexion. According to Professor Debra Umberson and writer Michael Hughes in *The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Achievement and Psychological Well-being*, published in 1987, "[studies] found that people deemed attractive by society are given more professional and social opportunities from childhood through adulthood, thus giving lighter-skinned Black women greater access to success than darker-skinned Black women."³⁹

While African American women already struggled with self-identification, the intersection of beauty, gender, and race within Second wave American feminism increased their feeling of exclusion from women's rights. Black women understood that inclusiveness could not exist -or at least pretended to exist- within Second wave feminism due to the intersection of numerous forms of discrimination. Black women did not fit within American beauty standards unless they benefited from colourism, which further complicated Black women's self-identification. Neither did they fit within Second wave American feminism, in which White privilege prevailed.

Black women's exclusion from both American feminism and society forced them to develop their own feminist ideology, focused on social inclusion and the betterment of Black women's living conditions. Studies led by Black female activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, led to the creation of concepts which would later help African American women pave the way for a Black feminist movement. Among these concepts were gender studies and intersectionality, which helped Black women to fully grasp the complex relationship between race and gender in the United States, and how it impacted their daily lives.

³⁸ Definition retrieved on the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.
Available on: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colorism>>

³⁹ To which Susan L Bryant refers to in "The Beauty Ideal: The Effects of European Standards of Beauty on Black Women".

1.3 Black women's criticism of American feminism

The late 1970s and early 1980s American feminism cannot be studied if not in relation to the notion of gender studies. Developed alongside women's studies and Black studies, gender studies appeared within American history and society because of gender discrimination within American society. Women's constant confrontation to patriarchy and patriarchal norms forced them to wonder why gender-based relations between men and women were conflictual. Gender studies focused on the socio-economic context of the 1970s, in hope that the analysis of womanhood, misogyny, and other gender-based concepts in the United States could answer to gender inequalities.

The numerous social and racial protests that affected the United States before had also revealed issues regarding gender equality and racism. Black feminist theorists and writers, influenced by this new field of research, used gender studies to shed light on the small place given to women in the American society of the late twentieth century. The various social revolutions, such as the industrial revolution, the Civil Rights Movement or the first waves of American feminism, barely participated to the inclusion of women within American society.

Gender studies aimed at analysing how the complexity of the human condition had altered equity between men and women. One of the first changes brought by gender studies in the late 1970s was the distinction made between two notions: "gender" and "sex." While sex referred to the biological features of a human being, born with either male or female genitalia, the notion of gender was rather perceived as a social construction. The concept of gender came from centuries of patriarchy which conditioned men and women to believe that one's identity as a man or a woman was predetermined and definite.

Decades before the appearance of gender studies within American society, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir developed essays on what would be later known as gender studies. Regarding the condition of women around the world, Simone de Beauvoir stated in *The Second Sex* "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman."⁴⁰

The 1970s gender studies were linked to American feminism as it tackled American women's living conditions. Studies led by American feminists empathized the notion of

⁴⁰ Published in 1949.

gender, questioning its place and impact on American society. For centuries, gender appeared as an unchangeable human trait, determined by one's male or female genitalia. From behaviourism to clothing, gender often relied on cultural, historical and religious beliefs to define one's identity. Before gender studies, a person born with male or female genitalia was expected to behave accordingly to the social constructions attached to their biological sexes. Among these social constructions were the notions of "masculinity" and "femininity," the aspects of the human identity that define someone as a man or a woman.

Self-definition was undeniably influenced by patriarchy and conservatism, which lead to differentiations between men and women, based on unfounded beliefs and stereotypes. Gender roles, gender expectations and gender normativity, described as "adhering to or reinforcing ideal standards of masculinity or femininity,"⁴¹ further increased inequalities between men and women in the United States. Gender-based stereotypes pinned women as physically and mentally weaker than men in any domain.

The common representation of American women in media, before gender studies, was deemed stereotypical and misogynist. Women were exhibited exclusively in households, painted as obeying to gender roles as they were seen cooking or nursing children. For decades, misconceptions around notions of sex and gender belittled women's condition in the United States. This representation of the "common" American woman, often stereotypical and negative not only belittled women's rights and gender inequalities, but it also alienated Black women who did not even fit within the stereotypical depiction of American women. Intertwined with women's studies, the late 1970s gender studies aimed at criticizing the impact of patriarchy on women's rights. However, gender studies would later reveal how Black women's relationship with the concept of gender in the early 1980s was overlooked by American society.

Bell Hooks, among many Black feminist writers, expressed concerns regarding the intersection of race and gender within American feminism. In *Ain't I A Woman*, Bell Hooks criticizes the illusionary support Black women received from White feminists in the early stages of gender studies and in Second Wave American feminism:

⁴¹ Retrieved on the *Merriam-webster online dictionary*. Available on: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender%20normative>>

As the racism of White women's rights advocates surfaced, the fragile bond between themselves and Black activists as broken [...] Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with White women activists who had publicly revealed their racism but to support only Black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice.⁴²

African American women were the direct casualties of gender issues in the Civil Rights Movement. However, improvements made in terms of racial relations between Black people and White people did not necessarily improve gender-based relations between Black men and women. In an article entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," published in 1983, Kimberlé Crenshaw criticizes the intentional ignorance of Black women's voice in both American society and the Black community:

Contemporary White feminists inherit not the legacy of [Sojourner] Truth's challenge to patriarchy but, instead, Truth's challenge to their forebears. Even today, the difficulty that women have traditionally experienced in sacrificing racial privilege to strengthen feminism renders them susceptible to Truth's critical question. When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect women's experience and women's experiences and women's aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask: "Ain't we Women?" If this is so, how can the claims that "women are", "women behave" and "women need" be made when such claims are inapplicable, or unresponsive to the needs, interests and experiences of Black women?⁴³

Black feminist writers and activists recognised the feeling of exclusion from American society in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though the first and second waves of American feminism upheld the illusion of a "national" feminism, in which all women would be heard, women of colour considered that their struggles with racism and gender-based discrimination were still silenced. Black female activists criticized the implication of nationalism on American feminism. They considered that White women from the earlier waves of feminism erased the plurality of women's identity in favour of nationalism. Racial discrimination towards Black women, as well as gender-based discrimination, were overlooked for the greater success of a feminist movement led by White women, for White women.

⁴² Extracted from Introduction to *Ain't I A Woman*.

⁴³ Op. cit., p.154 Available at <<http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>>

Black women's living conditions saw little improvements in terms of economy and education. The late 1970s were considered as the revealing period of Black women's inclusion within American society. Racism, sex and gender intertwined within their daily lives and became the matrix of identity crises amongst them. Within a society which showed little interest in valuing Black women's experiences and cultural heritage, Black women's identity crises grew alongside gender studies which, once again, overlooked Black women's condition. From their exclusion from American society grew writings and theories on Black womanhood in the United States, which would later influence a branch of feminism led by Black women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor in Law, Civil rights, and Black feminist Theory at UCLA⁴⁴ became one of the leading figures of Black studies in the late 1980s, alongside Angela Davis and other African American female activists. Black feminist theories aimed at redefining African Americanness from Black women's perspective, as they were often excluded from their own community. With an emphasis on gender, race and other issues which impacted Black women, the new branch of American feminism interlocked the Black women's experiences and knowledge in both American society and the Black community.

Before the rise of a Black feminist branch in the 1980s, patriarchy and gender-based discrimination within the Black community silenced Black women's protests. As stated in an essay entitled "Mapping the Margins Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," published in 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses how the impact of racism and gender within the Black community allowed little social improvement regarding Black women's living conditions:

Race and culture contribute to the suppression of domestic violence in other ways all well. Women of color are often reluctant to call the police, a hesitancy likely due to a general willingness among people of color to subject their private lives to the scrutiny and control of police force that is frequently hostile. There is also a more generalized community ethnic public intervention, the product of a desire to create a private world free from the diverse assault on the public lives of racially subordinated people. In this sense the home is not simply a man's castle in patriarchal terms, but it is also a safe haven from the indignities of life in a racist society. In many cases, the desire to protect the home as a safe have against

⁴⁴ The University of California, Los Angeles.

assault outside the home may make it more difficult for women of color to seek protection against assaults from within the home.⁴⁵

Black women were more likely to face discrimination and domestic violence from Black men due to their shared culture and history, impacted by racial struggle and violence. Among the theories developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, one had lasting impact on the feminist landscape: the notion of intersectionality, developed in 1989. Whether it be in American society or elsewhere, one may find several criteria used as discriminatory tools. Race, class, religion, age, or sexual orientation are often used to assert domination over one person or a group of people. One's skin complexion, physical or intellectual disabilities could either be used against them, or put a halt to their social integration, especially if these forms of discrimination overlap. Rather than analysing one's identity by adding each criterion one after the other, Kimberlé Crenshaw decided to cross them and study how the common logic between each criterion could affect someone's life. Instead of defining someone's identity through an accumulation of discrimination, intersectionality offered to analyse how these discriminations alter and influence people's lives when they intersect.

Thus, regarding African American women, Kimberlé Crenshaw considered that being a Black woman was an experience on itself rather than being Black, and a woman. The idea of an addition somehow implies that all discrimination is treated equally when sometimes, one might be more impactful than the other. Intersectionality was then used to analyse how the interconnection of race, gender, and many other criteria, affected the daily life of African American women. For many Black feminists, intersectionality confirmed their feeling of exclusion from both American feminism and American society.

Black women's specific struggles were overshadowed by Second wave American feminism. Gender studies, women's studies and intersectionality appeared quite late in Black women's fight for women's rights, which could explain the lack of proper solution to racial and gender inequalities in the 1980s. However, these new concepts worked as a criticism of American feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. They all highlighted Black women's exclusion from American society and influenced development of a Black feminism based on ethnic and gender inclusiveness. This Black feminist movement would put the emphasis on the inclusion of African American women in the political, economic and social American

⁴⁵ Op. cit., p.7

landscape. However, as we will see, though the Black feminist movement first seemed to value all Black women, it did not escape the identity crises to which Black women were confronted already in the earlier waves of American feminism. Neither did it escape patriarchy, which increased disparities within the Black community but also between White women and Black women from the 1980s onwards.

**PART 2: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT THE
CROSSROADS OF RACE AND GENDER STRUGGLES
IN THE 1980s**

2.1 Black women's exclusion from American feminism and the creation of Black feminism

Disillusionment and distrust regarding American feminism in the late 1970s led African American women to rethink their involvement within the movement. Many voices were raised to denounce how the social, economic, and political context of the time allowed but little improvement regarding the living conditions of Black women. The history of Black women in the United States is directly marked by racial and gender prejudices. Even though the abolition of slavery in 1865, and the direct recognition of Black men and women within the U.S Constitution,⁴⁶ led Black women to believe in racial equality, the implementation of segregation shattered their newly acquired sense of belonging to American society.

For decades, segregation perpetuated racial disparities, until the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s. African American men and women were prevented from actively participating to American society. They were excluded from discussions on American economy, education, politics and many other domains. Despite signs of progress thanks to protests, Black people's living conditions were marked by racial discrimination.

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* banned segregation in American schools. The Civil Rights Movement, led by Black figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, resulted in the improvements of the Black condition in the United States. Black men and women were recognized as American citizens through the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*. Signed by President Lyndon Johnson after John F. Kennedy's death in 1963, the Act stated the immediate ending of racial segregation in public places. The official document declared "discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin"⁴⁷ illegal and reprehensible. The 1965 *Voting Rights Act* allowed voting rights to all Americans. Before 1965, segregation monitored Black suffrage by imposing literacy tests and paid voting polls to Black men and women. Since the economic and social conditions of African Americans favoured poverty and illiteracy, they were deemed unfit to vote. Signed by President Lyndon Johnson as well, the *Civil Rights Act* reasserted Black suffrage despite its presence in the U.S Constitution since 1865.

⁴⁶ Through the three following amendments: The thirteenth amendment put an end to slavery, the fourteenth amendment gave citizenship to Black men and women and the fifteenth amendment allowed Blacks to vote.

⁴⁷ Extracted from the official transcript for the Civil Rights Act (1964)

African American men were now able to have diplomas and have access to high-paid professions such as doctors, surgeons or lawyers. However, despite improvements in various areas, the impact of racial segregation on the daily life of African Americans was still visible, as many of them struggled to reach economic stability.

Whether it be housing or employment, there were still disparities between Black and White families. In *Civilisation des Etats-Unis*, published in 1995, Marie-Christine Pauwels analyses the link between race and economy. According to her, “racial segregation is now often replaced or exacerbated by economic segregation.”⁴⁸ In the mid-1970s, Black men and women were more likely to face economic difficulties due to their ethnic origins.

The persistence of housing segregation is a leading cause of poor social integration. While school desegregation politics have had very positive effects since the 1960s, housing patterns have changed little. In the North, only a small proportion of better-off African-Americans live alongside Whites in integrated neighborhoods (unlike well-off Hispanics and Asians, more tolerated in major-White areas). Cities in the South are somewhat less segregated. This is one of the reasons why half of the African-American community lives there today.⁴⁹

The Civil Rights Movement, though improving the living conditions of African Americans considerably, did not fully erase racial issues and disparities between Black and White Americans. As for employment, Marie-Christine Pauwels’ studies on incomes highlights a greater threat to equality between Black people and White people: gender. Even though “on average, African-Americans are hit twice as hard by unemployment as the rest of the population, especially young Blacks from the inner-city,”⁵⁰ Black women were more likely to face even higher unemployment rate than Black men:

Black households are also poorer: their median income is 60% that of White households, a low figure that may be explained by the high proportion of Black female-headed households, traditionally poorer.⁵¹

The employment of African American women was impacted by a “*glass ceiling*, insidiously barring the way to the top.”⁵² Though the notion of race often appeared as the first factor of discrimination, its convolution with gender put a series of barriers on Black

⁴⁸ Op. cit., p.76

⁴⁹ Op. cit., p.77

⁵⁰ Op. cit., p.76

⁵¹ Op. cit., p.76

⁵² Op. cit., p.76

women's social improvement. Black women first partook in feminist protests for the recognition of women's rights within American society, then in Civil rights marches for the integration of Black people. Even though African American women were already facing a double struggle, based on race and gender, many considered their involvement in both movements pointless. Regarding American feminism, the earlier waves of feminism, impacted by racism and segregation, showed little support to women of colour. As for the Civil Rights Movement, the political, physical and economic support provided by Black women during the marches was overlooked, as well as their demands for women's rights in the Black community.

Before Dr. Martin Luther King's involvement in the racial struggles of the United States, Black women were more likely to take low-paid jobs to maintain their already weakened living conditions. From maids to nurses, Black women were often offered work opportunities which perpetuated segregationist beliefs and belittled their existence due to their skin complexion. In Alice Walker's essay *The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It*, she interviews a Black woman who recollects on the difficulty for Black women to identify themselves within American society: "Black was not a color on my mother; it was a shield that made her invisible."⁵³

Despite the physical presence of women of colour during activism for women's rights in the United States, First and Second wave American feminism failed to include them in their discourses and political ideals. From the late 1970s onwards, gender and Black studies would reveal the social, economic and political disparities between Black women and White women. They would also lead African American women to perceive the existing movement as a threat to their social development. From the illusion of belonging thus grew a desire for emancipation and self-definition. Black feminism was developed from African American women's struggle with racial and gender issues in the United States. African American women believed that American history prospered without recognising their involvement within American society. Directly opposed to a "White" feminism, the Black feminist movement aimed at recognizing women's rights for women of colour, including Black women. After American society denied them access to their own womanhood and economic independence for decades, many Black feminist authors wrote on the necessity for

⁵³ Op. cit., p.154

Black women to be integrated within the Black community and American society without any racial or gender expectation.

However, the divergence of voices within the Black feminist movement would, once again, reveal the complexity of Black women's identity. In the late 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw's studies on intersectionality became the standard-bearer of Black feminism, and the precursor of Third wave feminism in the United States. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights the numerous social, political and economic difficulties Black women encounter on a daily basis. Though White women often face similar struggles, they did not include Black women in their fight for women's rights:

The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a White racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when White women speak for and as women. The authoritative universal voice-usually White male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity -is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics. When feminist theory attempts to describe women's experiences through analyzing patriarchy, sexuality, or separate spheres ideology, it often overlooks the role of race. Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and, moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women.⁵⁴

Black feminist theories acknowledged a certain hierarchy in American feminism, based on race and gender. Despite their undeniable struggle to be integrated within American society, White women were still highly favoured. Their skin colour allowed them a sense of freedom which had been denied to both Black men and Black women. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, Black women's living conditions would have never improved had they continued to try to fit within the first two waves of American feminism. Despite the Civil Rights Movement and anti-segregation laws, Black women still faced racism and discrimination.

The U.S economic, political, social and educational landscape rarely acknowledged Black women as independent and capable beings, due to racial and gender-based stereotypes.

⁵⁴ Op. cit., p.154

Intersectionality and Black studies led by African American women did not erase or exclude Black men's impact on Black women's condition. Kimberlé Crenshaw considered that Black men, just like White men, had responsibilities regarding the lack of support towards Black women, before and after the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, patriarchy and gender-based beliefs very often went beyond the concept of ethnic solidarity within the Black community. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", Kimberlé Crenshaw analyses the cognitive dissonances among Black women who were already fighting against racism and patriarchy. She refers to controversial American writer Shahrazad Ali whose work, *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman*, published in 1989 was perceived as harmful to Black women, Black feminist theories and, on a wider scope, to the Black community:

In this stridently antifeminist tract, anchor for Ali draws a positive correlation between domestic violence and the liberation of African Americans. Ali blames the deteriorating conditions within the African-American community on the insubordination of Black women and on the failure of Black men to control them (Ali 1989, pp. viii, 76). Ali goes so far as to advise Black men to physically chastise Black women when they are "disrespectful" (p. 169). While she cautions that Black men must use moderation in disciplining "their" women, she argues that Black men must sometimes resort to physical force to reestablish the authority over Black women that racism has disrupted.⁵⁵

Black feminists criticized such discourses as they only solidified stereotypes affecting Black men and women, as described in Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics":

Even though it was sometimes acknowledged that the Black community was not immune from domestic violence and other manifestations of gender subordination, some nevertheless felt that in the absence of positive Black male images in the media, portraying such images merely reinforced racial stereotypes.⁵⁶

With Black men often portrayed as aggressive beings and Black women as either passive or disobedient, it became clear to many Black feminists that their way to social, political and economic acceptance would be long and difficult, regardless of the improvements made in the 1960s and 1970s. Black women felt compelled to develop their

⁵⁵ Op.cit., p.6

⁵⁶ Op. cit., p.163

own field of theories and studies which would seek for inclusiveness and offer a voice to women of colour in the United States. Even though the late 1970s and early 1980s were marked by Black feminism, which recognized women of colour as American citizens, the struggle for self-identification among Black women never stopped. Their voices were, once again, overshadowed by the dominant White feminism which had existed for decades and imposed itself as the only American feminism. Studies and theories led by Black feminists only confirmed the influence of race, gender, and patriarchy on White women and on the first waves of American feminism. White women's lack of consideration for Black women came as a difficult realisation, but Black women outgrew from this illusion of belonging and developed their own feminist theories.

However, Black women were not immune from expressing discrimination towards other Black women. As we will see, Black women's complex relationship with American society would lead to even more identity crises among them. Disagreement based on racial, social, gender-based and religious beliefs would reveal the fragility of Black feminism, which originally sought to distance itself from these same criteria of discrimination.

2.2 Racism and sexism on Black women's educational and political environment

Decades prior to the development of a Black feminism, African American women already faced discrimination in the United States. Though the *Nineteenth Amendment*, ratified in 1920, granted American women the right to vote, Black women faced difficulties to partake in women's suffrage. Already in 1848, numerous female activists, including Elizabeth Cady Staton and Lucretia Mott expressed the need for women to be included in the development of American society. Elizabeth Cady Staton⁵⁷ was one of the leading figures of both the American women's rights movement and the Abolitionist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. She dedicated almost her entire life to the improvement of women's living conditions within American society. She was accompanied by Lucretia Mott⁵⁸, an early feminist activist for gender equality. Both Staton and Mott penned the *Declaration of Sentiments*, which embodied the call for women's suffrage in the United States.

⁵⁷ Retrieved on the *Women of the Hall* website. Available on: <<https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/elizabeth-cady-stanton>>

⁵⁸ Retrieved on the *Women History* website. Available on: <<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/lucretia-mott>>

They penned the Seneca Fall Convention and its *Declaration of Sentiments*. Based on the *American Declaration of Independence*, the Declaration denounced the numerous inequalities between men and women in the United States. Suffrage, housing taxes and other various subjects were evoked during the Seneca Fall Convention held in New York. Signed by more than three hundred women, as well as many male attendees, both the Convention and the Declaration were met with criticism due to what many considered as unrealistic demands.

Decades after the Seneca Fall Convention, and a decline in the fight for women's rights in the United States due to the First World War, the *Nineteenth Amendment* was ratified in 1920. The latter stated that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

The Amendment, approved by President Woodrow Wilson, allowed all American women to have access to suffrage, decades after White men and Black men. Though women then had the impression of belonging to American society, they faced few changes in the way the male-centred American society perceived them. It was even more complicated for Black women, whose living conditions had already been altered by racism and sexism.

In an online article entitled "How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women," writer Brent Staples expresses how, already in the late nineteenth century, the suffrage movement led by White American women was not necessarily meant to include women of colour in their fight:

Its worst offences may be that it rendered nearly invisible the Black women who labored in the suffragist vineyard and that it looked away from the racism that tightened its grip on the fight for the women's vote in the years after the Civil War.⁵⁹

Despite Elizabeth Cady Stanton's abolitionist views, the suffrage movement mainly aimed at improving the life of White American women from middle and upper classes. Both Stanton and Mott voted against the *Fifteenth Amendment* in 1870, which granted African-American men the right to vote in the United States. Torn between their desire for women's suffrage and the improvement of racial-based relations between Blacks and Whites, both women ultimately decided to focus on women's condition, stating that "[The amendment]

⁵⁹Article available on <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/opinion/sunday/suffrage-movement-racism-Black-women.html>>

creates an antagonism everywhere between educated, refined women and the lower orders of men, especially in the South.”⁶⁰

According to Brent Staples, Elizabeth Cady Stanton “embraced fairness in the abstract while publicly enunciating bigoted views of African-American men, whom she characterized as “Sambos” and incipient rapists in the period just after the war.”⁶¹

The racism expressed by Elizabeth Cady Staton not only contradicted her abolitionist ideologies but, more importantly, went against the women’s suffrage movement. Her perception of Black men inevitably reflected on Black women, who shared specific features and kinship with Black men. Black women were then less inclined to partake in a movement in which they would not feel welcome.

However, despite their growing voices and protests, Black women would only, and implicitly, be granted the right to vote almost a century later, through the 1965 *Voting Right Act*. Before the Act, Black women had but little presence within American politics. They were silenced by decades of sexism and racism within American society and within their own community. Thus, Black women’s living condition cannot be analysed without the intersection of racism and sexism, as these two criteria of discrimination often impacted their lives and education at an early age.

In an article entitled “The Education of African American Girls and Women: Past to Present,” published in 2007, authors Veronica G. Thomas and Janine A. Jackson discuss the history of African American women’s education after the Civil Rights Movement:

Issues related to the education of African American girls and women shifted tremendously in the latter part of the 20th century, especially at the elementary and secondary levels. On the positive side, the Civil rights and women's movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s served as major catalysts against racial and gender discrimination in education and other aspects (e.g., employment, athletics) of American life.⁶²

African American women’s education was greatly affected by racism and sexism in numerous American schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even though the *Voting*

⁶⁰ Op. cit.

⁶¹ Op. cit.

⁶² Retrieved on <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034578>> Op. cit., p.365

Rights Act allowed African Americans access to politics, and indirectly to education, many Southern states refused to implement these new changes within their schools and colleges.

In a report from the National Centre for Education Statistics, published in 1995, disparities between the education of White people and Black people could already be found in preschool:

Black children are at an educational disadvantage relative to White children for a number of reasons, including lower average levels of parental education, a greater likelihood of living with only one parent, fewer resources in their communities as a result of income-based residential segregation, and, especially, a greater likelihood of experiencing poverty.⁶³

In areas marked by economic difficulties, both White and Black children from 3 to 4 years old faced similar enrolment rates in the 1970s: 20% in 1973 and 25% in 1977. However, the enrolment rates of African American children declined from 1980 onwards, due to the economic disadvantage between Blacks and Whites. According to the *National Centre for Education Statistics Report*, the academic gap between Black and White children would only increase in elementary and secondary schools:

In 1971, average reading proficiency among 17-year-old Blacks was well below that of 17-year-old Whites and even well below that of 13-year-old Whites; in 1992, the proficiency of 17-year-old Blacks was about the same as that of 13-year-old Whites.⁶⁴

Despite indisputable improvements regarding the education of Black children, the gap between the academic results of Black and White children was never narrowed nor reversed. Among the earliest consequences regarding the educational gap between Black and White scholars in the 1970s was the higher chance for Black children to drop out of school due to their low scores. In 1972, the school dropout rates for students aged 16 to 24 was 21% for Black children and 12% for White children. Such differences between their education were often linked to the notion of race, deeply rooted within American society.

However, as explained in “The Education of African American Girls and Women: Past to Present”, these studies on the education of Black children in The United States overlooked the impact of racism on the education of African American women:

⁶³ Retrieved on the *National Centre for Education Statistic website*. P.53

⁶⁴ Op. cit., p.53

Unfortunately, however, the emphasis on African American boys is generally undertaken in the absence of a critical look at the experiences and obstacles confronting African American girls who are educated by the same woefully inadequate school systems as their African American male counterparts. As a result, relatively little is known about how these girls are faring in our PK-12 educational systems, as well as how to assess their outcomes within a framework that takes into account the interactive influence of gender, race, and oftentimes, class.⁶⁵

From an ethnic standpoint, studies led on the living conditions of Black people in the United States revealed that, in the 1970s, African Americans -as a community- faced racism and discrimination regarding employment after school completion. However, studies led by African American female theorists, feminists and professors have highlighted the intersection of racism and sexism within the education of Black women.

In an article entitled “Having Their Lives Narrowed Down? The State of Black Women's College Success,” published in 2015, author Rachelle Winkle-Wagner expresses how “the college success of Black women, although multifaceted, remains underexplored due to the trend in the research of examining students of color as a group at the aggregate level.”⁶⁶ Black women are often excluded from studies which analyse the relationship between the American educational system and Black people. First, Black women’s exclusion somehow originated from assimilation. They were assimilated to the racial category “Black”, which erased differences between Black men and Black women. Gender-wise, Black women were assimilated to the category “women”, which ignored the racial disparities between Black women and White women.

Even though “Black women earn substantially more bachelor’s degrees than Black men, and the difference doubled between 1977 and 1991,”⁶⁷ they were more likely to face discrimination and unemployment. Gender-based discrimination towards African American women were influenced by patriarchy, which placed White men at the top of the economic, political, and social hierarchy. The intersection of race and gender within Black women’s ethnic origins, historical background and social position ultimately placed them at the very bottom of American hierarchy.

⁶⁵ Op. cit., p.359

⁶⁶ Retrieved on <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24434255>> Op. cit., p.172

⁶⁷ Data extracted from the *National Centre for Education Statistics website*.

Black women's physical features, mental capacities and behaviour were scrutinized and compared to those of White women. These comparisons, which often originated from sexist and racist stereotypes, denigrated Black women's intellect and greatly impacted their professional development, regardless of their degrees or qualifications. As expressed in "The Education of African American Girls and Women: Past to Present", studies led by Black women in the late 1970s denounced Black women's devaluation within American society:

However, many African American women lack the necessary support systems to deal with role overload and role conflict, and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and gender stereotypes can combine to create double obstacles for them.⁶⁸

These studies, led by Black feminist figures and writers asserted that Black women were simply not asked about their opinion on American politics, education or economics or any other domain. Among the criticism raised towards the lack of consideration regarding Black women, the common observation was that historically, Black women had shown no interest in such topics, unlike White feminists. However, as previously stated, the American White feminism of the mid-twentieth century also suppressed the voice of Black women for its own benefits and success.

According to Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, Black women's lives are constantly "narrowed down"⁶⁹ by American society for racial, economic or political purposes. To prevent Black women from diverting from the Black community, Black men used race to narrow down Black women's quest for self-identification. Gender also played a role in the narrowing of Black women's quest for equal rights. The male-centred American society perceived them as women amongst other women, narrowing down the impact of racial disparities between White women and Black women, while White feminists considered them as numbers which were added their protests.

Despite the significant improvements regarding the education of Black women from the 1970s onwards, many Black female activists and writers could not overlook the never-ending impact of racism and sexism in the way African American women were treated within American society.

⁶⁸ Op. cit., p.368

⁶⁹ In "Having Their Lives Narrowed Down? The State of Black Women's College Success", previously cited.

The analysis of Black women's education only revealed greater difficulties for them to adapt in a society that disregarded them despite their political, economic, and educational achievements. The disregard of their Black identity and womanhood made the improvement of their living conditions, in what many consider a patriarchal society, even more difficult. Both racism and sexism impacted Black women's living conditions in American society. As their solution to exclusion appeared to be the Black feminist movement, which they developed alongside Second wave feminism, Black women hoped for changes within a movement which belonged to them.

However, as we will see, racism and sexism greatly impacted Black womanhood and Black feminism, especially with the important place of conservatism within the Black community. Not only will conservatism interfere within Black women's identity crises, but it will reshape American feminism from the late 1970s onwards.

2.3 Black women and conservatism: discordances and new branches of feminism

The exclusion of Black women from American politics, economy, and other key domains of American society, increased their desire to create a feminism which would value Black women's identity. The 1980s saw a growing number of branches within the Black feminist movement. Black feminists from different states and social conditions all agreed that, while being an important aspect of American society, the earlier waves of American feminism rarely coincided with their own struggles.

Whether it be Elizabeth Cady Stanton's early feminist protests or the earlier waves of American feminism, the movement barely acknowledged racial inclusiveness. Any improvement made regarding women's rights in the United States mainly applied to White women from higher social classes. American feminism, sometimes unintentionally, suppressed women of colour's ethnic background and only perceived them as women. Black women were then unable to express the inequalities they endured as Black women, both within American society and within the African American community.

Women's studies and Black studies in the 1980s led to the appearance of an organized Black feminist movement in which Black women, from different states and social classes, discussed their experiences as women of colour in a White, and male-dominated

American society. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis and many female authors rallied under the idea of a Black feminism which offered them a sense of belonging. Through this Black feminism, African American women expressed their different opinions on topics such as women's rights and equal rights, or on more personal matters such as sex, religion and politics.

However, many Black women expressed their concern regarding the "inclusive" aspect of this newly developed Black feminism. Black feminists' divergence in opinions and principles slowly became forms of discrimination within Black feminism. Black women who disagreed with the ideas and ideals expressed by the leading figures of the movement felt targeted and excluded from Black feminism.

Black women's division regarding matters which impacted African Americans was already visible before the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the *Fifteenth Amendment*, which supposedly granted the right to vote to all American citizens, Black men were prohibited from entering voting polls in numerous states even in the 1960s. The issue of suffrage in the United States challenged Black women's identity and self-protests as they were, once again, torn between their feeling of belonging to the Black cause and women's cause. As Black women were already struggling to find their place in the earliest waves of American feminism, they were asked to choose between two sides.

In an article for the *History.com website*, entitled "How Early Suffragists Sold Out Black Women", published in 2017, author Becky Little discusses the pressure that was put on Black women on whether they would choose to support suffrage either for White women or for Black men, knowing that in any case, they would benefit little from both since "Black women fall out of this equation."⁷⁰ The union between Black women and White women within the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) in 1866 did not last enough as its leaders, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, refused to support Black men's suffrage and, indirectly, Black women's suffrage.

Were Black women to stand besides Black men in their fight for suffrage, White feminists would have considered them as opponents to women's rights. On the contrary, the

⁷⁰ The full quotation is from History Professor Lisa Tertault: "There's tension from the very beginning over the priority of those two demands," [...] Black women fall out of this equation." The quote can be seen in Becky Little's article.

Retrieved on < <https://www.history.com/news/central-park-to-get-its-first-ever-statues-of-real-life-women> >

Black community would have perceived them as Black women who gave away their African Americanness to defend what they perceived as White women's cause. The different perception of Black women's identity marked a seizure in the principles they shared within the Black community and nurtured identity crises among African American women.

The issue of Black suffrage continued for decades and the Civil Rights Movement only furthered Black women's conflictual relations. In a 2009 article for the *Teaching Tolerance website*, entitled "Sexism in the Civil Rights Movement: A Discussion Guide," writer Jennifer Holladay analyses how "the sexism that was present in the Civil Rights Movement was a continuation of oppressive mentality that existed in the larger U.S. culture, which was and is a White, male-dominated culture."⁷¹

Gender-based discrimination within the African American community increased conflicts amongst Black women. Some of them assumed the gender roles that were expected from them in order to defend what they considered a greater cause: social and racial justice. Other forms of discrimination have led Black women to create branches of Black feminism in the United States, from the 1980s onwards. As African American women were already impacted by racism and sexism, they also endured forms of discrimination which originated from centuries of White oppression.

Conservatism, for example, had an important place in the Black community and increased Black women's identity crises. Conservatism refers to the "tendency to preserve traditional values and oppose change, esp. in politics."⁷² In American history, conservatism played a key role in racial tensions. Indentured servitude, slavery and segregation aimed at maintaining White men's position at the top of American society. To do so, physical and psychological means were used to prevent people of colour from "surpassing" White people. Besides the need to preserve one's social, political, or economic position within any given society, conservatism also applied to more personal matters, including religion.

In an article for the *Harvard Theoretical Review*, "Conservatism in Religion," published in 1913, author E. Albert Cook describes religious conservatism as the

⁷¹ Retrieved on the *Tolerance.org website*. Available on: <<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/sexism-in-the-civil-rights-movement-a-discussion-guide>>

⁷² Definition retrieved on the Cambridge online dictionary. Available on: <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/conservatism>>

“maintenance of the old for its own sake,”⁷³ with the practise of religion and faith as a way for White men and women to protect themselves from the physical and psychological dangers they may encounter in the outer world. Over centuries, patriarchy and politics intersected with American conservatism on subjects such as sexual orientation, birth control and women’s rights. Black women were inevitably bound to face conservatism in its many discriminatory forms. Surprisingly enough, many Black women embraced American conservatism as it benefited them, while others were critical towards it due to its harmful ideologies.

In an article for the *Journal of Black Studies* entitled “What Came to American Politics ?-Contemporary Black Conservatism,” writer Elwood Watson describes how, in the 1980s and 1990s, highly-educated Black men and women participated in the development of a Black conservatism in hope for the improvement of their living conditions:

The message that these individuals have espoused is one of equal opportunity, self-reliance, and individual initiative, and a message that encouraged community-based approaches to problem solving, a message that endorsed less government intervention, strengthening the Black family, and abolishing the welfare state.⁷⁴

Those who refused to compel to conservatism, including a growing number of Black feminists, harshly criticized its negative impact on African American women’s identity:

They [Black conservatives] have been referred to as racial traitors and right-wing racists. Some Black conservatives have also been accused of self-hatred, of egoism, of being disrespectful toward the poor, of being "house niggers," and of being willing to sell out an entire race for the sake of their own gratification.⁷⁵

Even though African Americans had shared conservationist beliefs, especially regarding their African Americanness, for centuries, the growing Black conservatism only increased their desire to be socially and economically equal with White Americans:

Many Black scholars and leaders agree that the African American community has a long tradition of being socially conservative in its behavior. African Americans share a tradition of being churchgoers, of building cohesive family units through their reliance on extended family and kinship networks, and of adhering to other principles that have been identified as

⁷³Retrieved on <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1507420>>

⁷⁴ Op. cit., p.73

⁷⁵ Op. cit., p.73

conservative. This sort of social conservatism among many Blacks was pertinent for survival.⁷⁶

For numerous Black feminists however, the Black conservatism extolled by some Black women was not compatible with the Black feminist movement. More importantly, it defied their perception of notions such as sex and gender in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an era which embraced inclusiveness and Black women's sexual freedom. Among the numerous subjects on which Black conservative women and Black feminists disagreed on, sexuality and sexual identity deepened Black women's identity crises.

Even though the question of sexuality was discussed on a nationwide scope, it seems important to highlight how much it impacted Black women's quest for their own identity in the United States. One of the earliest voices to discuss the importance of conservatism on Black women's living conditions was Alice Walker. Walker's studies on the intersection of race, gender and sex within the life of African American women led her to develop another vision of Black feminism in the 1980s: "womanism". In the introduction to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker defines her womanist ideology through two different aspects:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist of feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior.
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and whole of entire people, male *and* female.⁷⁷

According to Alice Walker, womanism embraces the cultural background of Black women, with its joyful moments and trauma, as it is those experiences that build the identity of Black women. Black women's studies on race and gender in the post-Civil Rights era cemented Black women's creativity, ingenuity, and boldness within American society. However, Black women's identity does not revolve around their African Americanness as it tackles the question of gender and sex.

⁷⁶ Op. cit., p.75

⁷⁷ Op. cit., p.XI

Walker's womanist ideology, though sharing similarities with Black feminism, offers a more intimate analysis of Black womanhood. Black women's sexual identity has been challenged by conservatism, as it was the case for White women's sexual identity. Conservative ideas and ideals made women's sexual identity a form of discrimination, especially within Black feminism. In "Looking to the Side, and Back"⁷⁸, Alice Walker writes on the question of homosexuality and same-sex relations within the African American community. Walker expresses how, within Black feminism, the idea of two Black women being emotionally and physically attracted to each other was challenged by the intersection of race and gender in the 1980s:

Many Black women, myself among them, assumed we had a right to be loved and treated well. We did not, fortunately, limit ourselves to any category or group, even if we were inclined to do so. We wanted love, respect, admiration, and moral support. We did not spurn getting these things wherever they could be found. Many Black women, however, were reduced to the condition of grumbling after some anonymous Black man on the street as he strolled along beside what he loved, respected, admired, and sometimes supported – and it was often not a woman, and very often not Black. Many of these women found find themselves hating lesbians because in a sense the lesbian has "gotten away clean." She isn't concerned about *what* Black men do.⁷⁹

Even though discrimination based on one's sexual identity originate from religious beliefs shared within American conservatism, one cannot deny the impact of race and gender on the way Black women perceived queer Black women. According to Walker, Black women were taught that "the responsibility of the Black woman is to support the Black man; *whatever* he does."⁸⁰ Many Black women, including heterosexual Black feminists, agreed to this principle as religious conservatism considered homosexuality and same-sex relations as sins. Black lesbian feminists, pansexual women and women who did not partake into American conservatism, thus felt excluded from the growing Black feminism of the 1980s.

As the issue of Black women's sexual identity and freedom within the African American community was overlooked, new branches of Black feminism would then appear. For example, the Combahee River Collective, which was active from 1964 to 1980, presented itself as a Black feminist movement which took into consideration Black women's

⁷⁸ Short story extracted from Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*.

⁷⁹ Op. cit., p.315

⁸⁰ Op. cit., p.317

sexual identity. Despite the short-lived aspect of the organisation, the Combahee River Collective left an important mark on the fight for an inclusive American feminism. The organisation was led by queer women of colour who expressed their radical opposition to patriarchy, conservatism and other forms of discrimination. The Combahee River Collective also criticized how sex-based, gender-based and racial discrimination within the African American community impacted Black women's quest for self-identification and self-acceptance. As a written record of their involvement in American Feminism, the leading figures of the organisation penned the 1977 *Combahee River Collective Statement*, in which they expressed their radical perception of American society:

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. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.⁸¹

The manifesto marked a turning point for women of colour in the 1980s and reshaped their perception of American feminism. Chicana feminists Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 *This Bridge Called My Back*, a collection of writings by radical women of colour, serves as an example of the lasting impact of the Combahee River Collective on American feminism. Alongside other women of colour, Moraga and Anzaldúa discuss the intersection of race, gender class and other forms of discrimination in the living conditions of women of colour.

As the *Combahee River Collective Statement* did a year prior, *This Bridge Called My Back* embraces the importance of an inclusive feminism which would benefit to all women, regardless of their sexual orientation, social status, or skin colour. The direct confrontation to American conservatism would soon pave the way for the 1990s Third wave American feminism, influenced by the technological revolutions of the time.

⁸¹ Manifesto Retrieved on the *University of Yale website*. Available at <<https://americanstudies.yale.edu>>

**PART 3: BLACK WOMEN FROM THE 1990s ONWARDS:
ARE THERE WAYS OUT OF IDENTITY CRISES?**

3.1 Black women and Third wave American feminism

In the United States, the early 1990s were marked by economic growth in numerous domains. More Americans were employed, others had access to wage growth and promotions at various workplaces. According to the *U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics website*, from 1990 onwards, over 2 million Americans were employed in the United States.⁸² The job growth originated from the country's development of new technologies, which contributed to the United States' global leadership in the 1990s.

According to the website, ten domains and industries saw a sharp improvement in job growth in the early 1990s: personal supply; restaurants; local government and education; computer services; local government; miscellaneous bus service; offices of doctors; hospitals; miscellaneous and recreation services; management and public relations services.⁸³ However, the handling of U.S politics, economy and judicial system between the transition, from the late 1980s to the 1990s, played an important role in the development of the domains listed above.

Politics-wise, the United States had just left Ronald Reagan's presidency, which many considered as the "Second American Revolution."⁸⁴ Reagan's trust in capitalism and tax cuts helped the United States to leave recession and gain employment growth (20 million jobs) in the 1980s. The 1990s then began with a new President, George H. W. Bush, from 1990 to 1993. George H. W. Bush resumed Ronald Reagan's republican ideals and vision of American society.

George H. W. Bush and Ronald Reagan rekindled American conservatism in the United States. From increased funds injected into the U.S military system and U.S defence, to tax cuts in order to improve American economy, both men aimed at making America one of the leading figures in global leadership.

The sense of nationalism shared by the Republican Party, and by its Republican presidents, nurtured the country's attachment to conservative beliefs regarding reproductive rights, human rights and racial relations. With the new sense of power, acquired with the back-to-back elections of two Republican U.S presidents, conservatives considered that they

⁸² Retrieved on <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2001/jan/wk4/art03.htm?view_full>

⁸³ Previously cited.

⁸⁴ Retrieved on the *Reagan Foundation website*. Available on: <<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/the-presidency/economic-policy>>

had the right to express their concerns regarding abortion, birth control and Civil rights in the United States.

Despite being treated as an era of technical and technological advances, the 1990s felt like a step back for numerous women, as such divisive subjects directly impacted their lives. Opposing political parties, minorities and Civil Rights Activists all denounced the impact of conservatism on American society, even after the Civil Rights Movement and the first waves of American feminism. From 1989 to 1993, George H. W. Bush's presidency was considered with caution by Civil Rights activists, due to his previous opposition to the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*. The presidency was also criticized by American women and feminists who advocated for women's rights years prior to George H. W. Bush's election.

Racial inequalities, gender inequalities, abortion and numerous controversial subjects, marked George H. W. Bush's presidency. Both Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, unable to position themselves regarding abortion and the question of race, due to the conservative pressure from their electorate, somehow partook in the growing racial and gender issues of American society. The beginning of the 1990s, marked by two different presidencies, had a direct impact on women's rights in the United States. Two decades after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade legal case*, which resulted in the legalization of abortion,⁸⁵ the controversial aspect of abortion was still at the centre of discussion in American politics. Numerous voices, including women, opposed abortion. From a religious standpoint, they believed abortion was a sin, with the belief that women were refusing a divine gift. From a gender standpoint, men perceived abortion as women's refusal to fulfil their gendered role, which was to become a mother.

Though Second wave American feminism played an important role in the improvements regarding women's rights in the 1990s, the notion of race inevitably altered American feminism. As expressed earlier, neither the first nor the second wave of American feminism voiced the need to include women of colour in their fight for equal rights. From equal wage to the improvement of women's living conditions, White women's racial background often helped them overcome the glass ceiling they met in male-centred American society.

⁸⁵ Retrieved on the *History.com website*. Available on : <<https://www.history.com/topics/womens-rights/roe-v-wade>>

The conservative beliefs surrounding their skin colour put White women above women of colour. These beliefs excluded women of colour, including Black women, from benefiting the same quality of life White women had acquired through decades of protest. Once again, women of colour appeared as the first casualties of the intersection of race, conservatism and gender in American society.

Already in the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan's policy vilified women of colour who were already dealing with low-incomes, healthcare disparities and racism. Reagan described them as "Welfare queens"⁸⁶ because of their need for social programs. He first used the term to refer to Linda Taylor, a biracial American woman who committed frauds and numerous crimes against the American economic system. However, the term "Welfare queen", with its racist and sexist connotations, amplified the stereotypes that accompanied the identity of Black women, who were more likely to face economic distress. During Second wave American feminism, and up until the late 1980s, Black women with low incomes were then perceived as a threat to the American economy.

Second wave American feminism flourished within such a political context and deepened the distinction, of ideas and ideals, between White women and Black women in the late 1980s. Third wave American feminism, with its new ideals and wider perspective for Black women in the early 1990s, then appeared in reaction to the exclusion of women of colour from American feminism and American society.

Third wave American feminism would follow the technical and technological revolutions of the 1990s, which many considered as the "Good Decade."⁸⁷ In 1992, the development of a feminism that entirely relied on inclusiveness would be coined as "Third wave feminism"⁸⁸ by feminist and activist Rebecca Walker. Daughter of Black feminist Alice Walker, Rebecca Walker partook into feminist activism at a young age and became one of the prominent figures of Third wave American feminism. In an article for the feminist journal *M.s*, Rebecca Walker described her own feminist writings and activism as her being the representative of a "Third Wave."⁸⁹ For Black feminists, the newly developed American Third wave feminism became a turning point in the recognition of Black female voices in

⁸⁶ Term Retrieved on "The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, Class, and Public Opinion", an article published in volume 15 of *Race, Gender & Class* (2008) and written by Carly Hayden Foster. Available at <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/41674659>>

⁸⁷ Retrieved on the *History.com website* < <https://www.history.com/news/1990s-the-good-decade>>

⁸⁸ Article entitled "Becoming The Third Wave", for the *Ms Magazine* in 1992.

⁸⁹ Rebecca Walker stated: "I am the third wave".

feminism. One of the first objectives of the movement was to fully embrace the principle of inclusiveness which was only idealised in the early waves of feminism.

Third wave feminist criticized the intersection of conservatism with Black female voices and Black feminism. They believed that, in Second wave feminism, numerous Black women were influenced by the heteronormative and religious environment they lived in. Within this environment, race, sexual orientation and other forms of discrimination were used to undermine Black female voices. Black queer women or Black women with no religious belongings were excluded from various discussions for the betterment of Black women's living conditions since they did not "fit" in the traditional image of the American Black woman. Gender-based and racial stereotypes not only affected Black women in the late 1980s, but they were perpetuated by Black women themselves and on themselves.

Third wave American feminism was then developed in reaction to the illusion of inclusiveness, which Black heterosexual women and White women extolled in the earlier waves of feminism. White feminists believed that the voices of all women, including those of women of colour, unified under one singular voice: the voice of the American woman. However, the voices of White feminists and activists outnumbered, overshadowed and disregarded Black women's struggle to fit into the agenda of the first two waves of American feminism. During Second wave feminism, Black feminists criticized the narrow-minded perception of womanhood in the United States. They considered that White women overlooked the microaggressions and discrimination faced by women of colour.

When laws providing better living and working conditions to White women in the United States passed, few White feminists questioned whether these laws also applied to women of colour. From birth control to financial support, the universalisation of women's voices in the First and Second American feminism could have suggested that women of colour also saw improvements regarding their way of living. However, the illusion of inclusiveness shared within the earlier waves of American feminism only deepened the economic, political and social disparities between Black women and White women in the United States.

Third wave American feminism thus held a certain distrust towards its predecessors, especially regarding how the earlier waves used race, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of discrimination in American feminism, to silence women with different beliefs and point of views. As expressed in an article entitled "What Is Third wave feminism? A New

Direction Essay”, published in 2008 and written by R. Claire Snyder, “Third wavers want their own version of feminism that addresses their different societal contexts and the particular set of challenges they face.”⁹⁰ The early days of Third wave feminism were marked by a sense of uncertainty regarding the societal aspect of the movement. Third wavers did not necessarily consider their “wave” as a continuation of the work done in the earlier waves. Neither did they perceive it as a rebranding for the mistakes done prior to the third wave. What mattered to third wave feminists was to offer proper solutions to the identity crises which were highlighted by second wave American feminism in the 1980s. Among these identity crises were the consideration of Black women within American feminism and within the political, economic, and social American sphere:

I would argue, more than simply a rebellion against second wave mothers. What really differentiates the third wave from the second is the tactical approach it offers to some of the impasses that developed within feminist theory in the 1980s.⁹¹

Though the overall “shape” of the movement remained quite uncertain in the early 1990s, third wavers entered the Third wave feminism with concrete ideas and needs in order to build an inclusive feminism. Subjects such as economy, politics, or more importantly sex and gender were developed under a newer and wider perspective:

In contrast to their perception of their mothers’ feminism, third wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity. Girl power, or girlie culture, is a central—yet contested—strand within the third wave.⁹²

The early 1990s were then marked by the development of a new wave of feminism greatly influenced by the literary, historical and psychological writings of Black female writers and activists. As their ethnicity clashed and intersected with the notion of womanhood in the United States, many Black women felt excluded from Second wave feminism. Black women were American citizens, they marched alongside White women in numerous protests and yet, the positive outcomes which came from their social activism exclusively applied to White women and to White households.

As explained by Kimberly Springer in “Third Wave Black Feminism?” an article published by the University of Chicago Press in 2002, leading figures of Third wave

⁹⁰ Retrieved on <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/588436>> p. 178

⁹¹ Op. cit., p.175

⁹² Op. cit., p.179

feminism, such as Rebecca Walker, considered Third wave feminism as an opportunity for Black women to overcome racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination that intersected with and within their daily lives. Rather than a direct follow-up to the earlier waves of American feminism, which overlooked Black feminists and Black voices, third wavers perceived Third wave feminism as a means for Black female voices to be rightfully heard. Third wavers acknowledged the progress made in favour of gender, racial and social equity in the United States, but wanted to ensure that these improvements would apply to all American women:

The term Third wave feminism as we now know it signals a new generation of feminists. It came to public consciousness, or at least leftist consciousness, in the form of Rebecca Walker's founding of the Third Wave Foundation in 1992, which initially conducted a Freedom Summer-styled voter registration campaign that same year. This generation of Third wave feminism credits previous generations for women-centered social and political advances.⁹³

Black women perceived Third wave feminism as an opportunity for their challenges to be acknowledged by American society. Black women also faced gender, social and economic inequalities and yet, the 1980s women's studies and gender studies often overlooked their specific struggles in favour of a universal American female voice and suffering. Despite the development of a Black feminist movement in the 1980s, in parallel with Second wave feminism, not all Black women felt welcomed within a movement created by their peers.

Third wave feminism was developed in reaction to the impact of conservatism on Black women, especially on queer Black women, and on Black communities. Regarding American politics and economy, gender equity or racism, queer Black women were excluded from expressing themselves on issues that were impacting them as well. They were silenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, they were silenced by Second wave American feminists in the 1970s and by other Black feminists in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, Third wave feminism appeared as a platform for queer Black feminists to discuss the impact of race, conservatism, sex, and gender on their daily lives.

The earlier waves of American feminism, predominantly led by White women, overlooked the question of sexual identity and sexuality for decades. They perceived the

⁹³Retrieved on < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/339636>> p. 1063

subject as taboo due to their religious beliefs, or as in contradiction to their heteronormative conception of American society. The intersection of gender and sex with race only deepened the exclusion of Queer Black women from pivotal discussions on the betterment of women's living conditions in The United States. According to R. Claire Snyder in "What Is Third wave feminism? A New Direction Essay," Third wave feminism allowed numerous and various conversations on sex, sexuality, one's sexual identity and on how these subjects were essential to the analysis of gender inequalities in the United States:

In contrast to their perception of their mothers' feminism, third wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity. Girl power, or girlie culture, is a central—yet contested—strand within the third wave. Its proponents argue that "our desires aren't simply booby traps set by the patriarchy."⁹⁴

Queer Black feminists who participated to the development of a third wave of American feminism treated the movement as the direct expression of their identity: queer Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality later linked the exclusion of Black women from feminism to notions of race, gender, and class. Black feminists questioned their identity and felt as if they had to choose between being a woman or being Black. For many Black feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, their queerness intersected with the conservative image of the American woman and the traditional conception of Black women, shared by the Black community. Their queerness, which was part of their identity, became another form of discrimination alongside race and class.

Queer Black women's quest for self-identification revealed itself to be as difficult as the fight led by Black feminists in the first two waves of American feminism. Many queer Black women wondered whether they should perceive themselves first as Black, as women or as queer. In "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle", published for the *Feminist Review*, author Laura Alexandra Harris expresses her own experience as a queer Black feminist in the 1990s, and details her difficulty for self-identification in the United States:

I want to speak out loud about these complications and contradictions. But which category addresses which complication? Should I speak to the history of my Blackness as a Black feminist or as a queer, or do I identify with both because I am a lesbian of African-American descent? Often, Black lesbian, and the way that description of myself troubles identity, are terms that inform each other best about my differences. Reducing queer to its bottom line - a

⁹⁴ Op. cit., p. 179

position opposed to normative heterosexual regimes - seems to indicate that I am queer because I am a lesbian, Black, and feminist. But am I only queer in relation to heteronormativity or perhaps also in the very categories with which I cast my opposition to it?⁹⁵

Third wave feminists were women from all ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds who advocated for an inclusive American feminism. Defined as “much more inclusive of women and girls of colour than the first or second waves had been,”⁹⁶ Third wave American feminism took into consideration the improvements, but also the mistakes, made by First and Second wave feminists, such as the universal conception of womanhood in The United States. Though all women were confronted to sexism and gender inequalities, their ethnic, economic, and social background made the experience different for White women and for women of colour. For third wavers, their new movement was to allow those different experiences to be expressed. They wanted to find a common ground for the betterment of all women’s living conditions without denying or erasing a woman’s ethnicity, sexual orientation, or beliefs.

Almost two decades separate Second wave feminism from Third wave feminism. Numerous Black feminists from Second wave witnessed their daughters or relatives partake into Third wave feminism and continue the fight they began. As explained by R. Claire Snyder, Black feminists from Third wave feminism acknowledged the work done by their predecessors, despite concrete differences between the two waves:

Third, third wavers depict their version of feminism as more inclusive and racially diverse than the second wave.⁹⁷

From Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality and Alice Walker’s writings on Black women, third wavers formed their own opinion on feminism in the United States, away from American conservatism or censorship:

Second, third wavers claim to be less rigid and judgmental than their mothers’ generation, which they often represent as antimale, antisex, antifemininity, and antifun.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Op. cit., p.4

⁹⁶ Retrieved on the *Britannica website*. Available on: <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-third-wave-of-feminism>>

⁹⁷ Op. cit., p.180

⁹⁸ Op. cit., p.179

The social, political and technological advances of the 1990s led women of colour to develop a wave of feminism which would rely on inclusiveness. Born from their exclusion from the earlier waves of American feminism, Black women spent decades trying to fit into a movement which disregarded their living conditions and silenced their voices. They found their own voices through Third wave feminism which grew from their mothers, sisters, and relatives' anger and identity crises.

The generational gap between Third wave feminism and its predecessors allowed third wavers to have an overview of the improvements made for all women in American society. As explained on the *Third Wave Fund website*, third wavers expressed themselves freely, on numerous subjects considered taboo in the earlier waves of feminism. From abortion to sexual orientation or even rape and sexism, third wavers considered that American society needed to be held accountable for its wrongdoings for gender equity to happen:

The early 90s were packed with events that riveted and shocked young people, like the Rodney King trial and decision, the William Kennedy Smith rape trial, Clarence Thomas's confirmation to the US Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court's decision on *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey*, which upheld mandatory 24-hour waiting periods and other restrictions to abortion. All of these events brought new urgency to pressing issues that affect young women: sexual harassment, rape, race in America, reproductive health, economics, and class. At the same time, no one was talking or listening to young women whose lives were most affected by these issues. The news media was almost always reflected White men discussing the ramifications of various legal arguments, not the reality of these issues, and not the impact they would have on young women's lives.⁹⁹

The technological and technical advances made post-Reagan, and in the wake of George H. W. Bush's presidency, allowed third wavers to develop a movement greatly focused on inclusiveness. Third wavers wanted to acknowledge that each woman experienced racism, sexism and gender inequalities differently. Third wave feminists highlighted that issues such as birth control, abortion, sexual abuse and domestic violence also impacted women of colour and needed to be voiced.

Third wave feminism became, for American women, a way to address their specific struggles and crises. In the wake of mass media expansion and the increasing use of the Internet, the 1990s allowed Third wave feminists to expand their presence in various medium

⁹⁹ Retrieved on <<https://www.thirdwavefund.org/history--past-initiatives.html>>

and places. However, as we will see, with the technological advances and the appearance of online presence in the early 1990s, came a new set of challenges for Black women in their never-ending quest for inclusion and visibility.

3.2 Black women in the media and online feminism

For many Americans, the 1990s marked the end of a century of protests and conflicts. They were perceived as bearers of hope for the upcoming generations. After two World Wars, decades of racial tensions and the undying quest for cultural and economic dominance, American society was greatly changed. Whether or not those changes were perceived as positive or negative depended on one's personal beliefs, political affiliations or social class. However, there are changes that impacted the United States as a whole, regardless of one's race, gender or class. The technological revolutions that the American society witnessed in the 1990s reshaped its cultural, social and political landscape.

From DVDs, cell phones and mp3 players to the creation long range telescopes, all participated to the development of a "modern" American society. It is important to thoroughly explain the use of the term "modern" when describing the technological advances which impacted the lives of millions of Americans in the 1990s. The *Cambridge Online Dictionary* defines "modern" as "[something] designed and made using the most recent ideas and methods." Another definition is "[something] existing in the present or a recent time, or using or based on recently developed ideas, methods, or styles."¹⁰⁰

Both definitions implicitly refer to the improvements made during the numerous social and technological revolutions that changed the American society. From photography in the late nineteenth century, to Fordism and the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century, these changes enhanced the "American way of life." However, the term "modern" can also be perceived negatively since these revolutions also highlighted or created racial and political tensions which still exist within American society. American capitalism, extolled by Fordism in the 1910s, was in direct opposition with the USRR's communist ideals.

¹⁰⁰ Retrieved on the *Cambridge Dictionary* website. Available on : <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/modern>>

One of the consequences of this political and economic clash was the Cold War, from 1947 to 1991. The Civil Rights Movement was born from the racism faced by the Black community in the United States, despite the abolition of slavery and the anti-racism articles of the American constitution. Thus, it seems important to analyse the “modern” representation of American society with great care since these revolutions inevitably opened the door for new sets challenges and crises.

The 1990s Third wave feminism was born from Black women’s realisation of their exclusion from earlier waves of feminism. It also originated from Black women’s exclusion from Black feminism, impacted by gender discrimination and American conservatism. Third wavers, mostly Black women, perceived Third wave feminism as a revolution in comparison to its predecessors. Whether it be a social, cultural or sexual revolution, Third wave feminism challenged the universal aspect of American feminism and took into consideration the uniqueness of all American women.

Amid technological advances, Third wave feminism reached a larger audience thanks to the 1990s media expansion. Essays, journalistic articles and reports were no longer the sole means of communication. In the early 1990s, the Internet was popularised and fully embraced its communicative aspect. The Internet allowed people to share videos, pictures and to exchange regardless of their locations. Third wave feminism developed alongside a national and international online revolution and its recognition in media helped third wavers to shed light on Black women’s struggle for self-identification. The intersection of race with queerness, sex and gender were discussed on numerous platforms, whether it be on the Internet, in journals or on television. Issues mostly affecting women -sexism, sexual harassment and sexual assault- were publicly criticised.

Amy Richards, Catherine McKinley, Catherine Goud and Dawn Lundy Martin, founders of Third wave American feminism, became the leading figures of an outspoken generation. Communication through different media allowed the movement to receive exponential coverage and growth. As explained on the *Third Wave Fund Website*, Third wave feminism aimed at reaching the younger generation of women, in order to raise awareness on gender inequalities. Rebecca Walker and Shannon Linn, other key figures of Third wave feminism launched the Third Wave Direct Action Organization in 1992, whose

purpose was “to fill a void in young women’s leadership and to mobilize young people to become more involved socially and politically in their communities.”¹⁰¹

Third wave feminism received support from various national communities and gathered a new wave of young feminists from various backgrounds. For Black feminists who felt excluded from the earlier waves of American feminism, Third wave feminism appeared to them as the fulfilment of their prior fights: an inclusive feminist movement. In a 2011 review article entitled “Surfing Feminism's Online Wave: The Internet and the Future of Feminism,” writer Stephanie Ricker Schulte analyses the beginning of an online feminist presence in the early 1990s, influenced by the political and social changes of the time:

To understand what these works¹⁰² have to say about cyberfeminism, it is important to first note that the roots of cyberfeminist theories lie deep in early internet scholarship. In the late 1980s and early 1990s in fields as diverse as computer science, cultural studies, political science, sociology, economics, and communication, scholars interested in internet technology began theorizing its potential power as a new public sphere. The most prolific work in the United States—where the Internet originated as part of a Cold War military project—hinged on the Internet's potential to strengthen or overthrow democracy.¹⁰³

Third wave feminism, and its new online presence, were perceived by Black women as a safe place for expression and self-identification. However, they quickly realised that the technological revolutions they were in came with a new set of challenges for American feminism and for Black women’s identity crises. Despite the increasing importance of the Internet and the media in the 1990s, which allowed Third wave feminism to gain national attention and recognition, gender-based discrimination still appeared in the communication tools women used to denounce them.

According to Stephanie Ricker Schulte, just like it was the case for the earlier waves of feminism in real life, Black women’s online presence could not escape patriarchy and sexism. The technological advances made in the late 1980s and early 1990s happened in a

¹⁰¹ Retrieved on the *Third Wave Fund website*. Available on : <<https://www.thirdwavefund.org/history--past-initiatives.html>>

¹⁰² The works reviewed in the article are : Manisha Desai’s *Gender and the Politics of Possibilities : Rethinking Globalization*; Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala and Christine Tulley’s *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies, and Social Action* and Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*.

¹⁰³ Retrieved on <<https://www.jstor.com/stable/23069943>> P.731

male-centred American society, and in workplaces often led by male chief executive officers in male-dominated companies:

Thus, early feminist visions of the Internet positioned the technology into a similar binary: on the one hand, the Internet was a liberatory space that would revolutionize feminism and global activism and initiate a postgender, bodiless, Utopian future outside current embodied power hierarchies; on the other hand, it was an inherently male-dominated technology and therefore a male-gendered space that would reinscribe oppression onto the new sphere and would become the virtual continuation of (or worse, a new means of) real-world gender and sex-based marginalization.¹⁰⁴

American feminism, and its various branches, did not put an end to patriarchy. Neither did the technological and social advances of the early 1990s. Third wave American feminism marked the beginning of a new era for women's rights. Black women and other women of colour, whose voices were previously silenced, now had the communication tools to denounce gender-based and racial inequalities. The movement also marked the beginning of an era of female boldness, empowered by the technological advances of the 1990s and the growing presence of women online.

However, Third wave feminism's fight for inclusiveness did not stop it from repeating the mistakes made by the earlier waves of American feminism. In the wake of an online revolution for feminism, third wavers disagreed on the importance that the Internet should possess on their newly developed movement. According to Stephanie Ricker Schulte, British philosopher and theorist Sadie Plant's scheme for an online feminism raised criticism, mainly for the purpose that would be given to a possible "cyberfeminism":

Just as definitions of "feminism" are numerous and contested, definitions of "cyberfeminism" are multiple and controversial. Cultural theorist Sadie Plant, who may have originated the term in the 1990s, used it to describe the next step in an alliance between women and technology designed to overthrow patriarchy.¹⁰⁵

Sadie Plant's conception of a cyberfeminism influenced by the intersection of Third wave feminism with the technological advances of the 1990s, came in direct opposition to third wavers' perception of their movement. It was also in contradiction with the earlier waves of American feminism, whether it be First and Second wave feminism, Black feminism or radical Black feminism. Despite severe criticism towards American patriarchy

¹⁰⁴ Op. cit., p.734-5

¹⁰⁵ Op. cit., p.735

and the harm it caused to womanhood in the United States, American feminists never perceived their movement as a tool to overthrow patriarchy. They believed that men's acknowledgement of their mistakes and actions was the leading way for gender equality in the United States:

Her [Sadie Plant's] vision, much like Mary Shelley's, technology would help invert the master-slave narrative. Desai notes that some feminists, including Donna Haraway, have imagined cyberfeminism broadly as "the use of technology for addressing gender inequalities in digital discourse, as well as in material and ideological spaces" or as a movement using technology to note and combat inequality in digital, physical, and ideological spaces. For most early self-described cyber feminists, including psychologist Sherry Turkle, internet technology itself was key to liberation because it allowed bodilessness and facilitated the creation of new and radical identities.¹⁰⁶

In the early 1990s, Third wavers' difficulty to define themselves alongside the growing importance of the Internet revealed the never-ending issue of self-identification. Despite major improvements for women's rights, Third wave feminism still struggled to represent all women under a singular feminist movement. According to Stephanie Ricker Schulte, "much of the early feminist scholarship about the Internet, which focused heavily on gender and genderlessness, did not focus on issues of class and race bias."¹⁰⁷

Once again, women of colour, including Black women, felt excluded from their own movement. The intersection of race and class with female online presence particularly impacted Black women since it worked as a reminder of their socio-economic status in the 1990s. Compared to White women within Third wave feminism, Black women were more likely to face economic distress due to the social and political climate of the time.

The then President George H. W Bush's war on drugs impacted Black communities and his Republican ideas favoured White conservatism in which Black men barely existed, let alone Black women. For Stephanie Ricker Schulte, third wavers' desire for an online feminism ultimately increased disparities between White women and women of colour. White women were more likely to have access to the Internet, which allowed them to partake into online activism. On the contrary, Black women suffered from social disparities which prevented them from an everyday access to the Internet. Once again, lower employment

¹⁰⁶ Op. cit., p.735

¹⁰⁷ Op. cit., p.735

rates, underdeveloped areas, and other aspects of Black womanhood in the United States became forms of discrimination:

The late 1990s and in early 2000, as a number of studies about access to internet technologies emerged, a backlash against this omission shifted the focus of many cyberfeminists onto issues of access and activism, onto connecting the women of the world to online spaces and empowering them to use that connection to change their lived experiences.¹⁰⁸

Black women remained marginalized in the 1990s, despite the growing popularity of Third wave feminism online and in the media. Kimberlé Crenshaw's works on intersectional feminism only confirmed how race and gender were deeply rooted in Black women's psyche and how it impacted them physically and psychologically. First and Second wave American feminism made Black women feel as if they were less valuable than White women. Black women were excluded from discussions on birth control, employment or sexual abuses. Despite undeniable improvements for women's rights in the United States, Third wave feminism did not stop the silencing of Black female voices in American society.

For many contemporary feminists, the 1991 *Anita Hill Case* revealed the -still- fragile aspect of Black womanhood in the United States. In 1991, Anita Hill testified against her former employer, Circuit Federal Judge Thomas Clarence in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. According to Anita Hill, Thomas Clarence, who was candidate for Supreme Court, sexually harassed her on numerous occasions during her time as his attorney-adviser and assistant, between 1980 and 1986.

Hill's case received nationwide attention due to press coverage and her depiction in media, but also because of the vivid discussions it sparked within the Black community. In the wake of a growing Third wave feminism, Anita Hill's accusations towards Thomas Clarence impacted Black women's self-identification in the 1990s American society. For many Black women, Anita Hill's mistreatment felt like a backward step for Black women, for the Black community and for Black feminism. Anita Hill's private testimonies were leaked in the press, which vilified a young Black woman who had just joined the University of Oklahoma College as a professor. As expressed in an article for the *Washington Post* entitled "The Scathing Ad 1,600 Black Women Bought to Oppose Clarence Thomas," written by Deneen L. Brown, many Black women criticized how Anita Hill's testimony on sexual harassment turned into her own trial. Seated in front of an exclusively male -and

¹⁰⁸ Op. cit., p.735

White- committee, Anita Hill had to answer what many considered degrading, racist and sexist questions:

We are particularly outraged by the racist and sexist treatment of Professor Anita Hill, an African American woman who was maligned and castigated for daring to speak publicly of her own experience of sexual abuse.¹⁰⁹

In support of Anita Hill, 1,600 Black women purchased an ad which criticised the questions to which Anita Hill had to answer during her testimony. Some of the questions were transcribed in an article for *CBS News* entitled “Here are some of the questions Anita Hill answered in 1991.” Black women denounced the racist and sexist connotations beneath all the questions asked, which reinforced racial stereotypes already impacting Black women and Black womanhood in the United States:

Q.1 Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont): Do you have anything to gain by coming here? Has anybody promised you anything for coming forth with this story now?

Q.2 Sen. Howell Heflin (R-Alabama): Now, in trying to determine whether you are telling falsehoods or not, I have got to determine what your motivation might be. Are you a scorned woman?

Hill: No.

Heflin: Are you a zealot Civil rights believer that progress will be turned back, if Clarence Thomas goes on the court?

Q.3: [Senator] Specter: The question which I have for you is, how reliable is your testimony in October 1991 on events that occurred 8, 10 years ago, when you are adding new factors, explaining them by saying you have repressed a lot? And in the context of a sexual harassment charge where the Federal law is very firm on a 6-month period of limitation, how sure can you expect this committee to be on the accuracy of your statements?¹¹⁰

The ad, which was posted on the New York Times, had for slogan “African American women in Defense of Ourselves.” It sparked nationwide debates on the Committee’s intentions regarding Anita Hill. Through their slogan, Black women expressed the undeniable reality that Black women, excluded from social movements and social discussions, could only count on themselves.

¹⁰⁹ Retrieved on the *Washington Post website*. Available on : <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2018/09/21/scathing-ad-Black-women-bought-oppose-clarence-thomas/>>

¹¹⁰ Retrieved on the *CBS News website*. Available on : <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/here-are-some-of-the-questions-anita-hill-fielded-in-1991/>>

However, according to Black feminists, press coverage and the vilification of Anita Hill only nurtured Black women's conflictual relationship with the Black community, but also with other Black women. In response to Anita Hill's accusations, Thomas Clarence described her testimony as a "high tech lynching" and denied any kind of inappropriate behaviour towards Anita Hill. Thomas Clarence's speech raised sympathy among African Americans, who sided with him and criticized Anita Hill's accusations against one of her peers.

In a 2019 article entitled "We Still Have Not Learned From Anita Hill's Testimony," published for the *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, Kimberlé Crenshaw reveals how Anita Hill's testimony reignited the issue of race and gender within Black womanhood and within American feminism in the early 1990s. According to Crenshaw, Black men supported Thomas Clarence out of "racial sympathy."¹¹¹ Already in the 1970s and 1980s, Black feminists denounced the dangerous aspect of racial pity or sympathy. They especially criticized how Black people often ignored the wrongdoings of their peers because they believed that Black men had already suffered from segregation and racial discrimination. Cases of domestic abuses, psychological and physical violence and sexism towards Black women were then silenced for the well-being of the community:

The Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson sought to provide a more highbrow analysis. Many Blacks did believe that Judge Thomas likely said those things, but like Dr. Patterson, chastised Ms. Hill for bringing these matters into the public domain.¹¹²

Thirty years after the Civil Rights Movement, Black women were once again asked to choose if they perceived themselves as women first, or as Black. The Black community was not immune to patriarchy and sexism and the sense of community forcibly led many Black women to criticize Anita Hill and to show support to Thomas Clarence:

Consider what the other Hill supporters and I saw as we left the Capitol late that evening. A group of African-Americans, most of them women, had gathered at the bottom of the steps, in song and prayer. At first, we thought it was a mobilization in support of Anita Hill in the great Civil rights tradition. But as we drew closer, we heard them praying for the Lord to intercede on Clarence Thomas's behalf, to rescue him from the scheming malice of Anita

¹¹¹ Retrieved on <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9nh3f6n6>>

P.18

¹¹² Op. cit., p.18

Hill. We fled and piled into a taxi, only to hear a Black radio talk show host inveighing against Ms. Hill. One caller after another sided with Judge Thomas.¹¹³

In an article for *PS: Political Science and Politics* entitled “Race Trumps Gender: The Thomas Nomination in the Black Community,” authors Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Tate analyse the intersection of race and gender within Black women’s lives, and the role it played in Anita Hill’s case. According to them, Anita Hill’s condition as a Black woman sealed her fate even before her testimony against Clarence Thomas. The legitimacy of her testimony did not matter as she ultimately paid a higher price than Clarence Thomas:

Race and gender are intimately intertwined in the lives of Black women in the United States. Race constructs the way Black women experience gender; gender constructs the way Black women experience race.¹¹⁴

While Clarence Thomas was nominated for Supreme Court despite the ongoing allegations against him, Anita Hill’s faced rejection from her own community. Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Tate suggest that the intersection of race and gender within Black womanhood led a major part of the Black community to support Clarence Thomas rather than Anita Hill:

Why did race trump gender for Blacks in the Thomas nomination? Blacks supported Thomas because of their desire to maintain representation on the Supreme Court.¹¹⁵

When asked to choose between race and gender, Black women often favoured race because of the impact of patriarchal norms on Black womanhood. Black women overlooked their own struggles and pain in favour of a “racial representation.” Despite the inevitable costs it would have on Black womanhood in the United States, Black women wanted to protect their fathers, brothers and sons from racism and wanted the Black community to be valued in American society. Thus, Anita Hill’s testimony appeared as a direct confrontation to the Black community, which explained the little support she received from Black people:

Despite the high level of support for feminist causes in the Black community and especially among Black women, Blacks did not believe Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment against

¹¹³ Op. cit., p.18

¹¹⁴ Retrieved on <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/419439>>
P. 488

¹¹⁵ Op. cit., p.488

Thomas. Surveys showed that large majorities of Black women, Black men, and White men all expressed disbelief in Hill.¹¹⁶

As explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the premises of Third wave American feminism were a strong focus on inclusiveness and the expression of women's sexual liberation. Somehow, Third wave American feminism helped White feminists understand the privilege given to them by their skin colour. After protest led during First and Second wave American feminism, their White privilege gave them access to better living conditions and social inclusion. Black women's online presence and media coverage helped them to express how few of these improvements benefited to them.

The technological and social revolutions of the 1990s allowed more women to witness the racial disparities between White women and Black women, and within American society. However, when White feminists were confronted with Anita Hill's testimony, most considered that Black men's racial struggle was similar to Black women's struggle with race. White women denounced racial disparities, gender inequalities and racism but believed that, regarding Anita Hill's case, it meant either supporting race or gender:

Underlying his comment was the idea that sexual harassment, like the feminism that pointed it out, was a White preoccupation incompatible with antiracism. The two groups most visible at the Hill-Thomas hearing were at odds with each other. Many White feminists appeared largely unaware of the racial dynamics that shaped the Thomas-Hill confrontation.¹¹⁷

According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, both American feminism and the Black community "are still ignoring the unique vulnerability of Black women,"¹¹⁸ reminding Black women of their identity crises. Anita Hill's case and its coverage, both online and in the media forced Black women to question their belonging within American society.

As explained by Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Tate, Black women's necessity to discuss sexual harassment and sexual abuse grew from Anita Hill's case and the devaluation of her testimony on sexual abuse. Black women were perceived as attention-seekers, gold-diggers and other stereotypical depictions imposed to them by racism and patriarchy:

The media and organized interest groups also played important roles in shaping public opinion on this matter. The way the media presented the confrontation between Thomas and

¹¹⁶ Op. cit., p.488

¹¹⁷ Op. cit., p.17

¹¹⁸ Op. cit., p.17

Hill did not make clear why she had waited 10 years to bring her story forward and why she had not quit or brought charges at the time.¹¹⁹

While the Supreme Court Justice confirmed Clarence Thomas' nomination, Anita Hill was politicized and vilified while her testimonies of sexual harassment were overlooked, which complicated Black women's fight for gender equality from the 1990s onwards. It was even harder for victims of sexual harassment, sexual abuse and rape to seek help since many Black women believed that Anita Hill's case discredited Black women's voices.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Black women's fight for the recognition of sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape within the Black community. In 2007, American activist Tarana Burke founded the "Me Too" movement. As a victim of abuse herself, Tarana Burke wanted a platform on which survivors of sexual assault could express themselves and exchange with other women. Through her *MySpace* page, the popular social media network of the time, Tarana Burke urged Black women to denounce their abusers and to seek judicial and emotional support. Tarana's earlier online presence would later influence the 2017 "#Me Too" Movement, which gained nationwide attention following the accusations of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape against former movie producer Harvey Weinstein.

The growing importance of the Internet and social media changed American feminism and Black women's perception of the movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Black women experienced racism and sexism online the same way they did in American society. Third wave feminism of the late 1980s and early 1990s allowed Black women to consider a feminist movement in which all American women felt included, empowered, and respected, regardless of their race, sexual orientation, or beliefs. The feeling of inclusion was reinforced by technological revolutions of the time, with the growing importance of the Internet and online communication tools, as well as mass media expansion.

Third wavers started their new movement with new platforms on which they discussed subjects such as abortion, reproductive rights and sexuality. As they felt excluded from these discussions in earlier waves of feminism, third wavers wanted to show how these issues also impacted women of colour, sometimes even more than White women. However, Black women's implication in online activism and presence in media was once again impacted by the intersection of race with gender.

¹¹⁹ Op. cit., p.489

Despite third wave feminists' work for inclusiveness, Black women remained silenced in media and online. Tarana Burke's first "Me Too" movement became the expression of women's "modern" struggles on issues such as emotional and physical abuse, homophobia and misogyny. Her movement included Black women's voices and raised awareness on the lack of recognition for Black women's suffering. Two years later, in a 2009 article entitled "Questions for Jessica Valenti: Fourth Wave Feminism" and written by Deborah Solomon, *Feministing.com* founder Jessica Valenti would coin women's growing online activism as fourth wave feminism: "Maybe the fourth wave is online."¹²⁰

The *Britannica Online Dictionary* defines the movement as follow: "Although debated by some, many claim that a fourth wave of feminism began about 2012, with a focus on sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture, among other issues. A key component was the use of social media to highlight and address these concerns. The new wave arose amid a number of high-profile incidents."¹²¹ The premises of Fourth wave feminism appeared alongside the proliferation of social media networks. *Facebook* in 2004, *Youtube* in 2005 and *Twitter* in 2006 allowed for the worldwide recognition of women's rights. Fourth wave feminism involved a new form of racial, gender and sexual inclusion: a total online presence and communication.

Fourth wave feminism gained importance in 2012, following the rape of a young Indian woman in a bus. The outrage became international and led to protests against gender-based crimes. The movement also birthed the 2017 Women's March protests in Washington D.C, following Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States. According to the *History.com Website*, Donald Trump's election reignited gender inequalities between American men and women:

But his unexpected victory over his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton—the first female presidential nominee of a major party in U.S. history—outraged and saddened many who objected to his past treatment of and statements about women, as well as his controversial positions and rhetoric during the campaign.¹²²

¹²⁰ Retrieved on the *New York Times website*. Available on: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html>>

¹²¹ Retrieved on the *Britannica.com website*. Available on: <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-fourth-wave-of-feminism>>

¹²² Retrieved on the *History.com website*. Available on: <<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/womens-march>>

Women's March gathered over 4.1 million women in the United States,¹²³ while its live coverage of on all major social networks allowed for women from all countries to participate in the protests for women's rights.

A few months later, women's online activism regained attention following accusations of sexual assault, sexual abuse and rape against former film producer Harvey Weinstein. Through *Twitter*, Actress Alyssa Milano revamped Tarana Burke's "Me Too" Movement with the use of the hashtag "*#Metoo*". Just like Tarana Burke did 10 years before, women were once again given a platform on which they could reveal the daily sexism they face and their experiences of sexual abuse or assault. The 2017 "*#Metoo*" Movement allowed women from the entertainment industry to be heard.

However, the movement later faced criticism as Alyssa Milano's "*#Metoo*" Movement erased the real creator of the movement: Tarana Burke. In an article for *Sayfy: Empowering Women Against Violence* entitled "Erasure of Black Women in the Fourth Feminist Wave," author Amy Coe explains how Tarana's Burke erasure from her own movement reveals the never-ending impact of racism on Black women's existence. Whether it be online or in protests, Black women's feminism is simply overlooked. Tarana Burke's movement emphasized Black women's encounter with sexual assault and sexual abuse yet, the 2017 version of "Me too" erased Black women from discussions on abuse:

To make matters worse, privileged, white women (mostly Hollywood actresses) usurped the hashtag and used it to call out cases of sexual harassment at the hands of prominent executives in the workplace. Eventually, it became evident that white actresses that participated in the hashtag received far more support and coverage than black women who did the same. Further, *#metoo* failed to acknowledge the specific problems women of colour face when reporting sexual assault in the workplace. More specifically, black women's stories of sexual harassment often met with dubiousness (an obvious effect of racializing black women as more primal and 'less fragile' than their Caucasian counterparts).

For numerous Black activists and feminists, Black women's struggle for self-identification only increased alongside new waves of feminism and technological revolutions. Claims of inclusiveness from past and modern feminist movements rarely met expectations. Black women's voices were, and still are silenced or erased. More importantly, notions of race and gender impact Black women more than it does with White women. Black

¹²³ "According to later estimates collected by the Washington Post, some 4.1 million people reportedly took part in the various Women's Marches across the United States, along with around 300,000 worldwide."

women are constantly asked to choose between race and gender, between their womanhood and their sense of community.

The popularisation of the Internet in the 1990s and the appearance of a fourth wave feminism reintroduced the idea of a universal feminism which deepens inequalities between White women and women of colour. The personal experiences of women of colour with race and gender are erased, just like it was within Second wave feminism. Once again, White women's struggles became the struggle of all women.

Thus, the 1990s technological revolutions revealed Black women's complex relationship with the media and the Internet. Once again, they questioned their inclusion within feminist movements which developed alongside the appearance of new tools of communication. More importantly Black women still struggled to define themselves in the wake of a new century. The difficulty for them to assert their online presence a few years later only increased their identity crises.

One can then question whether the identity crises of Black women in the 1990s appeared in another key media: the 1990s American entertainment industry. How were Black women portrayed in movies and tv series and were they impacted by the rise of "pop culture" in the 1990s? The analysis of Black women's relation with the entertainment industry, especially music and cinema, will allow us to see whether or not the American entertainment industry became a key for Black women's representation from the 1990s onwards.

3.3 The entertainment industry: a key to representation?

In the wake of a new century, the 1990s United States faced great changes which allowed the country to assert itself as one of the world economic powers. From its culture to its politics, economy and technology, the United States became a source of inspiration for numerous countries. The popularisation of mass media in the 1990s not only helped reshape the American society, it also reshaped the way the country was perceived on a global scale.

Thus, in the 1990s, The United States' cultural, psychological, and social impact could be visible in numerous Western societies. The popularisation of the Internet not only allowed people from different walks of life to communicate easily and quickly, it also permitted the American "way of life" to be perceived as the standard, or ideal, way of living.

The representation of American food, clothing, language, and culture in both printed and online media reshaped what it meant to be an American from a non-American standpoint.

The cultural and technological revolutions of the 1990s also revived the idea of the American Dream, defined as “the belief that everyone in the US has the chance to be successful and happy if they work hard.”¹²⁴ As explained in an extract for *The American Dream in the 21st Century* entitled “The Politics of the American Dream, 1980 to 2008,” The United States’ cultural and economic landscape in the early 1990s allowed Americans and immigrants from different economic and social backgrounds to consider an American Dream in which economic success prevailed. Many Americans deemed George H. W. Bush’s one-term Republican presidency as a carbon copy of its predecessor, Ronald Reagan. George H. W. Bush’s politics became incompatible with the technological advances which took place during his remaining months as the 41st President of The United States. Many believed that George H. W. Bush’s politics, perceived as outdated and class-based, undermined the economic growth which took place during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Until Bill Clinton’s election in 1993, which appeared to many as the rebirth of the American Dream, the country’s economy was once again impacted by recession, unemployment and poverty:

In the 1990s, the Democratic Party reclaimed the White House, recapturing the individualistic American Dream with Bill Clinton. If the crises of the 1970s recalled those of the 1930s, the giddy money making of the 1990s suggested a repetition of the Roaring Twenties. Both decades—the 1920s and the 1990s—were golden ages for the American Dream.¹²⁵

Bill Clinton’s Democratic ideals for the United States developed alongside the technological revolutions of the 1990s and allowed the country to reassert its economic power. Employment growth, improvements regarding racial and gender issues and a focus on domestic affairs helped numerous White Americans, minorities and European immigrants to seize an American Dream which they deemed unfeasible before, due to their economic or ethnic background:

Clinton was a new kind of Democrat. From Carter’s failure and Reagan’s success, Clinton had learned how politically crucial the metaphysics of the American Dream is, what price one pays for denying it, and what one can win by presenting oneself as a spokesman and

¹²⁴ Definition retrieved on the *Cambridge Online Dictionary*. Available on :<
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/american-dream>>

¹²⁵ Op. cit., p.34

specimen of the American Dream—presenting oneself as the poor boy from Hope, Arkansas, who had studied and worked his way to the presidency.¹²⁶

Bill Clinton's vision of the American Dream in the 1990s was televised, publicised, and shared through press and online articles. Beyond the economic and social success implied behind Bill Clinton's American Dream, there was a desire for inclusion which coincided with both the racial and feminist protests of the time.

The early 1990s were marked by Third wave feminism which fought for women's representation in American society and politics, regardless of their race, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. Before Bill Clinton's two-term presidency, few Black men, let alone Black women and women of colour were present in American politics. Condoleezza Rice, American political scientist and diplomat, became one of the key figures of Black representation in American politics in the late 1980s and early 2000s. Condoleezza Rice became the first African American woman to serve as an advisor on Soviet Affairs under George H. W. Bush's presidency in 1989. She would later become the first African American woman appointed to the National Security Advisor under George's Bush presidency in 2000 and the first African American woman to become the Secretary of State of the United States in 2004.

In an article entitled "Third wave feminism and the Defense of "Choice"," R. Claire Snyder-Hall develops how Third wave American feminism focused on numerous subjects regarding women's representation in political, economic, and social discussions. From Gender equity to sexuality and birth control, third wavers explored the plurality of American womanhood in the United States. There was no longer a singular woman that embodied "America's greatness" and appear as the example to follow to be socially integrated. Third wave feminism embraced women's uniqueness as they struggled for self-identification within American society and American feminism:

With no common identity, experiences, or definition of feminism, each feminist must make a conscious decision about how to determine her own path through the contradictory discourses that constitute contemporary society. "As [women] struggle to formulate a feminism they can call their own," Walker explains, "they debunk the stereotype that there is

¹²⁶ Op. cit., p.34

one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead offer self-possession, self-determination, and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities."¹²⁷

Anita Hill's televised testimony against Clarence Thomas in 1991 reignited the question of Black women's representation in American feminism. More importantly, it sparked debates on the representation of Black women in the media, especially how it often perpetuated racism and microaggression.

With the growing importance of the Internet and other tools of communication in the 1990s, Black feminists from Third wave feminism discussed Black women's presence in a key aspect of American society: the entertainment industry. From American cinema to music and television, how were Black women portrayed, depicted, and represented from the 1990s onwards?

The 1990s were marked by numerous cultural changes, also known as "Pop culture," which worked in favour of female representation in the American entertainment industry. Defined as "music, TV, cinema, books, etc. that are popular and enjoyed by ordinary people, rather than experts or very educated people,"¹²⁸ pop culture participated to the popularisation of the American culture on numerous media, with its set of positive outcomes and drawbacks.

The American musical landscape faced a gender-based revolution in the early 1990s with the concept of "Girl Power." Girl power refers to "the idea that women and girls should be confident, make decisions, and achieve things independently of men, or the social and political movement that is based on this idea."¹²⁹ Inspired by the British girl band *Spice Girls*, girl power embodied female emancipation and freedom of choice, from girlhood to womanhood. Over the years, the popularisation of the Internet allowed the ideology to reach women from different countries and background. In an essay for *Visual Arts Research* entitled "Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism," South Korean author Michelle S. Bae revisits the premises of girl power in the early 1990s. She details how, from music, girl power reached other key aspects of the entertainment industry.

¹²⁷ Retrieved on < <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25698533>>

P. 259

¹²⁸ Retrieved on the *Cambridge online dictionary*. Available on <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/pop-culture>>

¹²⁹ Retrieved on the *Cambridge online dictionary*. Available on <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/girl-power>>

More importantly, she analyses how girl power depicted and altered the plurality of American womanhood in the United States:

Since the 1990s, the discourse on girl power, a popular media initiative of new femininity, has been shaking the conventional ground of feminist thinking and proclaiming a new mode of girlhood.¹³⁰

For numerous modern feminists, female representation, especially Black women's in American music industry reasserted Black women's identity crises. In 1992, Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You* topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 for 14 consecutive weeks and would later become one of the best-selling singles by a Black female artist of all time. This would mark Black women's growing position in the 1990s music industry. From R&B to Pop music, Hip-Hop and Rap, Black women explored every musical genre normally exclusively dominated by White women, White men and Black men. Aaliyah, also known as the *Princess of R&B*, was one of the best-selling and most influential R&B female artists in the 1990s, selling between 24 and 32 million albums. *TLC*, an American girl group composed of three Black women: Lisa *Left Eye* Lopes, Tionne *T-Boz* Watkins and Rozonda *Chilli* Thomas became the best-selling American girl group with approximately 85 million records worldwide. In another musical genre, Missy Elliot positioned herself as the best-selling female rapper in *Nielsen* History, with 30 million records sold in the United States.¹³¹ Lil Kim, Queen Latifah, Lauren Hill and other successful Black female artists of the 1990s, introduced the idea that Black women could also succeed in an industry that had been perceived as White and male dominated. Female emancipation and sexual liberation, upheld by Third wave feminism, allowed Black women to speak on numerous and various subjects and to highlight the plurality of Black women's identity.

On the surface, girl power amplified Black women's feeling of inclusion in American music. Black women were musically thriving in an era of technological revolutions. They were present in media and the popularisation of the Internet allowed their music videos to reach a wider audience. Many Black female artists were perceived as role models by young Black women who struggled with self-identification.

¹³⁰ Retrieved on < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/visuartsrese.37.2.0028>> P.28

¹³¹ Retrieved on the *Billboard.com* website. Available on : < <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/7896960/missy-elliott-signs-with-wme-exclusive>>

However, the American music industry, as for the any other domain, was not immune to patriarchy and sexism. Female emancipation was still perceived as a threat to patriarchy. In a 2009 article for *Time* entitled “How the ’90s Tricked Women Into Thinking They’d Gained Gender Equality,” author Allison Yarrow develops how Third wavers’ focus on women’s sexuality felt like a retrograde step for many women of colour. They believed that women’s sexuality had become a marketing tool which jeopardized women’s rights and gender equity, as well as the work done by First and Second wave feminists:

Parity, it turned out, was paradox: The more women assumed power, the more power was taken from them through a noxious popular culture that celebrated outright hostility toward women and commercialized their sexuality and insecurity. Feminist movements were co-opted. Soon, women would author their own sexual objectification.¹³²

Many Black women considered that the sexualisation of women’s outfits, gestures, and lyrics in the music industry increased gender-based discrimination between men and women. From examples of self-assertion in a male-dominated society and industry, women became objectified:

Discrediting women based solely on their gender, sexually harassing them and reducing them to their sexuality endures today from the school yard to the boardroom in part because this was, writ large, ubiquitous and accepted behavior in the 90s.

In an article entitled “As a 1990s teenager, the world gave us girl power and pornification,” author Afua Hide explains how Black women considered that the sexualisation of women in the 1990s impacted Black girlhood and womanhood more than it did with White womanhood. The representation of Black women’s sexual liberation in media increased racial disparities between White women and Black women. As a young Black woman in the 1990s, Afua Hide first perceived the improvements made towards Black women’s representation in the music industry as uplifting. The leading Black female artists of the time embodied Black women’s American Dream and emancipation. However, Black women’s representation in music faced criticism from both the male-centred industry and from Black women who did not recognize themselves in the Black leading female artists of the time:

The 90s, and the Third wave feminism the decade has come to be remembered for, was a contradictory experience at the time. It was, on the one hand, all about girl power and sex

¹³² Retrieved on the *Time.com website*. Available on : <<https://time.com/5310256/90s-gender-equality-progress>>

positivity. It was “position of the fortnight” in *More* magazine – offering teenage girls line drawings that explained sexual positions in technical detail.

Black women’s portrayal in the music industry also nurtured racial stereotypes. From the lexical fields used to describe them to their pictorial depiction in music videos, Black feminists criticized how Black women’s sexuality became a tool for gender-based and racial-based discrimination. As explained in an article the entitled “Women of Colour in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze,” writers Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto analyse how women of colour often appear as narrative tools in both music videos and lyrics for male rappers:

It is important to note that the women described in rap music lyrics are not all women, but specifically women of color. Any cursory examination of the accompanying music videos reveals a plethora of anonymous, interchangeable.¹³³

In many music videos, men are in position of physical or psychological dominance over women. Women who embrace their sexuality and sexual identity are portrayed as “sex workers”, “prostitutes”, “hoes” or “hoodrats”. Another narrative applied to women of colour suggests submissiveness, either by physical or psychological abuse. Women are portrayed or written as “ride or die chicks”, influenced by the real life American criminal couple Bonnie & Clyde. This scenario perpetuates the idea that women should stay with their partners no matter the cost.

Both scenarios portray women as physically and emotionally inferior to men, perpetuating gender-based stereotypes. Regarding women of colour, the physical and psychological violence portrayed in their representation in music imply that they condone it. These scenarios also imply that gender-based relations between women and men of colour are limited to sexual intercourses, and that women should be deprived of emotions due to their portrayal as sexual objects:

Beyond representations of “types” of women, the pornification of rap also involves the routinization of a “pornographic gender relation.” We describe pornographic gender relations as those that portray interactions between men and women in particular and limited ways. Examples of this particular gender relation widely communicated in hip hop include scenes or lyrics where women are routinely sexually humiliated, used for male sexual pleasure at

¹³³ Retrieved on < <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1395143>>
P.174

the exclusion of female sexual pleasure, or typically shown as exchanging money or status for sex.¹³⁴

Thus, Black feminists criticized how the male representation of women of colour in music silenced domestic abuse and gender-based discrimination in Black communities and other minorities. They believed that women's objectification in the music industry would lead to a younger generation of men and women who believe that women should be sexualized or submissive to their male partners:

Rap music has demonstrated its ability to speak to social problems and provide creative expression for generations of young people, especially African Americans. However, rap's more recent confluence with the pornography industry has more than a few people concerned. Effective interventions in hip hop will likely fall into one of three areas: critical media literacy, alternative rap production (independent label or underground), and change or expansion of commercially successful rap. Media literacy campaigns guide students in thinking critically about lyrics, images, and marketing in hip hop. Programs of this sort are crucial in arming young people with the tools they need to sort through the barrage of images hip hop offers.¹³⁵

Once again, the 1990s were marked by the intersection of race with Black women's identity and sexuality, which made Black women question their place within American society. More importantly, the 1990s media representation strengthened existing tensions among Black women. Regarding progress made on Black women's sexual acceptance, thanks to Third wave feminism, many Black women criticized the role Black female singers and rappers played on their own sexualisation.

As expressed by Afua Hirsch, Third wave feminism influenced a music industry in which Black women freely expressed their sexuality, their struggles, and their own identity. However, the movement fell short in highlighting the work done by earlier Black feminists who opened discussions on women's sexuality years before:

It was only much later I learned the Third wave feminism that came to define the decade was in fact coined by a woman of colour, Rebecca Walker, whose work helped create the space for Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to thrive. That I was aware of neither woman during the 90s shows how far the decade really was from embodying the values it helped create.

¹³⁴ Op. cit., p.171-2

¹³⁵ Op. cit., p.186

According to R. Claire Snyder, women's struggle for representation in the media and in the entertainment industry resulted from what many considered as Third wave feminism's lack of structuring. Regarding women's sexuality, women shared divergent opinions which undermined the third wavers' fight for inclusiveness:

While third wavers claim the mantle of being prosex, however, the central issue at the heart of the sex wars—how to create gender equality when women enjoy female objectification (pornography), claim the right to make money servicing male sexual needs (prostitution), and eroticize relationships of inequality (sodomasochism)—has never been resolved; it seems to have simply dropped from sight. Oftentimes, Third wave feminism seems to have morphed into being all about choice with little examination of how chosen desires are constructed or recognition of how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large (Wood 2006)¹³⁶

In the 1990s, the representation of women in the media greatly impact women's rights. Women judged other women which they deemed too sexual. Conversely, women also criticized those who repressed other women's sexuality and freedom. These criticisms were omnipresent in Black women's representation within the music industry of the 1990s. Despite Third wavers' desire for inclusiveness, Black women criticised the image that Black female popstars and rappers conveyed in media.

Once again, women faced gender-based and sex-based discrimination, as they did during Second wave feminism. Despite Third wavers' redefinition of American womanhood in the 1990s, women were still subjected to patriarchy. A sexualised woman, or a woman fully aware of her sexuality, did not necessarily fit the heteronormative and conservative American society of the time. Therefore, as explained by Afua Hirsch, White women were less likely to fully grasp the issue regarding Black women's representation in the media.

White women, whether or not they partook in Third wave feminism, or in racial protests, were protected by the colour of their skin. Despite gender-based inequalities and misrepresentation, they were already present in the cultural American landscape:

White beauty norms became aligned with Kate Moss and other pale, bony models – some embodying profoundly emaciated, heroin chic – and the acceleration of unhealthy body images.

¹³⁶ In "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay." R. Claire Snyder refers to Summer Wood, "Freedom of "Choice": Parsing the Word That Defined a Generation," published in 2006.

Black women did not fit in the heteronormative and traditional representation of American women, based on stereotypical beauty standards. Neither did they fit in the music genres in which they succeeded in the 1990s. From male-centred rap, rock and country music to a white and female dominated ballad genre, Black women shattered the glass ceiling which covered the 1990s American music industry. However, Black women's representation in some of these musical genres alienated them. While White women's sexual and cultural liberation appeared as ground-breaking in the wake of a new century, Black women's sexual representation in the music industry belittled their identity and their struggles in American society.

The analysis of Black women's representation, or rather misrepresentation, in the music industry helped them question their portrayal in another key aspect of the entertainment industry: American cinema.

The 1990s U.S technological advances made communication better and faster. From one side of the world to another, people were able to communicate, to share their experiences and struggle in no time. The introduction of the Internet to the public sector allowed for an immediate visual representation of the 1990s American society. Whether it be cultural, political or economic improvements and changes, their depiction in American media permitted people from all around the world to witness them.

American society became the example of success and self-sufficiency, following the economic boom of the early 1990s. American cinema, among other numerous and various media, participated to the depiction of the United States as the perfect example of success. In an article for *The Independent*, published in 1999 and entitled "The 1990s in review: cinema - Hollywood takes over the world," writer Gilbert Adair expresses how American movies, regardless of their genre, dominated worldwide box offices and reinforced the United States cultural and economic hegemony:

What, above all, the closing decade of the century will be remembered for, in a film-historical context, is the consecration of the American cinema.¹³⁷

The 1990s American cinema embodied the economic growth of the United States after Bill Clinton's election in 1993. The cinema industry worked as a symbol of patriotism and highlighted the country's willpower and influence on numerous countries. Thus, the

¹³⁷ Retrieved on the *Independent.co.uk* website. Retrieved on: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/the-1990s-in-review-cinema-hollywood-takes-over-the-world-1129142.html>>

representation of the United States as the land of success was implicitly present in numerous movies.

As developed in Rebecca Nicholson's article for *The Guardian*, entitled "From Clueless to Tarantino: why the 90s was Hollywood's fairytale decade," American movies gained popularity due to their accessibility. Mass media expansion allowed for movies to be presented beforehand thanks to trailers and previews. More importantly, movies were made to erase, for a few hours, one's personal issues and struggles. The Cold War had left a lasting impact on American society and after four decades of political and economic tensions, there was a need to produce movies that depicted a better vision of the United States:

One reason films from the 90s hold such appeal is that they seem to depict a simpler, more innocent time. "A lot of these films were written by baby boomers, so even if someone had a dead-end job, they were still able to afford accommodation, they lived in a nice neighbourhood. Even if they were struggling, their problems were quite superficial," says Elizabeth Sankey, who worked on *Beyond Clueless*, a 2014 documentary about teen movies that focused heavily on the mid-to-late 90s.¹³⁸

1990s movies portrayed numerous aspects of the United States. From its natural landscapes to its culture and politics, American society influenced and was influenced by American cinema in the 1990s. From *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) to *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1998), American movies depicted the positive and negative aspects of the American society, such as class war, mental health or economic disparities. Behind the portrayal of America's flaws was the idea of acknowledgement, with the belief that the country could learn from its past mistakes and improve itself even more.

However, most of the 1990s blockbusters and famous movies shared a common denominator: They often portrayed the life, struggles and success of White American men. Thus, the analysis of 1990s American cinema raises the issue of representation in the entire American entertainment industry. As for other key media, American cinema remained a largely male-dominated area. Not only did it perpetuate gender-based discrimination, but it also partook in the resurgence of beauty standards in the 1990s. More importantly, the issue

¹³⁸ Retrieved on the *Guardian.com* website. Available on : <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/29/from-clueless-to-tarantino-why-the-90s-was-hollywoods-fairytale-decade>

of representation also revealed the weight of race on Black men and Black women's implication in American cinema.

Regarding women's representation in the 1990s American cinema, few female directors and producers were acknowledged by the industry, unlike their male counterparts. Amy Heckerling (*Clueless*, 1995), Sophia Coppola (*Virgin Suicides*, 1999) or Kathryn Bigelow (*Point Break*, 1991) were part of the few women who managed to make a name for themselves in a male dominated cinema industry.

However, despite inspirations from Third wave feminism on notions such as female emancipation and self-assertion, movies made by women in the 1990s perpetuated patriarchal and racial stereotypes. In both *Clueless* and *Virgin Suicides*, female lead characters appear to be white women from middle or upper class. The lead characters not only fit in the socio-economic context of the American society they live in, but they also fit in the beauty standards set decades prior by patriarchy. Pale complexion, light-coloured hair, slim body shape altered women's representation in American movies. Both movies depict the life and struggles of White women in American society and fail to represent those of women of colour. Despite improvements made during the earlier waves of American feminism on inclusiveness, concerns grew regarding the impact of beauty standard on young women's self-image and representation. Once again, there was the belief that women were supposed to look a specific way in order to be socially and economically integrated in American society and industry.

White women's representation of their own identity highlighted the issue of race in American cinema, in comparison to the representation of Black women. In numerous movies made by White female and male directors in the 1990s, Black women were either inexistent or used as narrative tools to remind the viewers of the main character's racial inclusiveness. In *Clueless*, the Black female character Dionne (portrayed by Stacey Dash) appear as the "token black girl."¹³⁹ She helps the main character in her numerous adventures, but does not necessarily alter the narrative or the lead character's fate.

The portrayal of Black women as White women's acolytes in 1990s American cinema perpetuated racial stereotypes which implied that, in a movie or any other media,

¹³⁹ Term used by writer Jazmin Kopotsha in an article for the *Refinery 29 Website* entitled "A Love Letter To The 'Token' Black Women I Grew Up With." (2019). Retrieved on <<https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/token-black-women-tv>>

Black women could not exist on their own. Thus, many Black women turned towards an existing and flourishing Black cinema in which they hoped for inclusiveness. In a 2016 article entitled “Black films matter – how African American cinema fought back against Hollywood,” writer Steve Rose explains how the 1990s mainstream revolution allowed for Black cinema to develop itself alongside a more traditional White cinema. Black cinema became possible thanks to the growing importance of the media and the desire to represent all Americans in tv series, including minorities:

For the first time, mainstream cinema and TV audiences were getting honest, intelligent portrayals of both modern African-American life and US history from a black perspective – the type of stories only black film-makers could tell. The revolution was being televised, dramatised, publicised and eulogised.¹⁴⁰

Tv series such as *Moesha* (1996. Created by Ralph Farquhar, Sara V. Finney and Vida Spears and starring Brandy) or *Sister, Sister* (1994. Created by Fred Shafferman, Kim Bass and Gary Gilbert) portrayed Black women in a more positive and realistic light. Viewers would follow the daily lives of young Black women and their perception of sexism and racism. In other tv series such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990. Produced by Quincy Brown and created by Andy Borowitz and Susan Borowitz) viewers are introduced to family-based and gender-based relations within the Black community. These shows offered a new representation of Black women in American society, away from racial and gender-based stereotypes.

In an article entitled “Black Women in Television: A Short History,” Imani M. Cheers explains how, after decades of misrepresentation on television, Black women were offered roles which did not rely on gender-based or ethnic-based stereotypes:

It would be 15 years before another African American woman would have a starring role on television as something other than an asexual domestic servant or mammy caricature.¹⁴¹

Following improvements regarding Black women’s representation in television, Black women expected similar changes in American cinema. However, the intersection of race with patriarchy undermine Black women’s representation in American cinema, either as movie directors, producers or actresses. In “They Set Us Up to Fail’: Black Directors of the ’90s Speak Out,” an article published for the *New York Times* in 2019, writer Reggie

¹⁴⁰ Retrieved on the *Guardian.com* website. Available on : <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/13/do-the-right-thing-how-black-cinema-rose-again>

¹⁴¹ Retrieved on <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc136>

Ugwu reveals how patriarchy within American cinema prevented Black women access from what was regarded as the “golden age”¹⁴² of cinema.

Five contributors participated to Reggie Ugwu’s article: Julie Dash, Matty Rich, Darnell Martin, Ernest Dickerson, Leslie Harris and Theodore Witcher, in which they shared their experiences with racism and sexism in American cinema. As Black women filmmakers, Leslie Harris, Julie Dash and Darnell Martin recollect their discussions with leading figures of American cinema who rejected their ideas and projects due to assumptions based on race and gender:

When did you first feel alienated in Hollywood?

LESLIE HARRIS (“Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.”) Right after [my debut], I had a script about a female record executive. What I heard was that it was just hard to get a black actress in a movie, with me being a black woman director, producer and writer.

What would they say to you?

HARRIS Just that. “We can’t get financing.” This is from my agent.

JULIE DASH (“Daughters of the Dust”) I was told that, too. Also, when I would indicate that I’m here as a director to make films about black women, executives would say to me, “Why are you limiting yourself?” [Her film, the story of three generations of Gullah women facing the Great Migration, made Dash the first African-American woman to direct a movie in wide release.] I was like, “I’m not. I want to see our stories on the screen that haven’t been shown before. I’m bringing forth something new. Take a look at it.”

DARNELL MARTIN (“I Like It Like That”) As an African-American woman who speaks up and fights against things that are racist or misogynistic, I felt a very big backlash. If I had a penny for every time I was blacklisted and somebody told me, “You will never work again,” I’d be super, super wealthy. [Though Martin has worked regularly in television, she has made only one theatrical film since her 1994 debut, “Cadillac Records” in 2008.]

No matter how skilled Black women may be, they are still perceived as unqualified for work opportunities due to the stereotypes based on their skin colour. Racial-based stereotypes portray Black women as less educated, less qualified and bankable than White men, Black men and White women. The 1990s entertainment industry thus increased Black women’s feeling of exclusion within American society. Both Second and Third wave

¹⁴² Term used in Steve Rose’s article “Black films matter – how African American cinema fought back against Hollywood”: “One thing is for sure: looking back, the 90s was a golden age. The amount of black cinema breaking through at that time is astonishing.”

American feminism tackled the subject of Black women's exclusion from American society but failed, in their own way, to solve Black women's identity crises.

Regarding Black women's portrayal in movies made and directed by Black men, many Black women and feminists believed that their representation embodied the expression of "misogynoir" in Black communities. "Misogynoir" refers to the "misogyny (=hatred of women) directed towards Black women."¹⁴³ Black cinema's success in the 1990s was credited as the work of one Black man: Spike Lee. Born in 1957, Spike Lee became one of the prominent figures of Black cinema with his directional debut, *She's Gotta Have It* in 1986. The movie follows Nola Darling (portrayed by Tracy Camilla Johns), a young Black woman whose relationship with three men highlights her quest for sexual identity and self-assertion in American society. Despite its focus on mature subjects, the movie was a commercial success and forged Spike Lee's reputation as a committed artist, due to his representation of Black communities, with its qualities and flaws, in American cinema.

However, already in the late 1980s, many women criticized Spike Lee's representation of Black women in *She's Gotta Have It*. In an article entitled "'She's Gotta Have It': The Representation of Black Female Sexuality on Film," published in the 1998 issue of *Feminist Review*, author Felly Nkweto Simmonds criticizes the dangers of Spike Lee's portrayal of Black women. By presenting Nola's character through the eyes of her three male lovers, Nola is objectified and sexualised. It is not her own quest for sexual liberation that is presented to the viewers, but rather a male perception of Nola's sexuality:

Nola Darling is constructed as a sensuous body. She is, in fact, what Spike Lee condemns others for creating: a one-dimensional animal. She only seems to be able to make relationships through her sexuality. Her three male lovers, the stable Jamie Overstreet, the narcissistic Greer Childs and the humorous Mars Blackmon, all want her body. Each of them tries to persuade us - and Nola - that he is the best lover for her. The film is structured so that we hear more of the men's voices, reasoning and pleading, than Nola's reasons for being a sexually free woman. The male voice is given more actual time in the film. Even when Nola invites all three men together to her apartment for Thanksgiving, it is the men who are given space to express their feelings.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Definition retrieved on the *Cambridge online dictionary*. Available on <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/misogynoir>>

¹⁴⁴ Retrieved on <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/1395143>>

Despite Spike Lee's desire to portray Black sexuality differently from what White directors did in previous movies, Black women believed that he perpetuated, or even increased, gender-based discrimination towards Black women. They once again fell under racial stereotypes which mystified Black women's sexuality. In the entertainment industry, Black women were defined by their sexuality, rather than their self-definition of their sexuality:

We need to transform both black politics and female politics if we are to define black female sexuality for ourselves. As long as men like Spike Lee continue to define it for us, the emphasis will be on phallic sex. We need a wider definition of sexuality and its relationship to other aspects of our lives.¹⁴⁵

Black women's representation in American cinema did not escape from sexism and racism, it amplified the struggles of Black women for self-identification in a society which excluded them from all discussions. Movies made by White male and female directors painted Black women as white women's "sidekicks" while their representation in Black-directed movies painted them as either angry women, unsatisfied women or as submitted to Black men.

Despite movies which mentioned Black women's struggle for representation in American society, such as Julia Dash's 1991 *Daughters of the Dust* or Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994), Black women's inclusion in American cinema still had a long way to go to erase the gender and racial stereotypes which accompanied Black women's identity. Black women's scarce presence in award ceremonies shed their struggle for representation and recognition. Since its creation in 1929, only fourteen Black women have won an Academy Award. The first Black woman to ever win an Academy Award as *Best Actress in a Supporting Role* was Hattie McDaniel in 1939, for her "mammy" role in *Gone With the Wind*. Since Halle Berry in 2001 with *Monster's Ball*, no other Black woman has won an Academy Award for *Best Actress in a Leading Role*.

The issue of representation in the entertainment industry was even harder for queer Black women and men. The 1990s' feeling of inclusiveness was not necessarily portrayed in movies or music and queer Black women and men failed to see their lives and struggles represented. Jennie Livingstone's 1990 documentary *Paris is burning* portrays trans Black women's struggle for recognition as Black women in an American society impacted by

¹⁴⁵ Op. cit., p.20

patriarchy and conservatism. The documentary offers a wider scope on the perception of transidentity and homosexuality in Black and Hispanic communities.

The 2000s, though not immune to patriarchy and racism, marked a significant change in Black women's portrayal in the entertainment industry. Influenced by cultural and social progress, the American entertainment industry slowly opened its door to diversity. The most remarkable example of Black women's successful representation in the 2000s American entertainment industry is Shonda Rhimes. Shonda Rhimes has altered the face of American television thanks to her focus on inclusiveness. Through her *Shondaland* production company created in 2005, Shonda Rhimes rewrites Black womanhood and highlights the plurality of Black women's identity. In *Grey's Anatomy* Black women are portrayed as doctors. In *Scandal*, which ran from 2012 to 2018, viewers were introduced to the character of Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington) who owned a crises management firm. In her co-production *How to Get Away with Murder*, viewers followed Annalise Keating (portrayed by Viola Davis), a criminal defence attorney and law professor. In Shonda Rhimes' productions, Black women are introduced unpretentiously. They are flawed, loving, and strong beings but they never fall under the stereotype of the angry Black woman which was often presented to viewers in earlier movies and tv series.

In an article for *National Geographic*, entitled "The Unstoppable Force That Is Shonda Rhimes," Karen Karbo expresses how Shonda Rhimes' work on the representation of women of colour in television shed an international light on their struggles for self-identification within American society:

I'm all for hailing Shonda Rhimes for pretty much everything. She is bold and unapologetically enterprising, and she creates difficult women characters who make no bones about wanting what they want and doing what they need to do to get it. They are brilliant, determined, and complex. They are a lot like Shonda herself. Her genius further rests in making us *prefer* difficult women over their easier, more accommodating counterparts.¹⁴⁶

The 1990s American entertainment industry worked as a reminder for Black women that their identity crises were still valid, despite improvements on inclusiveness. From music to television and cinema, Black women's identity could not be separated from race and gender. Sexism, misrepresentation and oversexualisation marked Black womanhood in the

¹⁴⁶ Retrieved on the *National Geographic* website. Available on : <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2018/11/shonda-rhimes-producer-greys-anatomy-scandal-praise-difficult-women>>

1990s. While White women were more likely to be depicted in a more positive way, Black women were either inexistent in numerous media, or depicted according to racial stereotypes.

From the angry Black woman to the submissive one, Black women's representation and objectification created issues among them. Black women blamed other Black women for the oversexualisation of their identity. Somehow, many of them desired to return to the more traditional and patriarchal depiction of Black women in the media. Once again, what was perceived as an era of changes barely benefited to Black women. Qualified and educated Black women were still overlooked in the entertainment industry and their representation only perpetuated stereotypes surrounding Black women's identity.

Still today, and despite improvements on racial and gender equality, Black women struggle to be recognized by American society unless their identity is analysed through the scope of race and gender. From their exclusion from earlier waves of feminism to the illusion of inclusion developed by the later waves of American feminism, Black women's identity crises appear timeless and unsolvable due to the never-ending impact of racism and sexism on their lives.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, Black women have often been perceived as a threat to American economy, politics and society. Their struggle for self-identification, the way they perceive themselves, goes back to American slavery. The complexity of their historical background, marked by racism and violence, has forced Black women into constant redefinition.

The abolition of slavery and the recognition of Black people as American citizens barely improved Black women's socio-economic inclusion. The *Nineteenth Amendment*, ratified in 1920, granted suffrage to American women. However, Black women's particular place within American society prevented them from the same, inalienable, rights. In the late 1950s, The Civil Rights Movement, with its focus on racial inclusion and racial diversity, reasserted Black men's position within the American society. However, Black women were once again excluded from social and economic improvements. Thus, racism undermined Black women's self-assertion within American society, while gender silenced Black women's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

Regarded as a solution to Black women's exclusion, Second wave feminism flourished alongside gender studies and women's studies, and brought attention to women's reproductive rights, political involvement and emancipation. However, its reliance on White privilege and conservatism worsened disparities between Black women and White women.

At its height in the 1970s, Second wave feminism then became the triggering point of Black women's identity crises. The movement exacerbated the existing racial and gender struggles of the time. Racism, sexism and other gender-based discriminations impacted Black womanhood more violently than White womanhood, and these discriminations prevailed up until the 1990s.

White women also faced sexism and gender-based discriminations in American society. However, their White privilege allowed them to have access to employment, to legal aid and to improved living conditions. On the contrary, Black women's difficulty to access suffrage and economic stability undermined their educational integration and upward mobility. Black women were then more likely to face unemployment, microaggressions and social exclusion.

Despite Second wave feminism's universal aspect, the movement was still submitted to patriarchal norms which deepened disparities between White women and women of colour. For decades, Black women partook in marches and events for gender equality but received little support from Second wave feminism. Black women's relationship with Second wave feminism led them to realise how their exclusion from American feminism reflected their exclusion from American society.

The various branches of feminism, such as the Black feminist movement of the 1980s or Third wave American feminism in the 1990s, constantly met forms of discrimination which undermined Black women's inclusion within American feminism. Within Black feminism, many Black women expressed conservative ideals which excluded queer Black women from discussions on women's rights. On the other hand, numerous Black women considered that Third wavers' focus on sexuality objectified Black women and increased their identity crises.

The technological revolutions of the 1990s, including the popularisation of the Internet and the media expansion, brought a new set of challenges to Black women's quest for self-definition. Black women's representation in American media often fell under racial stereotypes which intersected with other forms of discrimination, such as gender and class. In early 1990s movies and television series, Black women were either depicted as angry women, or portrayed as tokens for White characters. In American music, Black feminists criticized how Black women were either sexualised or portrayed as submissive to Black men in their music videos.

While Black women's online presence was not erased, they suffered from misrepresentation in media. Black women were either politicised or vilified, which amplified stereotypical gaps between White women and Black women. As for the earlier waves of American feminism, the early 1990s Third Wave feminism also encountered racism, patriarchy and other forms of discrimination. Beauty standards still impacted the American society in the 1990s, as well as conservatism and gender-based discrimination.

Despite major improvements regarding equal rights and racial inclusion, it would seem that Black women's identity crises are not only timeless, but unsolvable. The early 2000s, which marked the beginning of a new era for American feminism, still struggled to consider Black women's presence within American society. Tarana Burke's "Me too"

Movement, in the wake of Fourth wave feminism, embodied the continuous silencing of Black women's voices and suffering. Fourth wave American feminism, which many consider as the online representation of American feminism in the 2010s, perpetuated Black women's struggle for self-identification. Online anonymity on modern social media allow gender-based and racial discriminations to remain unpunished as Black women often see their creativity and knowledge plagiarized and stolen from them without credit nor due compensation.

Thus, Alice Walker's words on Black women's representation within American society express well the never-ending nature of Black women's identity crises: "Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, 'the *mule* of the world,' because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else -*everyone* else-refused to carry."¹⁴⁷

However, from the 1970s onwards, exclusion has not stopped Black women's fight for consideration within American society. Black women are more and more present online and in the media, and they use these platforms to help every Black American woman try and find their rightful place in society, and in the world.

This thesis is a tribute to African American women, famous or not, whose willpower and constant fight for women's rights and racial inclusion lessen the burden that lays on all Black women's lives.

¹⁴⁷ Op. cit., p.237

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Résumé :

La place de la femme noire au sein de la société américaine est un sujet fascinant, tant par sa complexité que par son intemporalité. Ce mémoire se concentre sur les femmes afro-américaines et leur implication dans les mouvements féministes qui se sont développés à partir des années 70. Le manque de reconnaissance envers les nombreuses femmes noires qui ont pris part au *Civil Rights Movement*, le mouvement pour les droits civiques aux États-Unis, entre 1954 et 1968, a poussé certaines d'entre elles vers les mouvements féministes de l'époque. En quête d'égalité des sexes, les femmes de la seconde vague féministe sont apparues comme une opportunité pour les femmes noires de faire valoir leurs expériences et leur présence. Cependant, les tensions raciales et les questions de genre de l'époque, spécifiques à la société américaine, ont rapidement forcé ces dernières à prendre conscience que leur implication au sein de ce nouveau mouvement féministe n'était peut-être qu'une illusion. Une fois analysé combien elles furent exclues d'un pan de la société américaine, voyons comment cette prise de conscience a ravivé la crise identitaire des femmes noires et remis en question la représentation de ces dernières dans la société américaine, impactée par le racisme et le patriarcat. De leur présence politique et sociale à leur représentation médiatique, voyons comment les femmes afro-américaines, des années 70 à nos jours, ont lutté afin que leurs voix soient entendues, à la fois au sein de la société américaine et dans les nombreux mouvements féministes qui se sont développés dans le monde depuis la seconde vague.

Mots-clés: États-Unis; Femmes; Afro-Américaines; Féminisme; Racisme ; Genre; Sexe ; Intersectionnalité.

Abstract:

Because of its complexity and intemporal aspect, Black women's place within American society reveals itself to be quite a fascinating subject. This body of work will focus on Black women's involvement within the waves of feminism which appeared from the 1970s onwards. As the Civil Rights Movement, from 1954 to 1968, overlooked Black women's presence within the movement, many of them regarded Second wave feminism, and its protests for gender equality, as a possibility for their existence within American society to be valued. However, the racial and gender issues of the time rapidly forced Black women to question whether or not their inclusion within Second wave feminism was something but an illusion of belonging. Once again, Black women were excluded from American society. The analysis of Black women's exclusion will allow us to see how Second wave American feminism not only participated to the racial and identity crises of the time, but also altered Black women's representation in the media and in the socio-economic American context. From the 1970s onwards, we will analyse how Black women voiced their struggle for self-identification in both American society and feminism, still impacted by racism and patriarchy.

Keywords: The United States; Women; African American; Black; Feminism; Racism; Gender; Sex; Intersectionality.