

Citation: Tiara L. Simmons (2017), *Feminism, Race and Disability*.

Of Gloria¹, Angela² and Vilissa³: *Feminism, Race and Disability*

*Tiara L. Simmons**

Sitting in a room full of women, the author of this paper engaged in conversation with her peers. The subject eventually turned to motherhood. Of the 20 or so women present, the author was only one of five who did not have children. She was the only one of the attendees with a visible disability. The women asked the childless attendees whether they planned to have children some day. This question was not posed to the author. Instead, she was asked whether she *can* have children. Over the next few days, it occurred to the author that this question was asked a lot. When she answered in the affirmative, it was only then that she was usually asked whether she planned to have any. On one occasion, a “yes” answer was quickly followed up with a hypothetical: What would you do if your child came out disabled? These questions not only revealed that people with disabilities are not viewed as able to engage in sex, but also that people with disabilities are not generally viewed as parent material. These questions did not sound like what the author expected to hear at a meeting of women declaring themselves feminists.

The exclusion of the Black woman with disabilities leaves her without the voice and support she needs to fight for her constitutional rights, such as her reproductive rights. Spaces have been created to combat racial and gender discrimination however, these spaces focus on the privileged of these groups: Black male for race, white female for gender and white male for disability⁴. Even after women of color have been accounted for in a list of leaders in the feminist movement, one would remain hard pressed to find a representative from the disabled

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community. And where there has been a space carved out for a disabled feminist, she more often than not looks like her white, able-bodied counterpart. In other words, feminism is not inclusive of the Black, disabled woman. This paper discusses the intersection of disability, race and gender. Part I will discuss feminism and the erasure of Black women in the discussion of reproductive rights. It will provide a brief description of feminism in the United States. It also introduces to readers the concept of womanism and why it was developed. Finally, Part I defines and discusses reproductive rights and introduces forced sterilization as it pertains to the feminist movement and women of color. Part II will discuss feminism in relation to the disabled woman. First, this paper defines disability according to the Americans with Disabilities Act. Then, it discusses the models of disability that form the basis of disability policy. Finally, there is commentary on the inclusion, or exclusion, of women of disabilities and their issues from the mainstream movements. Part III will discuss the intersection of being a Black, disabled woman. Here, reproductive choice and involuntary sterilization is reintroduced.

The notions of racial inferiority coupled with the stigma of disability, then, puts the Black, disabled woman at a disadvantage. Without the support of mainstream feminists, and self-proclaimed womanists for that matter, the Black, disabled woman is at a higher risk of having her legal rights to have a family violated for the sake of a disability-free society. However, the question is how would the disabled, Black woman present a legal challenge if courts continue to rule on an either/or basis? Does she sue as a disabled person, a woman, or a Black person? Can she sue as a disabled woman, or would this be a “super-remedy” as in the *Degraffenreid* court?

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If women in feminist circles are to advocate for reproductive choice and control over one's own body, then it stands to reason that they should be advocating for all women. However, this is not the case. Women of color with disabilities are often excluded from conversations surrounding these rights. Therefore, it is the opinion of the author that feminist circles as a whole are not inclusive. In order to represent the needs of all women, not just the default (white, able-bodied female), it is recommended that feminists and woman advocates invite disabled women of color to be speakers and lecturers in mainstream circles. This will promote intersectional dialogue between able-bodied women, disabled women, and disabled women of color. This will also expand the reach of disabled advocates beyond their audience of disabled women. Finally, this inclusion and acceptance of the intersection of race, disability and womanhood will create pressure for legislation that does more to protect the rights of the disabled, much like it did for women's individual rights.

*J.D. 2018, Southwestern Law School. The paper was written as a submission in the Women and the Law Seminar under the instruction of Prof. J. Sloan. She would like to thank her fellow disabled women of color for providing the inspiration behind this paper.

¹ Gloria Steinem is an American journalist activist for women's rights. She founded Ms. Magazine in 1972 and helped found the Women's Action Alliance. <http://www.gloriasteinem.com/about/> (last viewed 10/25/2017).

² Angela Davis is an author/activist/advocate. She was a member of the Black Panther Party during the Black Liberation struggle of the Civil Rights Era. She currently teaches at University of California – Santa Cruz in the Feminist Studies Department. Ms. Davis is the author several books including, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) and *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016)

³ Vilissa Thompson is a disability activist, writer and lecturer. She is outspoken about the lack of representation for Black disabled women in feminist culture.

⁴ Michael L. Perlin and Heather Ellis Cucolo, *Tolling for the Aching Ones Whose Wounds Cannot Be Nursed: The Marginalization of Racial Minorities and Women in Institutional Mental Disability Law*, 20 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 431 (2017). It should also be noted that these privileged groups described in the text may also be largely cis-gender and heterosexual.