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Beyond the Rhetoric of "Dirty Laundry": Examining the Value of Internal Criticism Within Progressive Social Movements and Oppressed Communities

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BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF “DIRTY LAUNDRY”: EXAMINING THE VALUE OF INTERNAL CRITICISM WITHIN PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES

*Darren Lenard Hutchinson**

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INTRODUCTION

The vast terrain of “identity politics” has been the site of sustained internal division during this dynamic era of postmodern and post-structuralist thought.¹ For example, critical analyses of the experiences of women of color have unearthed the ways in which anti-racist and feminist politics and theorizing often fail to explore the connections between racism and sexism, thereby providing inadequate solutions to the unique problems faced by women of color.² Similar contestations have occurred

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1. See generally Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *Ignoring the Sexualization of Race: Heteronormativity, Critical Race Theory, and Anti-Racist Politics*, 47 *BUFF. L. REV.* 1 (1999) (exploring race-sexuality critiques of anti-racism and gay and lesbian discourses).

2. See generally Regina Austin, *Sapphire Bound!*, 1989 *WIS. L. REV.* 539 (1989) (analyzing the convergence of race and gender stereotypes in the employment discrimination context); Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 *STAN. L. REV.* 1241 (1991) (arguing that efforts by feminists and anti-racists to politicize sexism and racism, respectively, have ignored the intersection of these forms of oppression); Mari J. Matsuda, *Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory Out of Coalition*, 43 *STAN. L. REV.* 1183, 1189 (1991) (observing that “no form of subordination ever stands alone”).

within gay and lesbian politics, with lesbian feminists and persons of color criticizing the “essentializing” nature of progressive sexual politics.³ These clashes have also occurred within critical race theory, led by sexual progressives challenging the “heteronormative”⁴ nature of racial theory,⁵ and by Latino and Asian American scholars, criticizing the “Black-White paradigm” commonly deployed in race relations discourse.⁶ These critics have produced a sizeable body of scholarship, literature, and art that unveils the complexity of socially constructed identities and oppression—what I refer to in my work as the “multidimensionality” of identity and subordination.⁷

3. For an account of lesbian critiques of gay politics, see MARTIN DUBERMAN, *STONEWALL* 249 (1993), which argues that “gay male sexism” hinders cooperation between gays and lesbians. See also Patricia A. Cain, *Lesbian Perspective, Lesbian Experience, and the Risk of Essentialism*, 2 VA. J. SOC. POL’Y & L. 43, 60 (1994) (citing Charlotte Bunch, *Not for Lesbians Only*, in *BUILDING FEMINIST THEORY: ESSAYS FROM QUEST* 67, 68 (1981) (noting that the early gay liberation movement did not include lesbians, who were still “a silent category”). For a sampling of scholarship and other work criticizing race essentialism in gay and lesbian theory, see Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *Out Yet Unseen: A Racial Critique of Gay and Lesbian Legal Theory and Political Discourse*, 29 CONN. L. REV. 561, 563–64 n.12 (1997) (citing numerous sources that review this topic).

4. “Heteronormativity” refers to the “normalcy” of heterosexuality. See Hutchinson, *supra* note 1, at 4 n.10 (“In a heterosexist society, heterosexuality serves as the transparent norm that shapes ideology, politics, culture, and social relations.”); Michael Warner, *Introduction*, in *FEAR OF A QUEER PLANET: QUEER POLITICS AND SOCIAL THEORY* xxi (Michael Warner ed., 1993) (“Het[erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist.”). For a general discussion of heteronormativity in social theory, see *id.* at xxxi–xxv.

5. See generally Hutchinson, *supra* note 1, at 4 (discussing recent critiques of heteronormativity in Critical Race Theory); Francisco Valdes, *Queer Margins, Queer Ethics: A Call to Account for Race and Ethnicity in the Law, Theory, and Politics of “Sexual Orientation,”* 48 HASTINGS L.J. 1293, 1296 (1997) (exploring the “ways in which white and straight supremacy interlock” in the perpetuation of bigotry).

6. See generally Robert Chang, *Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space*, 81 CAL. L. REV. 1241 (1993) (discussing need to include Asian American experiences within anti-racist theory and activism); George A. Martínez, *African Americans, Latinos, and the Construction of Race: Toward an Epistemic Coalition*, 19 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 213 (1998) (discussing the need to include Latino experiences within traditional civil rights work and critical race scholarship).

7. See Hutchinson, *supra* note 1, at 11–21 (developing “multidimensionality” as a paradigm for examining subordination and questions of identity); Hutchinson, *supra* note 3, at 636–43 (same). For a sampling of arguments linking the “crisis” in identity politics to postmodernism and poststructuralism, see generally FEMINISM/POSTMODERNISM (Linda J. Nicholson ed., 1990); SHANE PHELAN, *GETTING SPECIFIC: POSTMODERN LESBIAN POLITICS* (1994). For an analysis of the impact of postmodernism upon contemporary jurisprudence, see generally GARY MINDA, *POSTMODERN LEGAL MOVEMENTS: LAW AND JURISPRUDENCE AT CENTURY’S END* (1995).

While the work of these “internal critics” has both influenced and challenged the ways in which equality theorists conceptualize oppression, these critics have encountered several political and cultural barriers to their project. The resistance to internal criticism was particularly acute during the early 1980s, when the “crisis” in identity politics—over narrow definitions of “identity”—first emerged as a serious challenge to the advancement of progressive social politics and ideology.⁸ Most commonly, internal critics within “progressive social movements” have had to contend with a political culture among progressive theorists and activists and among members of oppressed communities that disfavors open self-criticism or the so-called “airing of dirty laundry.”¹⁰

Several historical reasons explain opposition to the airing of internal criticism by scholars and activists within progressive social movements and by members of subordinate communities. Opponents often contend that such criticism might reinforce negative stereotypes of subordinate individuals¹¹ and that reactionary movements and activists might appropriate and misuse negative portrayals of the oppressed.¹² A related fear holds that internal criticism will dismantle political unity within oppressed communities and progressive social movements, thereby forestalling social change.¹³ While these concerns provide some context for understanding

8. See, e.g., BELL HOOKS, *AIN'T I A WOMAN: BLACK WOMEN AND FEMINISM* (1981) (discussing conflicts between Black and White women in feminist movement); ELIZABETH V. SPELMAN, *INESSENTIAL WOMAN: PROBLEMS OF EXCLUSION IN FEMINIST THOUGHT* (1988) (same).

9. In this essay, the term “progressive social movements” refers to organized political and legal efforts to combat injustice, subordination, and privilege based on race, sex, sexuality, economic status, and other sources of disadvantage.

10. Crenshaw, *supra* note 2, at 1255–57 (discussing reluctance to address domestic violence in communities of color).

11. *Id.* at 1256 (“People of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intracommunity problems.”).

12. This position was advanced at the February 1998 Critical Race Theory Conference held at Yale Law School when plenary participants Mari Matsuda and Catharine MacKinnon argued that opponents of feminism and anti-racism could misuse internal dissent within critical race and feminist theories. In particular, Professor Matsuda argued that critiques of the “Black-White paradigm” could legitimate arguments of conservative individuals who are exhausted by discussions of Black subjugation. Professor MacKinnon argued that critiques of feminism by feminists of color have further devalued feminist theory and politics in the broader, anti-feminist society. See also Catharine MacKinnon, *From Practice to Theory, or What Is a White Woman Anyway*, 4 *YALE J.L. & FEMINISM* 13, 20 (1991) (linking racial critiques of feminist theory with the “trivialization of the white woman’s subordination”).

13. See Crenshaw, *supra* note 2, at 1253 (observing that critics opposed to the discussion of feminist issues within communities of color claim that such issues are “internally divisive”).

the resistance to internal criticism within progressive social movements, I argue in this essay that they do not justify a rigid “policing” of progressive discourse. In fact, much of the resistance to internal criticism may stem from the *acceptance* of oppressive ideologies of patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism by members of oppressed communities and progressive social movements—a position that is patently contrary to the goals of liberation and equality. Part I discusses examples of resistance to internal criticism within progressive social movements in order to demonstrate the extent to which such opposition operates as a barrier to constructive dissent. Part II argues that resistance to internal criticism may often result from the embrace of heterosexism, patriarchy, and racism within oppressed communities and among progressive intellectuals, and that any remaining explanations for such resistance are outweighed by the value of internal criticism to progressive theory and politics. Part III offers suggestions—to both internal critics and to the objects of their critiques—for minimizing the potentially negative effects of internal criticism and for advancing a more inclusive conceptualization of justice.

I. THE RESISTANCE TO INTERNAL CRITICISM

Scholars and political activists within progressive social movements have faced resistance to their critiques of essentialism and hierarchy within these movements and in oppressed communities. Perhaps the most vivid illustrations of such resistance to internal criticism have occurred in the opposition to feminist of color critiques of essentialism and of the embrace of racial and gender hierarchy within communities of color and among women, anti-racists, and feminist theorists.¹⁴ Men of color, for example, responded critically to the cinematic adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,¹⁵ a fictional account of a Black woman’s struggle against racism, poverty, and sexism. Black men were particularly disturbed by the film’s depiction of domestic violence, arguing that the film narrowly portrayed “Mister,” a Black male character, as violent and callous, thereby reinforcing societal stereotypes of Black men as threatening and animalistic.¹⁶ A Black male law

14. See BELL HOOKS, *Censorship from Left to Right*, in *OUTLAW CULTURE: RESISTING REPRESENTATIONS* 63, 63–72 (1994) (describing resistance to discussions of racism within feminist theory).

15. ALICE WALKER, *THE COLOR PURPLE* (1982).

16. See Jacqueline Trescott, *Passions Over “Purple”*: Anger and Unease over Film’s Depiction of Black Men, *WASH. POST.*, Feb. 5, 1986, at C1 (“The men are raping, committing incest, speaking harshly, separating people from their families . . . It reinforces the notion of Black men as beasts.”) (quoting Leroy Clark, a law professor at Catholic University).

professor described the film as “very dangerous” and “a lie to history”¹⁷

Similar negative responses have been made against gay and lesbian challenges to heteronormativity and homophobia in communities of color and in anti-racist politics and theory. Often, these responses charge that *homosexuality alone* can divide and threaten the solidarity and future of communities of color.¹⁸ For example, the work of Cheryl Dunye, a Black lesbian filmmaker, has been coldly received by Black conservative activists. One commentator has charged that Dunye’s film *Watermelon Woman*, which has a Black lesbian protagonist, is a “slap in the face of Black people who have died for the advance of Black people in America.”¹⁹ Another critic contends that “there is no demand in the Black community for [the] movie.”²⁰ These statements reflect a heteronormative belief that heterosexual coupling is necessary to sustain communities of color²¹ and that heterosexuality is an essential element of “authentic” Black cultural expression.²²

Similarly, and with many more harmful implications, the racial civil rights establishment has sluggishly responded to the AIDS and HIV

17. *Id.* (quoting Professor Leroy Clark).

18. See BELL HOOKS, *TALKING BACK: THINKING FEMINIST, THINKING BLACK* 123 (1989) (“[T]he notion that homosexuality threatens the continuation of black families seems to have gained new momentum.”); Cheryl Clarke, *The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community*, in *HOME GIRLS: A BLACK FEMINIST ANTHOLOGY* 197, 200 (Barbara Smith ed., 1983) (criticizing the widespread notion among Black nationalist activists that homosexuality is “a threat to the continued existence of the heterosexual family”).

19. Julia Duin, *Black Lesbian Film Likely to Rekindle Arts-Funding Furor*, *WASH. TIMES*, June 14, 1996, at A2 (quoting Jesse Peterson, founder of a Los Angeles organization for Black men).

20. *Id.*

21. See HOOKS, *supra* note 18, at 123 (observing that some heterosexual Black women blame male homosexuality for the difficulties they encounter finding Black male partners); Clarke, *supra* note 18, at 198 (quoting a Black nationalist leaflet which states that “[h]omosexuality does not birth new warriors for liberation”).

22. See Darren Lenard Hutchinson, “Claiming” and “Speaking” *Who We Are: Black Gays and Lesbians, Racial Politics, and the Million Man March*, in *BLACK MEN ON RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY: A CRITICAL READER* 28, 33 (Devon Carbado ed., 1999) (discussing heteronormative nature of Black critiques of Dunye’s work); Kendall Thomas, “Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing”: *Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity*, in *REPRESENTING BLACK MEN* 55 (Marcellus Blount & George P. Cunningham eds., 1996) (criticizing heteronormative construction of “authentic” Black identity); cf. Dana Takagi, *Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America*, in *RACE, CLASS AND GENDER: AN ANTHOLOGY* 452, 458 (Margaret L. Andersen & Patricia Hill Collins eds., 1998) (discussing “the silences surrounding homosexuality in Asian America”). See generally Hutchinson, *supra* note 1 (criticizing the heteronormative nature of anti-racist legal theory and political discourse).

epidemics, despite the devastating impact of AIDS in communities of color.²³ As many scholars and commentators have noted, homophobia and heteronormativity in civil rights theory and activism explain the grossly inadequate amount of attention given to AIDS in traditional civil rights organizations.²⁴ For example, a spokesperson for the Urban League, one of the largest and oldest civil rights organizations, has recently dismissed the need for AIDS advocacy by the organization—explaining that the issue lies “outside” of the agency’s “traditional purview.”²⁵ Yet, anti-racist advocacy could help poor persons of color receive greater access to health care and preventative counseling; these issues fall directly within historical civil rights advocacy.²⁶ Only a heteronormative theory of racial subordination could dismiss the significance of AIDS as a civil rights issue, given its harmful racial impact.²⁷

As the above examples illustrate, attempts to reconstruct political discourse and cultural production in subordinate communities—through “counter-narratives”²⁸ that unveil the diversity of these communities and

23. See generally CATHY J. COHEN, *THE BOUNDARIES OF BLACKNESS: AIDS AND THE BREAKDOWN OF BLACK POLITICS* (1999) (discussing the failure of civil rights organizations to address the issue of AIDS in black communities); *HIV Prevention in People of Color: Hearings Before the Subcomm. on Human Resources and Intergovernmental Relations of House Comm. on Government Operations*, 102 Cong. (1994) (statement of Martin Ornelas-Quintero, Director AIDS Programs, National Latino/a Lesbian and Gay Organization (LLEGO)) (discussing failure of Latino civil rights organizations to address AIDS in Latino communities).

24. See sources cited *supra* note 23. See also Hutchinson, *supra* note 1, at 56–58 (attributing inadequate civil rights response to AIDS to heteronormative construction of anti-racist political discourse).

25. Sheryl Gay Stolberg, *Epidemic of Silence: Eyes Shut, Black America Is Being Ravaged by AIDS*, N.Y. TIMES, June 29, 1998, at A1 (quoting Lee Daniels, spokesperson for the Urban League).

26. As Cathy Cohen has argued:

Because AIDS touches on, or is related to, so many other issues facing, in particular, poor black communities—healthcare, poverty, drug use, homelessness, etc.—we might reasonably expect black leaders to “use” the devastation of this disease to develop and reinforce an understanding of the enormity of the crisis facing black communities.

Cathy J. Cohen, *Contested Membership: Black Gay Identities and the Politics of AIDS*, in *QUEER THEORY/SOCIOLOGY* 362, 375 (Steven Seidman ed., 1996).

27. See Hutchinson, *supra* note 1, at 56–58; see also *supra* text accompanying note 24.

28. See Eric K. Yamamoto, *Critical Race Praxis: Race Theory and Political Lawyering Practice in Post-Civil Rights America*, 95 MICH. L. REV. 821, 888–89 (1997) (explaining that counternarratives allow oppressed groups to destabilize and challenge entrenched, dominant accounts of reality that seek to legitimize injustice). See generally Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Norms and Narratives: Can Judges Avoid Serious Moral Error?*, 69 TEX. L. REV. 1929 (1991) (examining counter-narratives and barriers to their influence upon judges).

that challenge these communities' embrace of oppressive ideology—have often received swift condemnation and resistance from members of these communities. From a practical perspective, any effort to critique essentialism or internal marginalization within subordinate communities must take such resistance into account.

Although community and intellectual resistance to internal criticism stands as a formidable obstacle to such critiques, this resistance is ultimately unjustified. As the next section reveals, opposition to internal criticism within oppressed communities and progressive social movements frequently occurs because members of these communities embrace oppressive ideologies of patriarchy, heterosexism, and racism. Furthermore, the other common justifications for opposition to internal criticism are outweighed by the value of internal criticism to progressive social movements.

II. THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF RESISTANCE TO INTERNAL CRITIQUES

A. *The Backdrop of Oppressive Ideology*

Commonly, opposition to internal criticism within progressive social movements and oppressed communities stems from the implicit or explicit embrace of oppressive racial, gender, and sexual politics by members of these communities.²⁹ Indeed, the pervasive adherence to patriarchy, heterosexism, and racism by activists and theorists in progressive social movements and subordinate communities is what sparked the development of the internal critiques. Frequently, activists, scholars, and other individuals implicated by internal criticism have responded to the critiques by defending, explicitly or implicitly, their acceptance of oppressive ideology. For example, many of the Black men who responded negatively to *The Color Purple* argued that Walker's portrayal of domestic violence was inauthentic and that it did not accurately portray the reality

29. See, e.g., Katharine T. Bartlett, *Feminist Legal Methods*, 103 HARV. L. REV. 829, 835 (1990) (arguing that a unified gender-based concept of feminism tends to "reinstat[e] . . . the isolation and stigmatization of women"); Trina Grillo & Stephanie Wildman, *Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other -isms)*, 1991 DUKE L.J. 397, 401 (arguing that the tendency to compare sexism to racism "perpetuates patterns of racial domination" by, among other things, centralizing "White issues" and "rendering women of color invisible"); Hutchinson, *supra* note 3, at 637 ("[B]y marginalizing issues of race and class, gay and lesbian essentialism replicates patterns of social exclusion—racism, sexism, economic oppression, people of color, women, and the poor remain irrelevant.").

of communities of color.³⁰ On the other hand, many of the film's critics conceded that domestic violence exists within communities of color but insisted that any sensitive portrayal of such violence must link its occurrence to the persistent racial marginalization endured by Black men.³¹ In other words, Walker's critics argued that White supremacy caused domestic violence and other types of gendered violence within communities of color or that such violence simply did not exist. Both of these approaches to the issue of gendered violence within communities of color evidence a dismissal of the reality of patriarchal subordination and a denial of the role of men of color in perpetuating the marginalization of women of color.

The assertion that domestic violence does not exist within communities of color clearly denies the gendered subordination of women of color. This claim thus reflects an essentialist view of racial oppression that ignores the operation of "non-racial" systems of subordination in the lives of people of color. By giving centrality to the effects of "racial" subordination, essentially defined, critics who dismiss the existence of domestic violence in communities of color compound the invisibility of feminist issues within these communities and exacerbate the lack of attention paid to the particularized oppression of women of color.³² It is likely that critics who deny the existence of anti-female violence in communities of color also embrace patriarchal ideology; they oppose Walker's narrative of

30. See, e.g., Trescott, *supra* note 16, at C1 (reporting belief of a Black law professor that the portrayal of Black men in *The Color Purple* is a "lie to history").

31. As film historian Donald Bogle argues:

In the novel you see a definite change in [Mister's] character and you can connect to his oppression in the White world. He can't be himself so he asserts himself with the black woman. He has to prove himself with some kind of power. In the movie . . . that is not explained and many people see him as an insensitive, callous Black man . . . For the white audience he is just a reinforcement of something they feel anyway. It is part of an old damage that has never gone away.

Trescott, *supra* note 16, at C4; see also Crenshaw, *supra* note 2, at 1257 ("There is also a general tendency within antiracist discourse to regard the problem of violence against women of color as just another manifestation of racism. In this sense, the relevance of gender domination within the community is reconfigured as a consequence of discrimination against men."); cf. DERRICK BELL, *FACES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL: THE PERMANENCE OF RACISM* 117 (1992) (arguing that Black female critics of the "distressing treatment" of Black women by Black men need to "make clearer the point that much of this ill treatment is the result of Black male frustration with having constantly to cope with the barriers of racism").

32. See generally BELL HOOKS, *supra* note 8, at 87-117 (discussing marginalization of feminist issues in anti-racist discourse); Crenshaw, *supra* note 2, at 1242 (same).

gendered violence in order to excuse gendered inequality or to protect patriarchal social structures from feminist criticism.

Those critics who attempt to link domestic violence in Black communities to racial subordination also effectively defend patriarchal subordination. While racial subordination and material deprivation may cause a host of harmful practices within communities of color, including violence and other crimes, this response to patriarchal violence (and to Walker's work) again centralizes racism as the seemingly exclusive source of inequality in the lives of people of color; patriarchal domination of Black women is, thereby, marginalized and dismissed.³³ The argument that White supremacy alone (or in large part) accounts for the gendered violence practiced by men of color also denies the impact of patriarchal privilege in the lives of men of color. Although White men benefit more from patriarchal social structures than do men of color, the latter, nevertheless, possess privileges (though limited) in a society that supports the domination of women.³⁴ By explaining anti-female violence exclusively as a manifestation of White supremacy, Black males deny and seek to mask their own adherence to and privileges from patriarchal domination.³⁵

The acceptance of oppressive ideology has also colored the negative responses to internal critiques of racism and sexism within gay and lesbian politics. White gay scholar Richard Mohr, for example, has criticized efforts by lesbian feminists and persons of color to integrate issues of racial and feminist equality within gay politics. Mohr rejects such efforts as "a wasteful drain on *the* movement."³⁶ Mohr also claims that Black and women's "groups' fights are not gays' fights."³⁷ Mohr's arguments are

33. See Cheryl Harris, *Bell's Blues*, 60 U. CHI. L. REV. 783, 787 (1993) (criticizing arguments that link patriarchal violence in communities of color exclusively to racism because "this assessment fails to acknowledge the extent to which the truth told by blackwomen about dysfunction in Black male-female social relations is not merely the product of racism, but of racial patriarchy and the intersections and interface between race and gender oppression") (citation omitted).

34. See HOOKS, *supra* note 8, at 87-117 (discussing role of patriarchy in the lives of Black men).

35. As hooks notes:

Black leaders, male and female, have been unwilling to acknowledge Black male sexist oppression of Black women because they do not want to acknowledge that racism is not the only oppressive force in our lives. Nor do they wish to complicate efforts to resist racism by acknowledging that Black men can be victimized by racism but at the same time act as sexist oppressors of Black women.

Id. at 88.

36. RICHARD D. MOHR, *GAYS/JUSTICE: A STUDY OF ETHICS, SOCIETY, AND LAW* 328 (1988) (emphasis added).

37. *Id.* at 329.

legitimate only if one ignores the existence of women and people of color in gay and lesbian communities;³⁸ feminism and anti-racist politics are not “wasteful” to these individuals. Mohr’s argument also implies that women and people of color are attempting to interject the extraneous (read “non-gay”) baggage of race and gender into gay and lesbian politics. What Mohr fails to recognize (or admit), however, is that the exclusion of feminist and anti-racist concerns from gay and lesbian politics does not divorce issues of race and sex from gay politics. Instead, an essentialist gay politics, one based on the experiences of White, gay, and upper-class males, represents the converging positionalities of Whiteness, maleness, and class privilege. In other words, by rejecting the feminist and anti-racist efforts of women and people of color, Mohr’s vision of gay and lesbian equality “rests firmly upon racial, class, and gender privilege.”³⁹ Thus, Mohr’s arguments (and the arguments of others opposed to internal criticism) create a discriminatory model of sexual equality: while Mohr dismisses the gender and racial politics of women and people of color, the gendered and racial political perspectives of White gay males (framed by gender and racial privilege) enjoy centrality in his vision of gay and lesbian politics.⁴⁰

In my work I have attempted to expose the discrimination that results when proponents of essentialism in progressive social movements dismiss efforts to construct more inclusive models of equality and justice.⁴¹ In this respect, my scholarship represents a conceptual extension of prevailing work on the “intersectionality” of oppression. The intersectionality scholarship has illuminated the pitfalls of essentialism and the need to include the experiences of marginalized individuals, particularly women of color, within progressive social theory and politics. Nevertheless, this work often suggests that the notion of “intersectional” oppression is only relevant to certain categories of individuals (*e.g.*, women of color or poor White gay men). As a result, arguments by skeptics and opponents of internal criticism, like Mohr, have a certain

38. For a critique that reveals how Mohr ignores the existence of Black gay men and lesbians, see Hutchinson *supra* note 3, at 620–22.

39. *Id.* at 621–22.

40. *Id.* at 622 (illustrating that although Mohr claims his “essentialist politics is authentic and pure,” it is in fact “a politics ground upon racial, economic, and male privilege”). For a discussion of how gays and lesbians are constructed as white in pro- and anti-gay civil rights discourses and in equal protection jurisprudence, see generally Darren Lenard Hutchinson, “Gay Rights” for “Gay Whites”?: *Race, Sexual Identity, and Equal Protection Discourse*, 85 CORNELL L. REV. (forthcoming 2000) (manuscript on file with author).

41. See, *e.g.*, Hutchinson, *supra* note 1 (criticizing the discriminatory and heteronormative model of racial justice employed by anti-racist legal theorists and political activists).

degree of (troubling) legitimacy: if the complexity of subordination is limited to only certain categories of individuals, then claims that the internal critiques should have limited (if any) application obtain greater force.⁴² When we deconstruct the “multidimensionality” of experiences that provide the foundation for dominant and essentialist progressive politics and theories, the discrimination inherent in arguments (like Mohr’s) that reject internal criticism as superfluous becomes readily apparent.⁴³ When “White gay male” positionality is treated as a multidimensional location, one shaped by race, class, and gender privilege, Mohr’s opposition to incorporating anti-racist and feminist politics into gay politics can be viewed as discriminating against the racial, gender, and class experiences of women and people of color and providing a central space for the “complex” experiences of white gay men.⁴⁴ Furthermore, because the rejection of internal criticism often replicates patterns of social oppression—by perpetuating the silence and invisibility of women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and the poor—the embrace of oppressive ideology likely explains much of the resistance to the internal critiques.⁴⁵

B. *Other Reasons for Resistance to Internal Criticism*

While the acceptance of oppressive ideology likely explains much of the opposition to internal criticism within progressive social movements and oppressed communities, a close examination of the negative responses to such criticism reveals other possible explanations. First, many of the opponents of internal criticism believe that such criticism will exacerbate the negative construction of oppressed individuals by the larger society. For example, Black men have opposed public critiques of Black sexism

42. See *id.* at 15 (“If . . . multilayered identities and oppression only implicate women of color and *their* experiences, then an examination of the ‘intersectionality’ of race and gender might indeed be a ‘wasteful’—or at least less relevant—venture for White women and men of color.”).

43. See *id.* at 9–17 (describing “multidimensionality” as a paradigm that represents a substantive and conceptual progression in intersectionality and that exposes the discrimination of essentialist theories of equality).

44. See *id.* at 16–17 (“Mohr’s argument . . . reflects white gay male positionality because only those persons who do not encounter racial and gender subordination (but who enjoy racial and gender privilege) could comfortably describe anti-racist and feminist reforms as ‘wasteful’ and ‘unnecessary.’”).

45. Clearly, arguments that homosexuality in communities of color threatens the existence of these communities reflects the embrace of heteronormativity and heterosexism. See sources cited *supra* notes 18–22; see also sources cited *supra* note 29 (discussing marginalization of women, people of color, and gays and lesbians caused by essentialist theorizing and political action).

and Black anti-female violence on the grounds that such critiques may ultimately reinforce negative social stereotypes of Black men as violent and threatening.⁴⁶

In addition, activists and theorists have opposed internal criticism because they fear that such criticism will cause disunity within oppressed communities, thus detracting from collective opposition to subordination. Members of oppressed communities often rally around their socially constructed identities in order to challenge the oppression and discrimination mediated by these categories.⁴⁷ The interposing of internal criticism is perceived as a threat to this history of “unified” political action.⁴⁸

Finally, discomfort with internal criticism may often result from a lack of knowledge concerning the complexity of subordination and the diverging experiences of individuals within oppressed communities. Essentialist theories of equality mask the divergent nature of subordination, limiting our exposure to the multiple “perspectives” of oppressed individuals.⁴⁹ This absence of knowledge may cause the internal critics’ pleas for inclusion to lack force within oppressed communities and among progressive intellectuals.

III. TOWARD TOLERANCE OF INTERNAL CRITICISM WITHIN PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND OPPRESSED COMMUNITIES

A. *Beyond the Fears of Internal Criticism*

Several factors—including the acceptance of oppressive ideology by activists and theorists, the fear of public disunity among and negative portrayals of marginalized communities, and a simple lack of information concerning the complexity of oppression—explain the resistance to internal criticism within progressive social movements and oppressed communities. Although internal critics should consider these factors when

46. See Trescott, *supra* note 16; see also *supra* text accompanying note 31.

47. See Jayne Chong-Soon Lee, *Navigating the Topology of Race*, 46 STAN. L. REV. 747, 772 (1994) (discussing the importance of socially constructed “race” as a tool for organizing communities of color to resist racial domination).

48. See Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 STAN. L. REV. 581, 605 (1990) (attributing the existence of feminist essentialism to the desire of many women to keep the movement “harmonious and free of difference”); Matsuda, *supra* note 2, at 1191 (arguing that the inclusion of “other forms of subordination [within anti-racism] risks breaking coalition”).

49. See Harris, *supra* note 48, at 615 (“[G]ender essentialism is dangerous to feminist legal theory because in the attempt to extract an essential female self and voice from the diversity of women’s experiences, the experiences of women perceived as ‘different’ are ignored or treated as variations on the (white) norm.”).

engaging in theory and activism, none of these factors justifies the ongoing hostility toward internal criticism within progressive social movements.

The embrace of oppressive ideology clearly does not legitimate resistance to internal criticism. The acceptance or endorsement of social subordination by liberationist activists and theorists contradicts what should be the inherent goals of progressive activism and theories—ending violent and discriminatory marginalization in our society.⁵⁰ By conditioning social activism on the silencing of dissenting voices that challenge the existence of hierarchy within oppressed communities and progressive social movements, members of these communities and movements obstruct advancement toward social equality.

The other factors that likely cause intolerance to internal criticism within progressive social movements also fail to justify such resistance. Individuals who object to internal criticism because they fear public disunity within oppressed communities or negative portrayals of these communities by conservatives must begin to view such criticism in a more contextualized and nuanced manner. The commonly feared “disunity” and “negative” depictions of the oppressed are substantially outweighed by the potential benefits of an acceptance of internal dissent: the strengthening of coalitions within and across the body of subordinate communities; the much needed inclusion of excluded “voices” within progressive discourse; and the transformation of equality discourse into an instrument for confronting complex subordination.

In addition, opponents of internal criticism should consider whether the critiques actually cause disunity or whether this disunity stems from the exclusionary effects of essentialist and narrow approaches to equality and identity within progressive social movements and oppressed communities. The internal critiques most likely expose (rather than create) the suppressed, silenced, or ignored fragmentation that results from essentialism and from the embrace of hierarchy within oppressed communities and progressive social movements.⁵¹

Finally, members of oppressed communities and participants in progressive intellectual discourse should endeavor to distinguish “repressive” and “progressive” criticism. Although internal critiques may have the potential effect of unveiling certain negative aspects of oppressed communities (thereby threatening to reinforce negative social stereotypes), these critiques ultimately seek to *empower* oppressed communities and civil rights theory by expanding their breadth. Repressive political

50. See Hutchinson, *supra* note 1, at 97 (“The perpetuation of social subordination and privilege by a ‘liberatory’ movement is clearly contradictory.”).

51. See *id.* at 98–99.

elements, however, stigmatize oppressed communities and seek to limit the gains of civil rights law and politics through their “critiques” of progressive theory and stereotyping of oppressed communities. If oppressed individuals and progressive theorists pay attention to the underlying purposes of internal criticism, their fears of appropriation could dissipate.⁵²

While the typical excuses given to justify resistance to internal criticism ultimately fail to justify such opposition, internal critics should, nevertheless, consider whether they can make any affirmative efforts to alleviate the level of controversy surrounding their work. The next section offers some suggestions to the internal critics so they might enhance understanding of their work and gain positive acceptance.

B. *Suggestions to Limit Negative Perceptions of Internal Criticism*

The participants in internal criticism can take several steps to limit the negative reception of their scholarship. First, internal critics should contextualize their work within progressive politics, demonstrating how their scholarship or activism ultimately facilitates the achievement of equality and liberation—or the inherent goals of progressive politics. While internal critiques might unveil negative aspects of oppressed communities, these critiques may appear less threatening if their ultimate goals of equality and social change are made explicit and clear.

In addition, internal critics should provide concrete examples of the injuries that result from essentialist progressive social theory and narrow constructions of identity. While generalized and abstracted arguments against essentialism draw needed attention (on some level) to the exclusionary nature of progressive theory, the employment of empirical studies and portrayals of specific examples of “multidimensional” oppression, as well as the direct engagement of the work of essentialist scholars,⁵³ will strengthen internal criticism analytically and provide greater illumination

52. Mari Matsuda has employed such a nuanced approach in her work. See Mari J. Matsuda, *Pragmatism Modified and the False Consciousness Problem*, 63 S. CAL. L. REV. 1763, 1774–75 (1990) (distinguishing Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality from “the simplistic anti-essentialism that reconstructs subordinated group identity until subordination no longer seems to exist”). In the same respect, it may be useful to make distinctions between “progressive” and “conservative” strands of *internal criticism*. See HOOKS, *supra* note 8, at 117 (distinguishing Black feminist critiques from conservative Black criticism).

53. Often, progressive scholars may avoid making such “targeted” antiessentialist criticism because they, accepting the “dirty laundry” rhetoric, do not want to disturb the “cohesion” of progressive communities. Telephone interview with Francisco Valdes, Professor of Law at University of Miami Law School (September 6, 1998) (relating experiences of other scholars).

of the pitfalls of essentialism. More persuasive critiques might alleviate the fears and concerns of some skeptics, particularly those skeptics who lack knowledge of the experiences of groups of individuals who are marginalized within oppressed communities.

Finally, internal critics should remain actively engaged with progressive political and intellectual communities. While the rejection of multidimensional critiques and the embrace of oppressive ideology within these communities might breed alienation and tension, the undaunted presence of internal critics, along with greater openness by resisters, may provide increased avenues for critical engagement and for broader understanding, acceptance, and effectiveness of the internal critiques.

CONCLUSION

Members of progressive intellectual communities and oppressed populations often reject internal criticism as divisive and as reinforcing negative depictions of subordinate people. Their rejection of internal critiques of gender, race, and sexual essentialism may also result from the embrace of oppressive ideologies. Opponents of internal criticism must adopt a more sophisticated approach to such criticism, given the important benefits it engenders: the strengthening of progressive politics and the construction of a more complex and inclusive model of justice and equality. Furthermore, any opposition to internal criticism based on the acceptance of repressive anti-feminist, White supremacist, and heteronormative discourses is squarely inconsistent with (what should be) the goals of progressive politics—liberation and equality. Participants in the rich, ongoing internal critiques of anti-racist, feminist, and gay and lesbian political discourses and theories can alleviate the fears of skeptics by contextualizing their work within progressive politics, providing concrete examples of the pitfalls of essentialism, and by maintaining their engagement with progressive intellectual communities and subordinate populations. Together, the openness of progressive communities and sustained vigilance by the internal critics can help ensure that the theoretical and political responses to oppression will accurately contest the multidimensional nature of social subordination.