

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Voicing the Unheard: The Radical Legacy of Barbara Smith and the Foundations of Black Feminist Criticism

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.1.11](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.1.11)



Article info

Article Received: 15/12/2025
Article Accepted: 10/01/2026
Published online: 18/01/2026

Abstract

This paper explores the pioneering contributions of Barbara Smith to Black feminist thought, literary criticism, and intersectional activism. Drawing on foundational texts such as *"Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"* and *"A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press,"* as well as theoretical expansions by Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn M. Simien, and other Black feminist scholars, this study situates Smith as a transformative figure in U.S. literary, cultural, and political discourse. It interrogates how Smith's work foregrounded the concept of intersectionality, well before it was formally theorized by illuminating the interconnected structures of race, gender, sexuality, and class that shape Black women's experiences.

Through a detailed analysis of her theoretical writings and community-based publishing initiatives, this paper examines Smith's efforts to challenge both the racial exclusion of white feminist criticism and the gendered erasure within Black male literary scholarship. Her vision of a Black feminist literary tradition insists on the necessity of self-definition, cultural autonomy, and collective resistance, especially for Black lesbian writers. Furthermore, the study draws connections between Smith's praxis and broader debates in womanism, identity politics, Third World feminism, queer theory, and radical publishing. Ultimately, the paper affirms Smith's enduring legacy as a foundational architect of Black feminist epistemology and a visionary who redefined the politics of voice, representation, and literary legitimacy.

Keywords: Barbara Smith, Black feminism, intersectionality, literary criticism, Kitchen Table Press, womanism, identity politics, radical publishing, Black lesbian writers, feminist theory.

Introduction

Barbara Smith's emergence as a literary critic, writer, and activist in the 1970s marked a foundational moment in the development of Black feminist criticism in the United States. At a time when the voices of Black women were largely excluded from both mainstream feminist and African American literary discourses, Smith boldly challenged the prevailing structures of academic and cultural erasure. Her groundbreaking essay "*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*" (1977) served as one of the first published works to advocate explicitly for a theoretical framework that centers Black women's literary production and lived experiences as worthy of serious critical analysis. She writes, "All segments of the literary world...do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist" (Smith *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 20). This assertion laid bare the structural invisibility imposed on Black women by both white feminists and Black male intellectuals.

Smith's work is distinctive not only for its theoretical interventions but also for its praxis-oriented vision. In 1980, she co-founded *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* alongside Audre Lorde and other feminists of color, driven by a shared frustration with the racial exclusion that permeated mainstream and even feminist publishing industries. As Smith explains in *A Press of Our Own*, "Kitchen Table began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us" (Smith 12). The press became a vital vehicle for publishing works by women of color, contributing to what has been described as a "renaissance of writing by Black and other women of color" during the 1980s (Smith 12).

Smith's contributions prefigured and deeply influenced the development of intersectionality as a critical paradigm, a term

later formalized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s. Long before intersectionality became a recognized academic concept, Smith was articulating the necessity of addressing the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Her insistence that Black women's literature be read through a lens that accounts for these multiple axes of identity paved the way for a generation of scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, who further developed Black feminist thought in works like *Black Feminist Thought* and *What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond*.

This paper traces Barbara Smith's intellectual trajectory and the radical implications of her literary and publishing work. It situates her contributions within broader theoretical frameworks, including Black feminist theory, womanism, and intersectionality. In doing so, it highlights how Smith's interventions not only reshaped the contours of literary criticism but also contributed to a larger project of epistemological justice for Black women and other marginalized groups. Her legacy continues to inform critical discourses around cultural production, identity politics, and grassroots publishing in both academic and activist contexts.

1. The Silencing of Black Women in Literary Criticism

In her foundational essay "*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*", Barbara Smith exposes the persistent and systemic erasure of Black women's voices in both mainstream feminist and African American literary traditions. She writes, "Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are...beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (Smith 20). Smith's use of the term "brutally complex systems" underscores the intersectional nature of the marginalization Black women endure, being sidelined not merely as women or as Black individuals, but as both, in a society that

privileges whiteness and maleness at every cultural and institutional level.

This absence is not coincidental. Barbara Smith argues that the literary establishment, including white feminists, Black male critics, and mainstream academic institutions either ignores or actively resists acknowledging the existence of Black women writers and their contributions. She writes:

These things have not been done. Not by white male critics... Not by Black male critics... Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists. And most crucially not by Black women critics. (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 20)

By listing each category of critical authority, Smith reveals the extent of the neglect and illustrates how each group participates in reinforcing a literary canon that systematically excludes Black women.

Smith particularly challenges white feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, who despite their claims of solidarity with women's issues, fail to engage with Black and lesbian writers. In her critique of Showalter's essay in *Signs*, Smith notes that there is not "a single Black or Third-World woman writer, whether 'major' or 'minor,'" mentioned in her overview of feminist criticism (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 24). This omission is not merely an oversight; it represents what Smith calls a form of "barely disguised cultural imperialism," where the experiences of white, middle-class women become the unexamined norm for feminist analysis (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 24).

The effect of this exclusion is epistemological as well as political. By ignoring Black women's writing, white feminist criticism limits its capacity to interrogate systems of oppression that do not center whiteness. Smith insists, "Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean" (Smith 25). This powerful statement

highlights how interpretive tools derived solely from white feminist frameworks are insufficient for analyzing texts by Black women, whose narratives are informed by histories of racialized gender oppression, economic deprivation, and heterosexism.

In naming the problem of exclusion, Smith lays the groundwork for what later scholars like Patricia Hill Collins would elaborate as *Black feminist epistemology*. Collins affirms that Black women's situated knowledge, rooted in lived experience is essential to understanding how oppression operates across interlocking domains of power (Collins 275). Without incorporating this standpoint into critical frameworks, feminist scholarship risks perpetuating the very systems of silencing it seeks to dismantle.

Ultimately, Smith's critique extends beyond individual omissions to address the structural limitations of feminist literary studies that have historically privileged whiteness, academic elitism, and heteronormativity. Her intervention calls for a radical rethinking of the literary canon and the critical methods used to engage it, insisting that the inclusion of Black women's voices is not a matter of tokenism, but of transforming the foundational logics of literary discourse itself.

2. The Necessity of a Black Feminist Criticism

Barbara Smith's insistence on the need for a distinct Black feminist criticism arises from her understanding that the lived realities of Black women cannot be fully comprehended or represented within existing literary critical frameworks that privilege whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. She makes a compelling argument in "*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*" when she declares, "Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean" (Smith 25). For Smith, the task is not merely to include Black women in an already existing discourse but to revolutionize that discourse by re-centering it

on Black women's experiences, aesthetics, and worldviews.

This perspective is rooted in her broader critique of the ways in which both mainstream literary institutions and feminist criticism had failed to engage with the complex realities of Black women. As she notes, "When Black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics" (Smith 25). Smith exposes the inadequacy of reading Black women's literature solely through a racial or gendered lens, without acknowledging the intricate interplay of both and more.

The necessity of a Black feminist critical framework lies in its capacity to interpret texts by Black women on their own terms. It acknowledges that Black women's literature emerges from, and speaks to, a nexus of oppressions, racial, gendered, sexual, and economic, that are often invisible in dominant critical traditions. Smith writes, "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 25). Her articulation of "interlocking" systems of oppression prefigures what Kimberlé Crenshaw would later theorize as intersectionality, a term now central to contemporary feminist theory and critical race studies.

Although Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, Smith had already laid the groundwork for intersectional analysis over a decade earlier. Her call for a Black feminist criticism based on the lived complexity of Black women's identities challenges not only exclusion but also the interpretive tools used by both white feminists and Black male critics. She emphasizes that without such a framework, the literature of

Black women is not merely underread but actively misunderstood and misrepresented.

The radical edge of Smith's proposal lies in its demand for an epistemological shift in literary studies. As Evelyn M. Simien later argues, Black feminist theory is not simply about representation, but about "charting a course" for entire academic disciplines to center the political, cultural, and intellectual contributions of Black women (Simien 82). Thus, Smith's vision of Black feminist criticism is transformative, not additive. It urges critics, scholars, and educators to recognize Black women's writing not as a marginal or niche subject but as a vital and necessary lens through which the broader human experience can be re-interpreted and reclaimed.

3. Literary Activism: Kitchen Table Press and Community Building

Barbara Smith's vision of Black feminist criticism was not limited to academic discourse; it extended into literary activism through material practices of publishing and community engagement. One of the most significant outcomes of this vision was the founding of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* in 1980, a pioneering collective established by Smith, Audre Lorde, and other women of color. As Smith recounts in her essay "A Press of Our Own", the press emerged out of a profound need for political and creative autonomy. "Kitchen Table began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us" (Smith 12). This declaration speaks to the urgency of self-representation for women of color within a publishing world that either silenced or distorted their voices.

The impetus for creating Kitchen Table was the pervasive racial exclusion and marginalization within both mainstream commercial publishing and the alternative spaces dominated by white feminists. Smith observes that even within feminist circles, Black

women were often relegated to special issues or token mentions. “Although our working relationships with white women were not universally problematic, too often we were required to fight...in order to get what we believed into print” (Smith *Press* 13). These structural limitations made it clear that women of color needed their own platform, one rooted in shared political commitments and cultural understanding.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press became much more than a publishing house; it was a revolutionary model of literary and political activism. The press prioritized the voices of women who were often multiply marginalized, not just by race and gender, but also by class, sexuality, and language. As Smith puts it, “We publish a work not simply because it is by a woman of color, but because it consciously examines...situations and issues that women of color face” (Smith 13). The press thus refused both tokenism and universalism, foregrounding politically engaged, intersectional writing as its core mission.

Furthermore, the community-building aspect of *Kitchen Table* was central to its impact. The press explicitly sought to reach and serve communities of color, beyond the academy or elite literary circles. Smith explains, “We have always defined our target audience as people of color: not solely women of color or lesbians of color, but the entire gamut of our communities” (Smith 13). This inclusive approach reflects the collective’s belief in literature as a transformative tool for social justice and cross-community education. By distributing books at cultural festivals, academic conferences, and grassroots events, the press connected literature to activism in concrete ways.

The establishment and success of *Kitchen Table* also challenged the structural assumptions of both white-dominated literary institutions and capitalist publishing models. As Patricia Hill Collins notes in her reflections on Black feminist cultural production, independent

institutions like Kitchen Table demonstrate the power of “subjugated knowledge” and grassroots epistemologies to resist domination and reshape public discourse (Collins 274). Kitchen Table’s legacy affirms that publishing can be a site of resistance, a space where radical voices not only survive but thrive.

In this way, Barbara Smith’s literary activism forged a material and ideological infrastructure for Black feminist knowledge production. Kitchen Table Press became a living example of her theoretical commitments, a space where Black women and other women of color could write, edit, publish, and circulate stories that were often excluded from dominant narratives. As Smith powerfully asserts, “freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press” (Smith 12). In owning their press, Smith and her collaborators reclaimed the means of cultural production, turning literary activism into a form of liberation.

4. Womanism, Intersectionality, and Theoretical Continuities

Barbara Smith’s early work laid the foundation for a critical tradition that would later be enriched and expanded by Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins and Evelyn M. Simien. While Smith identified the absence of Black women in literary criticism and articulated the need for a framework that centered their lived experiences, these later scholars formalized, extended, and applied these insights across disciplinary boundaries.

Patricia Hill Collins’s essay “*What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond*” engages directly with the philosophical and political distinctions between *womanism* and *Black feminism*, two terms often used interchangeably but rooted in different historical and cultural contexts. Collins acknowledges that womanism, a term popularized by Alice Walker, carries cultural resonance and spiritual inclusivity for many Black women, particularly those wary of feminism’s association with white, middle-class

women's concerns. However, she contends that Black feminism remains more explicitly political, rooted in historical struggles against racialized gender oppression and in coalition-building practices aimed at systemic change. As Collins puts it, "Womanism's emphasis on the experiences of African American women affirms a shared group identity, whereas Black feminism's political urgency highlights the need for resistance and collective action" (Collins 278).

By theorizing this distinction, Collins builds on Smith's foundational call for a critical framework that centers the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Smith had insisted that Black women's literature and lives could not be understood through additive models that viewed race and gender as separate or competing categories. Rather, she saw them as "interlocking systems of oppression," a phrase that anticipated later articulations of intersectionality (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 25). Collins formalizes this conceptual lineage, stating, "Black feminist thought is not just a critique of domination but also a vision for empowerment" (Collins 275). Thus, she offers not only theoretical validation of Smith's insights but also a broader vision for their application within contemporary feminist and cultural theory.

Evelyn M. Simien, in her essay "*Black Feminist Theory*", carries Smith's legacy into the discipline of political science, demonstrating that the marginalization of Black women is not confined to literary spaces but persists across academic fields. Simien critiques the traditional methodologies of political science, which often treat race and gender as discrete variables rather than intertwined systems of power. She argues, "If race and gender are studied as separate categories, one cannot explain how attitudes might change as a result of cross-pressures to subordinate the interests of Black women" (Simien 82). In other words, failing to apply an intersectional lens in political research leads to

distorted understandings of both Black political behavior and broader democratic participation.

Simien's argument complements Smith's original claim that Black women's experiences and contributions are not merely overlooked, they are actively erased by epistemological frameworks that privilege white, male, and heterosexual norms. Smith writes, "It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood" (Smith 21). This critique applies equally to academic disciplines that purport to study women, politics, or culture but fail to account for the unique positions Black women occupy within systems of power.

Together, Collins and Simien extend and validate Smith's pioneering insights. Their works underscore the theoretical and practical necessity of Black feminist consciousness as a tool for resistance, coalition, and truth-telling. By articulating how systems of knowledge reproduce racial and gendered hierarchies, these scholars reaffirm Smith's radical project: to center Black women's voices not as add-ons to existing frameworks, but as the foundation for new paradigms of analysis, politics, and liberation.

5. Praxis, Resistance, and the Legacy of Barbara Smith

Barbara Smith's contributions to Black feminist thought are inseparable from her political praxis. She did not limit herself to theorizing Black feminist criticism in academic settings; rather, she embodied the principles she articulated through a life dedicated to teaching, publishing, activism, and coalition-building. Her career serves as a model of *praxis*, the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between theory and action. As she wrote, "The conditions that coalesce into the impossibilities of this essay have as much to do with politics as with the practice of literature" (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 21). For Smith, writing and

activism were not separate domains but overlapping fields of resistance and creativity.

Her commitment to building intellectual and political infrastructures for women of color is perhaps best exemplified by her co-founding of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, which sought to challenge not only the whiteness of the publishing industry but also the class and heterosexist biases within feminist and radical movements. "We were writers and activists who had always cherished the written word, and we were determined to provide an alternative," Smith explains in *A Press of Our Own* (Smith 13). The alternative she envisioned was one where women of color had full autonomy over the production, distribution, and reception of their work.

Smith's activism also foregrounded an inclusive and intersectional politics well ahead of her time. She refused to ignore the structural homophobia and transphobia within communities of color or the racism embedded in white feminist movements. "It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood," she asserted, calling for feminist critique that recognizes race, class, and sexuality as co-constitutive forms of oppression (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 21). Her insistence on inclusivity laid the groundwork for what would later become queer of color critique, a framework that interrogates how racialized sexualities and sexualized racial identities intersect under structures of power.

Smith's collaboration with thinkers and activists such as Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa helped shape the intellectual contours of this critique. Lorde's declaration that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 112) echoed Smith's call for self-determined cultural production. Similarly, Moraga and Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* emerged from the same political and literary currents Smith was

fostering through Kitchen Table Press. These alliances were not merely symbolic; they produced tangible shifts in feminist epistemologies, demanding the inclusion of bodies, histories, and knowledges that had been systematically erased.

Moreover, Smith's political practice extended into electoral politics and grassroots organizing. She served as an elected official on the Albany Common Council and worked extensively in anti-violence initiatives, racial justice campaigns, and educational reform. As Evelyn M. Simien notes, Smith's life demonstrates the necessity of "placing Black women at the center of scholarly inquiry and political praxis," a move that not only disrupts dominant narratives but generates more accurate, inclusive, and transformative knowledge systems (Simien 83).

The legacy of Barbara Smith is thus multifaceted. She is a theorist, critic, organizer, educator, and institution builder. Her work has not only transformed the field of literary criticism but has had far-reaching impacts on feminist thought, LGBTQ+ activism, and intersectional praxis. In an academic era increasingly concerned with decolonization and anti-racism, Smith's model of intellectual-political synthesis remains deeply instructive. Her praxis reminds us that liberation is not simply a matter of what we say or write, but of what we build, together, intentionally, and without compromise.

Conclusion

Barbara Smith's legacy transcends the boundaries of literary criticism and feminist history; it is deeply embedded in ongoing movements for racial, gender, and sexual justice. Her contributions are not relics of a past wave of feminism but active frameworks that continue to inform how we think, teach, write, and organize today. Smith's vision was never limited to making space for Black women within existing systems; it was about transforming those systems entirely. She demanded that Black

women not only be heard but that their histories, texts, and lives reconfigure the fundamental terms through which academic inquiry and political discourse operate.

In her insistence that Black women's experiences, be examined at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality, Smith laid the groundwork for what we now recognize as intersectional feminism. Her work prefigured contemporary theoretical frameworks while remaining grounded in lived realities and community needs. Whether through the radical act of co-founding *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, challenging white feminist exclusivity, or shaping Black lesbian visibility within intellectual and activist spaces, Smith continuously merged thought with action, embodying the praxis she advocated.

Smith's work also forces us to reconsider the politics of voice and representation. In a cultural and academic landscape still marked by erasures, her reminder that "freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press" (*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* 12) becomes a rallying cry for those creating alternative institutions and platforms today. As literary canons continue to be revised, curricula decolonized, and gender binaries dismantled, Smith's foundational contributions stand not only as historical interventions but as living blueprints for justice-oriented scholarship and activism.

Contemporary Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Evelyn M. Simien have built upon Smith's insights, extending her influence across disciplines and generations. Yet the core of her message remains urgent: systems of knowledge that silence Black women are not simply flawed, they are incomplete. For as long as these systems persist, Smith's call for accountability, self-definition, and liberation through critique remains indispensable.

Ultimately, Barbara Smith reminds us that writing is a political act, that publishing is a

form of resistance, and that centering the lives of Black women is not a matter of inclusion but a mandate for transformation. Her enduring legacy challenges us not only to listen to marginalized voices but to shift the foundations of knowledge so that those voices define the terms of engagement. In doing so, she reclaims literature, criticism, and activism as interconnected tools of survival and liberation.

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