INTERSECTIONS & INTERVENTIONS: BLACK FEMINISM IN THE AGE OF THE POLYCRISIS

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Polycrisis

Definition: (noun) a time of great disagreement, confusion, or suffering that is caused by many different problems happening at the same time so that they together have a very big effect[1]

Similar Terms: Permacrisis, Multicrisis

Usage: "In the polycrisis the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts." (Adam Tooze, *Financial Times*[2])

[Alternative] *Polycrisis*

[Alternative] *Definition*: (noun) a deeply concerning and troubled period haunted by both physical and metaphysical ghosts of ontological errors and "Europatriarchal" power dynamics

[Alternative] *Similar Terms*: Metacrisis, Systemic Oppression, Europatriarchal Rule

[Alternative] *Usage*: Continue reading ...

1 Definition of "polycrisis" from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polycrisis.

2 Tooze, A. (2022, October 28). Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis. *Financial Times*. www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33

Coined in the 1990s by the sociologist Brigitte Kern and the French philosopher Edgar Morin in their book *Homeland Earth*, the term "polycrisis" describes how multiple crises across climate, the economy, politics, health, and society are compounding and exacerbating each other. In 2022, the term resurfaced and became a buzzword. It now frames discussions at the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, and Davos, to name only a few of the high-level spaces it features in.

When a term gains such explosive traction within key institutions, it becomes important to engage with it. This is particularly important for feminists. Patriarchal power typically takes refuge in high-level decision-making and agenda-setting platforms, which is precisely where the term polycrisis also travels. The word "crisis" is itself code for issues that concern the "big boys" — decision-makers and technocrats who are usually white male elites, whereas the polycrisis most adversely impacts women, and brown and Black people as a group.

Biases in problem-solving have not put an end to global crises in the past, and they won't do so now either. In fact, they lie at the root of these crises. I provide an alternative definition of the term polycrisis to start this chapter as a sardonic play on words, but there is a truth behind it. This essay will show that the polycrisis is not only a *diagnostic* of interlocking and simultaneous threats, but also a *result* of multiple and intersecting oppressions. The polycrisis is not only a structural and economic crisis, it is also a crisis of meaning and a crisis of relationships. The unusual pairing of Black feminism and the polycrisis allows a deeper structural and affective understanding of the critical reality of our planet.

For a long time, we have been ruled by a worldview where we are masters of our destiny; where we can do as we please with our planet, and then fix the damage with technology and science. We have accepted this technoscientific way because we have constructed the world based on the idea that *all* reality is of a material nature, and that the supposedly material nature of reality is therefore measurable and quantifiable. This belief has in return produced a mindset that we can control *Nature*, a notion that I capitalize to indicate that I include in it *all* that exists: matter, land, soil, resources, humans, subatomic particles, time, and so on.

This perception creates all kinds of problems because if something needs to be material to be real, then everything which does not easily lend itself to measurement — emotions, intuition, lived experience, for example — is either neglected or forced into a rigid binary formula where it loses its telos. Inevitably, the attempt to control Nature, mysterious and untamable as it is, leads to systems that — be they economic, political, social, or educational — view Nature as a resource to endlessly exploit. Nature consists of more than tangible materiality. There are also non-material, metaphysical qualities within Nature: experience, language, subjective emotions, embodied processes, consciousness. This is also the case with democracy: we focus disproportionately on the materiality of democracy (votes, constitutions, data, etc.), all the while losing the game to those agents who understand that appealing to the immaterial elements of lived experience is a valuable strategy in recruiting people toward anti-democratic dogmas.

If we lived on another planet, we might continue believing that our sophisticated institutions can heroically end the polycrisis with their straight-out technoscientific diagnostics. But we have reached a critical juncture of increasing droughts, melting glaciers, and a natural environment undergoing rapid and threatening transformation. It is a tipping point of democratic decline, economic recession, growing social inequality, global pandemics, and immense mental and emotional suffering. There's a need for deeper and alternative approaches to crisis.

Those who are the most affected by multiple and overlapping crises need to have a say in how we address these crises. Marginalized, minoritized, and disenfranchised groups have a grasp of crisis that is not only theoretical but also experiential. This makes them less likely to formulate duplicitous "solutions" to the polycrisis. Take, for example, how Germany — world leader in recycling — exports an annual average of one million tons of plastic waste to poorer countries. Our planet's oceans and forests do not care about recycling awards. This kind of "waste colonialism" harms Germany's people as much as any other group in the long term. Any true effort to end the polycrisis must therefore understand that lurking beneath the term polycrisis are the inimical ghosts of inequality — imperialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

Wherever there is an abuse of power, there is a crisis. The debate about the polycrisis is, therefore, fundamentally a debate about power. The polycrisis forces us, yet again, to address questions of who shapes and defines reality, the direction of the planet and its human and non-human inhabitants. Every issue that informs the polycrisis, be it declining democracy, climate emergency, war, poverty, social unrest, or health threats, is enlarged by this prevailing connection of power with social hierarchy. We cannot, therefore, discuss the multiple unfolding crises without discussing the nature of hegemonic power. The biased Europatriarchal approach to the polycrisis is unsuitable for tackling the polycrisis because it is the polycrisis.

Imagine our planet at an intersection of a huge traffic jam with cars coming from multiple directions simultaneously crashing into it. Imagine that each car at this destructive intersection represents a harmful system or event, such as climate crisis, authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism, imperialism, pandemics, consumerism, militarism, hierarchism, and so on, and that our home, Earth, is being synchronically hit by each one. That *is* the image of the polycrisis.

Now replace in your mind's eye the image of the planet at the intersection of a traffic jam with an image of a Black woman at the center of the crossroads. Where the planet is at a destructive intersection of harmful systems, picture the Black woman similarly being hit by multiple vehicles representing oppressive structures, such as sexism from one lane and racism from another.

This latter image is, of course, precisely the one famously provided by the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 when she coined the term "intersectionality". Crenshaw argued that rather than relying on single-axis feminist and Black antiracist frameworks that ignore Black women's experiences by respectively treating gender and race as exclusive categories, race and gender should be understood as inseparable factors that interdependently negate Black women's agency. To describe intersectionality, Crenshaw wrote:

> *Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number*

> *of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.* (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139)

Ultimately, Crenshaw notes, "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (ibid., p. 140).

Intersectionality, then, describes the unique predicament of a Black woman facing multiple compounding systemic oppressions, and the polycrisis likewise describes the unique predicament of our planet being hit by multiple interlocking and systemic crises. The image of a Black woman at the intersection of an accident that blurs the lines of oppression also shows us how our planet is harmed by multiple and simultaneous systemic dangers. I have extrapolated intersectional theory to the polycrisis to demonstrate one of the reasons why Black feminist thought is necessary in the polycrisis discourse.

In the years since Crenshaw's coinage of intersectionality, Black feminist thought has expanded to also consider intersections with class, sexuality, disability, and more. Like all feminist theory, Black feminist thought has focused on the systemic nature of power structures, but Black feminist thought has been especially insightful in highlighting the ways that power is abused through multiple dimensions. Indeed, intersectionality has had a remarkable impact not only on feminist scholarship, but it has also become widely adapted and expanded geographically, topically, and methodologically to suit many possible situations, including in politics, governance, and education. The German government, for instance, created a new feminist foreign policy in 2023 in which it adopts an "intersectional approach," emphasizing the need to stand up "for everyone who is pushed to societies' margins because of their gender identity, origin, religion, age, disability or sexual orientation." Notably, prodigious scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Jennifer C. Nash, have developed bodies of work that situate intersectionality in a larger theoretical and political project with "visionary world-making capacities" and, therefore, also challenge intersectionality "to broaden its reach to theorize an array of subject experiences" (Nash, 2008, p. 10).

However, Black feminists do not only have things to say about biases and structural oppression in addressing the polycrisis. As a school of thought, Black feminism also addresses the rigid and technocratic ways we address crises in the first place. It is easy for exclusionary and destructive biases to slip into the strategic frameworks because their nature is mechanical and lacking in the human touch of experience. Since the inception of Black feminist thought, the arts, the poetry, the ritual, and the embodied practice has been essential to Black feminism precisely because they confirm an understanding of reality that is about more than just the material. Due to our position outside the center of power, Black feminists have always integrally understood that we need new ontologies and ways of knowing, which don't worship quantification to the detriment of other sources of knowledge.

Specific Black feminist theories expound on this insight, such as the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' "ethics of caring". According to Collins, the psychological effect of bearing the impacts of classism, sexism, and racism mark Black and African women's lives around the world with a unique tendency that she calls an ethics of caring. Founded upon three pillars, the ethics of caring includes, first, the value of individual expression; second, the value of emotions; and third, the capacity for empathy. Collins argues that African humanist and feminist principles influence Black women's ways of knowing. Similarly, in her body of work, the Black feminist thinker Audre Lorde built a philosophical view that encourages transformation not only through rationalizing but also through qualities such as the erotic and the poetic.

In my book *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone* (Salami, 2020), I offer a similar language with which to counter the oppressive systems that create destructive collisions at both the level of the individual and the planet. Black feminist thought helps us to reconceptualize the planet. The planet emerges as agentic, meaning it is something that acts, and that acts in relationship with other agentic entities – other planets, humans, non-humans, matter, and non-matter. These relationships are impacted by the planet and, vice versa, the planet is impacted by them. The planet illuminates the impact of metaphysics and materiality on the human and the image of the Black woman at the

intersection can be extrapolated to shine a light on the destruction of the planet. Intersectionality helps us envision how symbiotic relations between agents can be transformative for both metaphysical and material outcomes.

The prefix *poly* connotes plurality, and the notion of a *crisis* is not only a situation of danger but can also signify a turning point. We can infer from these conceptual roots that, yes, the polycrisis is the doomed scenario of intersecting dangers that our world is grappling with – but the polycrisis also presents a possibility for multitudinous transformation. If it takes a state of despair to abandon biased, dualist, and un-alive ways of structuring the world, then Black feminist thought has new visions and "solutions" to heal our wounded planet.

I may be rushing ahead of myself with such a hopeful and optimistic mindset, but amidst the many fires there is also an unexpected possibility to satisfy the yearning for connections between humans and the planet, and between humans ourselves. The intention of this essay is not to provide a full articulation of these critical, imaginative, and restorative visions, but rather to sketch the contours of a powerful Black feminist intervention in the narrative of polycrisis. If the polycrisis doesn't make us tend to the wound, then what will?

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