

All Ears with Abigail Disney

Season 1 Episode 09

Kimberlé Crenshaw: The Woman at the Intersection of Intersectionality

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Abigail Disney: I'm Abby Disney and you're listening to All Ears. When we started this podcast in April, we were focusing on economic inequality, but inequality is not always just about economics. We all watched a public lynching and it seemed important to focus directly on race and racial injustice. For the remainder of the season. I'm using my platform to talk with some amazing thinkers and movement leaders about how we got here and how we should move forward.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Testing, testing...ok. I think we are ready. Luke, I need some tissue, that's the only thing I need.

Abigail Disney: Is this a family member getting you tissue?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Yes, it is. He has become the production assistant.

Abigail Disney: So, I've gotta do a more formal, fancy introduction. So, why don't I start that now.

My guest today is a hero in the truest sense. She's certainly a hero of mine. If you go back through her life, the breadth of her achievement is incredible.

Kimberlé Crenshaw is the originator of the term intersectionality. She also started the critical race theory movement, she co-founded and is Executive Director of the African American Policy Forum.

And here's the thing. She's an academic, a scholar, but very very rare scholars whose academic work has left the ivory tower and had an impact on the real world around us. That impact is being seen on the streets every day these days.

I have to tell you, I kind of cheated last night and spoke to Kimberlé. We were just supposed to touch base, but it turned into a wide-ranging two-hour conversation about everything and what we figured out was that we are pretty much the same vintage--I'm 60, she's 61. We grew up being all the same things and had all the same cartoons and heroes and so forth that we loved. And yet we were coming at things from such very different places, so it's incredibly wonderful that we find ourselves together in the same place now.

So, Kimberly Crenshaw, welcome. Welcome. Welcome.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Thanks so much for having me looking forward to this conversation.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, me too. We had a really nice talk yesterday on the phone and, it really did feel like we've known each other all the time.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Amazingly.

Abigail Disney: And we were talking about that yesterday, just in terms of my memory of the Watts Riots.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Yes. Watching it, seeing the smoke rise from, from, from the hills, right. Sort of the gaze outward and seeing that, which was, it's a memory that--your memory that's now stuck in my head.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Yeah. And the fear in my house. And, um, it's just that we, that there are two Americas in some ways. And I wonder if what we're seeing out there is the finally, maybe the, the uniting of the two realities, at least among young people. So, let's go back to the eighties for a minute because you know, you and I were both graduate students.

I at Columbia, you at Harvard kind of around the same time. And the eighties brought us, of course, Ronald Reagan, who started his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and was the king of the dog whistle. And really kind of ushered in a period of retrenchment around race and racial justice, we saw just such an erosion.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Well, the eighties, that was the period where it became clear that we, as a people in particular those of us who'd been deeply committed to racial justice and gender justice, that that upward momentum was over. I was actually a student at Cornell when Ronald Reagan was elected.

And I remember, uh, the evening of his election was one of the moments when Cornell experienced racist hate crimes. Some students saying that they were accosted by white students, another episode involving, you know, some other racist graffiti on the Africana Center. It was clear that something had been unleashed and that unleashing wasn't just at the level of students and people getting excited.

It went all the way up to the Supreme Court. This idea now that whatever the civil rights movement had been, it was pretty much over.

So, I left Cornell along with a whole cohort of students going to law school thinking we want to be of service to this movement. We want to be part of like this next generation. And what we encountered was number one, the recalcitrance of liberal institutions that never really saw themselves as part of the problem against a bigger backdrop of a society that was ready to move on.

Abigail Disney: So, you came along in that period, um, and really shook up the Harvard law school. Can you tell me about that?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: So, my mother ended up reading in the New York Times about a protest that I'd been involved in. And, uh, she called me over the phone and was horrified. Like, what are you doing? You know, we worked so hard to get you here.

You know, you're going to ruin it. And I just started explaining to mom, well, look, here's what happened. We got here to study with Derrick Bell. Derrick Bell had left, you know, three months before we got here, he was up in arms really about the fact that even though

he was there and another black faculty member was there, they had no others, they weren't planning to get any others.

Abigail Disney: Right, right. So, can you help me understand who Derrick Bell was?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Derrick Bell was a civil rights litigator who went on to become one of the first African Americans to teach at Harvard Law School. He wrote a book called *Race, Racism, and American Law*, which was a staple for any of us who were thinking we wanted to become civil rights lawyers thinking we wanted to be involved in racial justice struggle through gaining expertise about race and the law.

And he decided that he could no longer stay there because it was impossible for him to persuade his faculty members to recruit other people of color to teach, and he wasn't happy being an exception.

And so, he just left and we went in demanding to have courses taught that he taught, which was why we were there. And they basically told us, you know, number one, what's so special about these courses and number two, wouldn't you prefer an excellent white professor over a mediocre black one?

Abigail Disney: Oh my God.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And those set the terms of our existence there. So, once I told my mom that, and I said, look, we are the lunch counters of, you know, today, right? We're doing an intellectual sit in at the seat of legal power. Once I explained that to her, then, you know, she was on board, she had raised me to be an activist. So that was what we walked into in the eighties. And that's pretty much shaped everything since in my opinion.

Abigail Disney: What I read was that not only did Derrick Bell leave, but he was replaced by two civil rights attorneys. Right?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Well, so what the students were demanding was--first of all Derrick Bell's course called *Race, Racism, and American Law*. And it was, you know, a full semester course. It was basically an interrogation about how the law has both created race and racism. And at the same time in the mid 20th century, uh, been presented as a, reformist institution. So, his course was looking at the contradiction of law with respect to race and racism. Well, what they offered us instead was a mini course, which was two weeks, and it was taught by two adjuncts, uh, civil rights lawyers. And it was about civil rights litigation. Now, that's really important, it's really great, but it was not what we were asking for. What we were asking for was a full treatment of law and racial subordination.

We were demanding that the law school use this moment to integrate its faculty. To actually use this as a way of integrating the talent that we knew existed across the country for permanent positions, tenured positions at Harvard. So, they basically ignored that demand. They went on that year to hire 10 white men, 10 out of 10 people, you know, 10 slots. They couldn't find one for a person of color. So that was why we reacted to their response by building our own course, we called it *The Alternative Course*.

And in that course, we used Derrick Bell's textbook and we reached out across the country to find scholars of color that we would then combine all our resources to bring to campus to teach a chapter out of his book. That's why we called it The Alternative Course.

Abigail Disney: You know, Harvard was hard to change and was important to change for the same reason, which is because it's seen as this leading institution. And I think an institution that goes back to the early 17th century is especially going to be very invested in the idea that law is neutral. It doesn't contain any value one way or the other. It's just simply a rational thing.

And I look at your work over the years. And one of the through lines I see is a contention with silencing. They narrow this course down and refuse to see what you're saying about the difference between a two-week course in civil rights law and the whole sweep of what Derrick Bell was teaching and critical race theory.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: What was so eye opening to me about this is that we weren't having a fight with like conservative institutions in the South. We were in the bastion of liberal, institutional, preparation, uh, of lawyers going into, you know, Wall Street and becoming leaders across the country.

So, they would have seen themselves as being our friends. In fact, the Dean at the time was a board member of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Um, so we were confronting the many ways that racial power was often embedded and reproduced, even in colorblind ways. They would not have seen themselves as doing anything that remotely looked like racial segregation of the past. They would see themselves, and they, they basically said it, um, we are, we are waiting for talented professors of color to emerge from the pool. So, the pool is shallow right now. Um, but we have confidence that eventually they will, will emerge.

But using that framework suggests that the pool is this naturally constituted...you know, like the ocean, right? Eventually, you know, the fish will grow legs and lungs and walk out, and we'll go voila I hear they are. We were saying, we need to change who's in the building. And so that's where, you know, it became clear to us that even liberal thinking about race and racism, was not critical thinking about race and racism. There was a lot more that liberals had in common with colorblind conservatives than they had with those of us who were thinking about race critically.

Abigail Disney: Right. And this insistence on the colorblindness, especially among liberals has them clinging to the idea of the individual racist. The individual who is reprehensible and horrible, and you see them coming a mile away and he's wearing a white sheet and that is the extent of racism.

And there was just a pattern of denial of institutional responsibility and what amazes me is that at Harvard of all places--

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And it started with slave money. Just adding that.

Abigail Disney: Exactly! Yes! And the role Boston played in the triangle trade and so forth that there would be no consciousness that what you do today is very much informed by what they were doing then.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And it also means that they have to confront the question of their own legitimacy. That's really what the beauty and the danger of meritocracy is. It's one thing if people understood their privileges in terms of just the brute expression of power.

Like we're white, we're men, we're here. Uh, we're the King of the mountain and that's just the way it is, but meritocracy gives them another frame, another way of institutionalizing their presence in an exclusionary way that doesn't rely on the brute expression of power and force.

So, if you can find some other mechanism to say, it's not about who we are, it's about this external thing we had and it's called merit and you know what, here's how we're going to measure merit. We're basically gonna sort of take the social biographies of all of us, we're going to turn a test out of that, and we're going to give this test to other people and if they take the task and they can replicate our language and our cultural references and the things that are important to us and they get a high score on that test, then they can come and be part of this club.

If they don't get a high score on that test it's not because of race or gender or even class. It's because they don't have that stuff inside their head that we have, and that has largely been the story that allows people to continue to look in higher education and see massive levels of disproportionality still in terms of who's faculty who's tenured, who's adjunct who's week to week.

Abigail Disney: So, as I'm listening to you, I'm hearing again and again there were so many parallels with feminism. You know, this question of being silenced, this question of meritocracy and achievement gaps. When did you begin to start bringing a feminist analysis to the things that you were thinking about and doing?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Well, the feminist in me had been there. It went all the way back to when I was a kid. You know, seeing the double standards, even within my own family. So what was so eye opening for me when I finally got to law school, um, was to see first institutionally how the sides get constructed.

So, in the debates that we were having over faculty hiring a big issue also was that women weren't being hired. Particularly liberals were taking up the project of trying to deepen the pool, broaden the pool, get faculty to see that there were many, many women out there who were qualified and there were many, many people of color, but in classic fashion, the lists of women didn't include women of color and the list of people of color didn't include women, not initially. And I was really struck by how obvious it was to me that a structure like that was going to produce precisely the silencing about those candidates who were both of color and were women.

It was also surprising to me that it that it was so surprising to everyone else. So, when I left Harvard, I really wanted to think about all of these questions. Like what was it that was so

profoundly different about a course on race racism in American law, that we didn't really fully have an answer to.

What was it about the way institutions structure their thinking about race, racism, and sexism that allow for black women to fall through the cracks? And then I just started reading law cases and saw, well, this is no mystery. The courts themselves have no capacity to understand that when a black woman makes a claim that a particular workforce excludes her as a black woman, the women's jobs are for white women and the black jobs are for men.

They literally cannot hear what they're saying. Cause their understanding of racism is limited pretty much to what happens to men and their understanding of sexism is limited to what happens to their sisters, daughters, and wives. So that's where intersectionality actually came to my imaginary. Like what kind of tool, what kind of metaphor, what kind of everyday concept can I build understanding onto so these judges can hear and see what these black women plaintiffs are actually saying. So, it was a metaphor that came out of interrogating the absence.

Abigail Disney: Right, right, right. Now, the absence in the narrative, I mean, narratives are so important. When I think how vividly narrative has shaped my identity, my consciousness, my, my means of thinking and, and, you know, as a white girl in a very privileged house being raised by a Southern mother, I got a narrative about slavery...

Kimberlé Crenshaw: What was your, what was it? I mean, when you think about that, what's the narrative about race and gender?

Abigail Disney: To fill everybody else in, I shared with Kimberle yesterday that my mother's family could trace its line all the way back to the first portage in New Orleans. You know, everything bad around race that you might imagine happened in my family. They owned a sawmill where they had slaves, enslaved people, they bought and sold enslaved people. I've seen the census information. Yeah, all of that. And my mother was an embittered southerner, even though she was raising us in Southern California. And so, I can remember reading my fifth-grade history book and having my mother look over my shoulder and say, Oh, this just is not fair, the way they're talking about this, you know, most of the slave owners were very nice. I just remember looking at her and saying, but weren't they slaves?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Right. But they were happy slaves!

Abigail Disney: Yeah. And she said to me, at the end of the war, they were so happy. They didn't want to leave. Reconstruction was totally invisible in the way I was taught about the 19th century. Black people went invisible, uh, really until the 1950s. So, it was like, they were sitting around kind of playing cards until they became important again, you know what I mean? And so, I had internalized patriarchy, certainly up the wazoo, but I also had internalized racism that I grew up with.

I think of it as something that I continually try to shed in a conscious way. Um, because when you're small, you have to be complicit. You don't know any other reality. So, when did you

become complicit? I can't tell you that because it was like the way the sun rises just slowly and, you know, you can't make a marker when the sun is up.

And, I think that, because I was struggling always from childhood, just like you, about the unfairnesses that were happening in terms of gender in my family, I think that that made me more sensitive to things like silencing. Um, and because I was hypersensitive about silencing, then I tended to ask myself, well, how would it feel if I were a slave, you know, and so that was how I started digging out. But I don't know that everybody digs out because the fabric of people's lives, real lived experiences, is not what we're taught.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Right.

Abigail Disney: And so, we don't go all the way there in terms of imagining the rapes and imagining the work, the labor of black women in slavery and imagining the sensation of erasure. And there is no room for the emotional shredding that would have to come with genuine empathy.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: I do think that many people right now are having a moment where they're thinking, well, how did I not know this stuff? Um, what is being done in my name? What is allowed to happen? Because it's happening to other people and not happening to me. And now that I've asked those questions and I'm starting to get some answers to those questions, what drives me to do something about it? I think sometimes people mistake the desire for justice as simply guilt. I do want people to have a reckoning with the world in which they live.

I do want people to feel like, you know, now that I know, now that I've taken this pill, it requires me to do something. And I don't think that should be disregarded or taken lightly. So those who are writing, like the, their check to the NAACP--that's not enough. It's, it's a start, but the, the kind of self-reflection that you're talking about is hard work and it's not like a one-time thing. It's now a lifetime of, of interrogating, thinking, looking around, seeing things with new eyes, and then acting on what it is your eyes are telling you.

Abigail Disney: I, you know, honestly, I've lived in a state of near constant guilt and good intentions for all of my adult life. It's kind of my defining condition. It's been an enormous motivator for me in my life to just make myself useful, right. And my grandmother always said, "The road to hell is paved with good intention" it's just an old expression. I remember thinking, well, that's a terrible thing to say, but as the older I get I'm like, yeah, I think the road to hell really is paved with good intentions because I have seen it again and again, and, and it, I do it personally.

Um, you know, like when somebody comes to me and I've done something bad and they want me to apologize. I dismiss them with a really quick apology and it's abject and sad, but I am totally doing the worst thing you can do if you really want to apologize to someone, cause I'm not listening.

And it's because I can't hear, um, my vision and my world structure, my narrative, all of that can't sustain all of what you want to tell me. Um, and so, and that's, what's happening across the board among white people who want to believe they worked really hard and

earned everything they have, and they have, um, who want to believe that it was all fair, that they didn't get any help. That idea of the world, that this country has been built over bones, you know, um, that is too hard to let in. And so, I think that there's this instinctive pushing away of the revelations.

I mean, one of the biggest bits of trouble I ever got on the internet was when I said Meryl Streep was right when she said that my uncle Walt was a racist. Um, yeah.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: You got a lot about that.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Yeah. And, and I thought it was kind of astonishing the blow back I got, because, you know, first of all, people were calling me the C word, which is, you know, it's an interesting way of defending this person because you think he's decent and good.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Right, we're going to reach into our bag of misogyny and throw something at you.

Abigail Disney: Exactly.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: How dare you?

Abigail Disney: But it was like, I don't understand why I have to explain this. Let's just look at Song of the South. So, for anybody who doesn't know, Song of the South was a film that, uh, the Walt Disney company put out, I think in the end of the forties or may have been in the fifties. But, um, it was the story of a young boy who lives on a plantation in post-Civil War South who, he befriends this elderly kind, African American man who's just very content with his life where he is--

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Like an Uncle Remus character.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, exactly. Well, he is Uncle Remus. It was an insult that he wanted to make it to begin with. Um, the NAACP met with him on multiple occasions and told him, described to him how painful this was and how problematic it was and in spite of the protests, in spite of everything, they put it out. And it's the basis for the ride on Splash Mountain.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And I, I remember being introduced to it as a kid. Um, and the thing about Disney movies is that they're so magical that you swallow it.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. That's the problem.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: You swallow the poison of it because it's so beautiful. Um, I mean to this day, I still have Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay you know, in a soundtrack in my head, you know, with, with a smile and you know, Mr. Bluebird's on my shoulder.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. You know, I, I have to say, I never thought of the song, the Spoonful of Sugar as a, as a political thing, but now, now you've reframed it for me.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Yeah.

Abigail Disney: That's like the whole story. Yeah. And that's and this is the thing that, um, gets me into trouble when I critique the company because, um, to interrupt how magical and to interrupt what it means to people, and especially to say well, it was racist guys how did you not notice that? Um, it feels like people are being assaulted personally, that their childhood is being interrupted. I understand that completely, but we just need to get over that.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And, getting over that I think helps as well, moving beyond the image-- the cartoon of racism, right? So there's the cartoon of the sheriff who is a good old boy who, you know, sics dogs on people or otherwise just wants to stomp the life out of them as long as that's our only view, our only vision, our only way of imagining racism, of course, we're not going to make much progress because that's a very, very small part of what constitutes racism. It's a very small part of the language of racism. We're going to have to be able to see in things that made us happy or made us sing along racist messages, and we have to be able to talk about the way they function as justification's rationalizations.

Telling people actually, it's all a good story you know, of the lost cause that that kind of lost cause framework is why, although the North may have won the battle, the South has won the war. As long as you can sing along to Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay.

And that's our problem now, that's the problem with the monuments. That's why we're having a reckoning with our history.

Abigail Disney: You know, the thing about looking at the history with, with clarity and with moral courage is you get so much about how you need to be functioning right now.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Right now. You know, one of the, one of the projects that we have and by we, I mean the African American Policy Forum, we have tried to do structural racism workshops that take people back to those earlier moments, partly because it's easier in 2020 vision, to be able to say, well, taking the lands of indigenous people and giving them to farmers, we could see how that was wrong and we could see how stealing labor of black people was wrong. We can see how forcibly abusing sexually assaulting and manufacturing people, which is what the rape of black women did during slavery. We can see how that was wrong. So, we can see all these things, but people are often not able to see the intergenerational passage of those injuries and the things that it produced to today.

One of the other things that my group created is this thing called the Unequal Opportunity Race. And it's basically just a cartoon. And it shows people running around the track from the beginning of the Republic as each character runs around the track and they get old, they pass the Baton on, which is basically wealth.

They pass it on to the next generation. Well, they're running around for decades until we get to 1965, when we finally see Black and Latino people being able to run around the race. And so as they run around, they encounter all of the obstacles that are based on race. So it's very simple. It's basically to say, if you're running a race and there's stuff in your lane, you're not even able to start until the race has gone on for 200 years.

And then there's stuff in your lane that's not in the others. Attending to that is not reverse discrimination. That's the simple point. It had been shown, you know, millions of times, but it was shown in Ryko County. It was the seat of Richmond, Virginia, the seat of the old Confederacy and some of the parents denounced it as a white guilt video and went to the school board and the school board banned it. Now I say this because we started this part talking about narrative. This is a fight about narrative. This is a fight about what stories get told. This is a fight about what stories cannot be tolerated. And if you don't have a narrative that backs up a policy or a demand or a sense that there is still work to be done on racial injustice, if you don't have the narrative, you can't get the work done. You can't communicate to other people why the society we live in is not okay. We can't say to the 10-year-old you looking at the smoke rising from Watts, why that smoke rising from Watts isn't just about Watts, it's also about where you are gazing from.

Abigail Disney: You know, I think the only thing that saved me from my patriarchal upbringing was being so bad at patriarchy. I mean, I was just too loud, too bossy, too opinionated. I just didn't.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Me too, me too.

Abigail Disney: Yes, exactly. I call it not getting the memo. There's all these women that didn't get the memo about how you were supposed to be.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And my mom, my mom was in this way, I think a contradiction because on one hand, as a race warrior, you know, she, she and my dad expected us at the dinner table every day to have something to say about the world we were living in. So it was, it was part of the striving generation taking full responsibility for living up to the moment and then transcending it, turning it into something better for the race. So that, that was very much a part of it.

Uh, at the same time, I think she figured out early in life that I would need to be trimmed a little bit around the edges. So, I would always, she would listen to me playing with, you know, my little friends who were boys and she would say afterwards, you know, you could let them win sometimes!

Abigail Disney: Oh my God.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And I was like, but why? Why do I have to let them win?

Abigail Disney: Yeah, exactly, exactly. But why.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: If they win, they win, if they don't, they don't. Right. Why is this my responsibility? And it--there were these moments when she was trying to, I guess, send me the memo, but sliding it in, you know, a little bit, but I just couldn't hear it. It made no sense to me. I didn't understand. I didn't understand this thing called the male ego. So, I just thought if we're all good at monopoly we're going to have the best time if we all play our best. I didn't get it. And then I would say for me, the other factor, my father died suddenly when I was 10.

So, from the time I was 10 onwards, I didn't see the internal negotiation in the household. I just saw my mom, you know, working and making a better life for us and, you know, being what she had to be in the world. So, I think I started off not really being responsive to the memo, and then I didn't have any example of the memo.

Um, and so by the time I got out in the world, I guess I was a feral version of what a woman is supposed to be.

Abigail Disney: You know, I do, I do think that if there were women who got the memo before us, that we haven't heard of, I mean, certainly they've been silenced and erased and all that, but I think many of them were dead before they had a chance to do anything. I think that's true to this day. I always wonder how many Anne Frank's we've never heard of. You know, because the diary didn't make it to the publisher.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Yeah, yeah. And the belief that our lives are worth narrating. You know, you have to, you have to first think that how you think is worthy of recording and sharing. Reading, you know, Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara, and, you know, um, Zora Neale Hurston, like knowing that their narratives were telling me something about my life that was important for me to see and witness, um, that helps build a subjectivity that empowers you to say, hey, you know, what about us?

Um, I think the challenge is when the political structures don't amplify that moment. When you say, hey, what about us? Um, when you are valued to the extent that you can tell the story of the racism that happens to your father, son, husband, or brother, but not valued when you're ready to tell the story about how racism impacts your daughter, your mother, you know, your partner.

And that frankly is I think the work that is underrealized. Um, and I think we're seeing it's under realization in this moment now that we're talking about race and racism, again, anti-black racism again, it's come online because we're looking at police brutality.

And at the same time, you know, we're not for the fact that Breonna Taylor was killed within this same season, we would not be talking about black women at all.

Abigail Disney: We wouldn't be talking about Breonna at all if it hadn't been for George Floyd.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Breonna was, and you know, I think people forget Breonna was killed March 13th.

Abigail Disney: Yeah.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Uh, George Floyd was killed two months later. Uh, and so up until that moment, no one was really demanding any kind of accountability for her death.

And so, in some way, her death is sort of a metaphor for all the other black women who, um, have been killed, uh, in between Eric Garner and Mike Brown, and between Mike Brown and Philando Castile. There are black women, but our ability to see them is limited because we don't imagine anti-black racism through the lens of violence through state violence.

We don't even imagine them as objects of private violence. We don't see them as having been lynched. We don't see them as having been raped. Um, and when we don't see that we don't see the connections to feminists organizing. Most people don't know that Rosa Parks got her start defending Recy Taylor, who was a rape victim of several white men in the South and she never was able to get justice.

So that's not been remembered. The not remembering it has had incredible consequences because still people see anti-racism and feminism as two separate, mutually exclusive, you know, movements and that's harmed us. I look at Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court and I say that's a product of the separation of our two movements.

Abigail Disney: Yes exactly. Can you explain that actually, because you did an op ed about it in the New York Times and I thought it was brilliantly put together.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: At that moment, so I was one of the, um, one of the folks who went to Washington to support Anita Hill when she was, uh, subpoenaed. And I always want to say that because many people still don't know that she was subpoenaed to come to tell the story that people had heard about. I wanna just share this one little snapshot. Um, so we were all backstage. Her main, uh, lawyer comes in and says, okay, everyone in the office come out. So, we march in beside her sort of like a prize fighter we'd go in cause we're there and my mother has no idea that I'm in Washington, DC she thinks I'm in Los Angeles and she's watching it and she sees me marching in. And once again, like, what are you doing? It was crazy.

But what happened when Clarence Thomas did that--this is a high-tech lynching. You know, against any black man who deemed to, to think for himself, he wrapped himself up in a history of lynching, um, as a symbol of this is what racism looks like. This is a racist thing that's happening right here. So, if you know about lynching, then this is what's happening.

Now, of course, no man has ever been lynched for any accusation that a black woman has ever made. Let's just start there. Number two, he was the furthest person from any willingness up until this point to say that our racial history has anything to do with what's happening now. So, I thought that it was going to be abundantly clear to everybody that it was just an effort to, you know, wrap himself up in an, in a story, in a narrative to save himself and everybody would see through it.

And so, what ended up happening is that the coalition that should have come together to support Anita and defeat that nomination ended up being divided. Divided between many white feminists who said, you know, race has nothing to do with it.

Well, you know, race has a lot to do with black women's veracity, and we could see that in the way the committee attacked her and then African Americans who basically said stuff like, you know, why is a black woman pulling a black man down stuff like sexual harassment isn't our issue. And that one really pushed me over the edge because sexual harassment has been an issue for black women since we arrived on these shores. We were the ones who contested it. Our black women were the ones who were the first plaintiffs against it who got

it established as, um, a point of antidiscrimination law. So that failed communication, that failed moment allowed Clarence Thomas to be confirmed.

And then he went on to wreak havoc on civil rights law on voting rights law, on anti-discrimination law, uh, against, um, gender discrimination. So that was a moment when it became clear to me that the artificial separation between the history of anti-racism and the history of women's rights advocacy was hurting us now. It wasn't just something we forgot in the past. It was doing active damage today.

Abigail Disney: Right, right, right, well, and white feminists aren't exactly innocent in this.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: These are struggles that we're having with people that we admire and support, and we love, and we march beside and we, you know, at the same time, recognizing that allyship doesn't necessarily bring visibility for you. Or your interests, and this is a big issue now, you know, for black women, they are the backbone of the Democratic Party. They are the ones that get people out to vote. They are the ones that more than any other cohort voted against the, um, scapegoating, racist xenophobic sexist politics of 45 more than anyone.

One would think that their leadership like, because they got it so, so right, that we would want to know how do we replicate that? You know, they should have input in significant places of strategy, political messaging, you know, creativity, and that just doesn't happen. Black women still have to struggle for leadership in the party and in organizations. So, if we take seriously that wisdom, it should mean that we reflect that in terms of placing people who've experienced this in institutional positions of authority. We've not done that. And until we do, we're not going to be able to really harness what is in that special sauce that comes from living life at the intersections of all of these structured inequalities.

Abigail Disney: Right. And, and, you know, you remember the Pillsbury Doughboy?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Yes, of course, with a little giggle at the end?

Abigail Disney: Yes. You, you poke him in the belly, and he giggles and it makes a little dent and then the dent goes right back out?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: It goes away.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. That's how I think of men. I mean, I, I, so I love men. I've men all over my life. They're wonderful. But, but with men, especially men over a certain age, um, when you remind them that a woman was standing there, when you remind them that an African American woman started this organization, when you remind them that Rosa Parks was so much more than just this nice old lady who sat on a bus, they go, oh, yeah, you're right, that's weird. And then, then like five minutes later, the dent is gone, and you have to remind them again. And that's the thing that I think probably comes out of guilt and privilege and an unwillingness to accommodate something that disrupts your narrative. But it's to our detriment!

Kimberlé Crenshaw: It is to our detriment. And I, and I would say the normalcy of patriarchy and here's the hard part. What do we make of women who are also the Pillsbury Doughboy in what, what's our analysis of that, right? Because we know that's real too.

Abigail Disney: You know, a lot of splintering, I think I stood witness to in the nineties when there started to emerge women's groups that were just focused on women's leadership and just focused on putting women into boardrooms and heads of companies and things like that. And that's how Ivanka Trump can unabashedly call herself a feminist. That version of feminism has become a tool of the patriarchy, because what it does is it doesn't challenge any of the structures that got us here to start with it.

It doesn't ask economic questions about like, wait a minute, why it's a whole swath of people being paid poverty wages to do full time jobs? Why do these race structures persist in spite of all this good talk in the other direction?

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And that's, that's precisely why, I think it raises the question of what we do now. So Ivanka in The White House. You know, or Ivanka marching out with her father when they tear gas, the protestors, that's a feminist moment.

If that's a feminist moment, a lot of people say, I don't want any part of it. Right. So, there's that. And then there is the side that says we will not relinquish feminism to that. We will not make a claim that feminism is wherever a woman is exercising power. We will not allow the real grassroots realities that shape the lives of billions of people on this planet to be absorbed in the careerist opportunistic demands for recognition of those at the very top of the political social hierarchy. So, I kind of, you know, line up with those who say, I'm not gonna give up feminism any more than I'm going to give up anti-racism anymore that I'm going to give up civil rights.

Fights about concepts, about politics are also fights about narratives. What stories are being advanced by our use of the term and how are those not the stories that are being advanced by our opponents' use of the term? So, I think that's where the fight is right now. It's not about conceding that the terrain. It's about getting those definitions and those frameworks back on our side.

Abigail Disney: But, you know, Kim, it's interesting. You don't like a binary. It's very clear.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: That's true.

Abigail Disney: It seems like you're all about finding a way to synthesize binaries. I mean, I think it's a very profound thing, because isn't that the, the way you grow into being a sophisticated thinker is you need to let go of the binaries because it's not a reasonable way to think about the world.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Yeah, well, that's very much, I mean, yeah, you put your finger on intersectionality, critical race theory. You know, the work, the work we do in #SayHerName, for example, in, in politics. So, a lot of my organizations focus on the killing of black women by police that focuses on a traditional way of thinking about, uh, anti-black police violence and putting women into it.

But there's also the reality that sexual abuse is the second most common complaint against police. Which means that sexual violence, it actually happens between police and women. And many of those women are disproportionately black.

So, uh, #SayHerName has space, holds space, both for families of black women killed by the police, but also for the uninterrogated dimension of police violence that both traditional civil rights organizations and traditional gender justice organizations don't really address. It falls outside of the framework for how people tend to think about violence against women.

So, yeah, I guess across all of these academic and political and organizational spaces, because I have a foot in everything and that, and both those feet are mine, I try to think in a, in a, in a synthesized way, rather than, you know, talking to myself in two different registers and finding a place and a space for all of that to be integrated into academic work, into policy work.

Abigail Disney: Right. So, Kimberlé, I want, just want to thank you so, so, so much for this conversation. It's been really, really interesting, and I've learned so much right now and I'm so grateful.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: And thank you. You've given me a perspective on things, especially since we were contemporaries, I feel like I'm learning about what your 10-year-old self was thinking in Los Angeles and mine in Canton, Ohio. So, it's, it's a fascinating conversation. Thanks for having it with me.

Abigail Disney: We'll have to keep it up. If you, if you want to know more about Kimberlé Crenshaw, you can follow her on twitter @SandyLock. Her podcast is called Intersectionality Matters! with an exclamation point at the end. And her web series is called Under the Black Light. She's the co-founder and Executive Director of the African American Policy Institute.

And if you're interested in her work, you can just look at the hashtag #SayHerName on Twitter. So, thank you. Thank you. Thank you, a million times.

Kimberlé Crenshaw: Thank you.