These are hard times for those of us who loathe capitalism—with its inevitable exploitation, competition, and rewards for selfishness and greed, along with its hostility to values of compassion, economic sharing, co-operation and solidarity.”

So begins Meg Luxton’s piece “Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism: Reclaiming Our History, Reanimating our Politics.” These are also troubling times for those of us who are aware of Marxist feminism’s failure to see that the world of women extends well beyond white middle- and working-class women. I agree with Luxton that the capitalist classes, together with their Right-wing leaders, have obliterated much of the anticapitalist forces. But they have managed to do this very effectively because the Left, including the feminist Left, has continued to ignore the need for politics of solidarity with the ever-growing numbers of people of colour in the global North and South. I will discuss Luxton’s piece with this idea in mind, pointing to the glaring gaps in her analysis, which pays lip service to the discourse of intersectionality but fails to engage with it as praxis in her work.

I enter this conversation weary of the fact that we are in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century examining Euro-Canadian feminist discourse that still shows no structural engagement with discussions by First Nations women, Black women, and other women of colour, and that pays only cursory acknowledgement to the contributions of these women to the development of feminism in that settler colonial society, Canada. It rings of what Black and other women-of-colour feminists refer to as the latest iteration of the “same-old, same-old.” In other words, society continues to change rapidly, yet the more things change the more they remain the same. Although Canada, unlike the United States, will not be
a white majority society by 2050, at least two of its largest cities, Toronto and Vancouver, will be majority nonwhite long before then. Yet as we see in this case, Euro-Canadian feminism continues to be a discourse of its imperial allegiances.¹

Meg Luxton offers her readers an excellent history of Marxist feminism as praxis in Canada from the 1960s to the present—something that she says has been ignored, minimized, or excluded by both the Left and feminists. I think it is fair to say, however, that she is equally guilty of recreating the same disjuncture between “memory and interpretation”—something of which she accuses the others who recount the histories of feminism in the past four decades because of an omission of a different kind. While Luxton indicates that she is aware that feminists in Canada differ across race, ethnicity, and class (at least these are the primary points of division), the most striking omission in this essay is the lack of an intersectional analysis. In each of the categories of race, ethnicity, and class, women of colour have forged their own feminist paths while at the same time challenging Euro-Canadian feminists to do a more comprehensive analysis of unjustified claims of universalism in their work.

Luxton’s own work has been no exception. She has addressed the dilemmas of white, working-class women in the Canadian labour force, but does not mention women of colour in the same workforce. Thus what is presented here is a genealogy of feminism in Canada that does not pay attention to intersectionality; Luxton’s piece in this conversation does the same thing. It is not sufficient to say that both the Left and the feminist movement disregard the history of women’s liberation by ignoring the “lessons of Marxist feminist politics” and to caution that doing so means the “risk of sustaining or even deepening the oppression of women, working class, racialized, Indigenous, and other subordinated peoples,”² and then go right ahead and commit the same error.

This omission is all the more glaring because First Nations, Black, and other women-of-colour feminists were writing about their experiences in Canada during the late 1960s to the late 1980s, the period that Luxton examines in her history of the socialist feminist current in the women’s movement in Canada and Quebec.³ Many of us were long-time activists on
the streets posing our demands to the state to end racist practices of all sorts that were designed to subordinate us and deny us our equal rights as Canadians. We were simultaneously budding scholars and established writers, challenging all institutions that dared to practise injustice against us. Whether as students or young scholars in academic institutions that made life a living nightmare for us, or as women employees in the labour force, our experiences forced us to challenge the establishment and write about those experiences. At the same time, Euro-Canadian feminism, irrespective of its ideological perspective, was carving out its liberal path that resulted in many of its subjects subsequently attaining institutional career advancement. White Canadian feminists such as Luxton were generally unconcerned with the struggles being waged by women of colour.

Since the early 1990s, there has been even more scholarship produced by Canadian feminists of colour, whether in literary or social texts. That work, too, has been largely ignored by Euro-Canadian feminists. Indeed, for years Black women and other women-of-colour activists and scholars in Canada have found their inspiration and developed solidarity with a number of scholars in the United States. It was understood that the Canadian state was practising a similar pattern of institutional racism against all who were not white. Since there had already been a civil rights movement in the United States—that is, concerted activism that forced the state to acknowledge as much—Canadian feminist activists of colour often found inspiration in those struggles across the border. The literature and the methods of African American women and feminist activists during and after the civil rights movement proved instructive for Black feminist and other women-of-colour activists in Canada. Throughout the development of this work, even when Black, First Nations, and South and East Asian feminists attempted to create solidarity with Euro-Canadian feminists on mobilizations for critical events such as International Women’s Day (IWD) for example, their thoughts, ideas, and experiences were ignored even as the white feminists claimed to appreciate our attempts at solidarity work.

A classic example of this occurred during the organizing for IWD 1986 in Toronto, which had the theme Women Against Racism from South Africa to Toronto. Black women and other women of colour objected to the theme
because the organizing of IWD had been in the hands of white feminists who resisted the involvement of women of colour at the helm. Hence in the face of practices of racialization in the making of feminist action, there was the pretense of working against racism. The actions of the women of colour transformed the organizing of IWD in Toronto from that year forward to include women of colour in the organizing committee. Interestingly, many of the white feminist organizers at the time touted themselves as Marxist/socialist feminists. Not surprisingly, a blog recounting the history of IWD globally fails to mention this watershed year in the history of Toronto’s IWD organizing.5

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty and other women-of-colour feminists have pointed out,6 white feminists present themselves as active agents of history and have perceived women of colour in the global North and South as victims of very patriarchal cultures, and as being in need of their pity rather than solidarity. When we look at the history of Euro-Canadian feminism that Luxton lays out here in her piece, there is nothing to show a different pattern from what I have suggested above. In her own work and long history of commendable activism on behalf of white, working-class women in the labour movement in English Canada, this has been a class struggle. We see little evidence in that work, however, of any recognition that the Canadian working class has always been raced.7 Indeed, when we consider the significance of race to the development of capitalism in Canada—from the near total annihilation of the First Nations, to the practices of slavery in Quebec and Ontario since the seventeenth century,8 to the search by the state for cheap immigrant labour (specifically workers of colour from the global South), and the failure of Canadian labour unions to pay equal attention to organizing Black Canadian workers and other workers of colour from the eighteenth century to the present—it is no small oversight that Euro-Canadian feminist scholarship has not paid attention to these facts.

It is against this historical background that we must examine Luxton’s essay. She argues that much of the distortion and blanketization of second-wave feminism as liberal feminism comes from it having turned away from the issues that are crucial to women such as redistribution, and having “served to legitimize the marketization, state retrenchment, and the valoriza-
tion of the cheap, waged, labour central to neoliberalism.” But this is a seriously flawed account because it ignores the history of all Marxist and socialist feminist activism that was taking place at the time. In fact, Luxton accuses a few prominent US feminists (although she does not name anyone specifically) of doing the same thing, albeit in a more sophisticated analysis, through their claims that feminism of the late twentieth century until today has been co-opted by neoliberalism. She finds what she calls this distorted “memory” and accounting particularly troubling because it serves to “silence, and even deny, the important roles played by working-class women, women of colour, and Indigenous women.” As a diehard Marxist, anticapitalist, and antiracist feminist, I would like to agree with Luxton. However, even if what she points out is accurate, it is not as if Luxton, nor any of the socialist feminists whom she invokes in this discussion, have integrated the work of the women she claims have been left out into their own socialist feminist analyses. Again, to merely mention what/who have not been at the table does nothing to bring them to the table.

In an analysis of identity politics and the issue of violence against women of colour, African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1990 to speak specifically to the multitude of ways that women of colour have historically been marginalized in policies and practices by the state, as well as in feminist discourse and activism by those fighting violence against women. Crenshaw painstakingly argues that women of colour exist right at the intersections of the dynamics of race, colour, and class that get ignored by those who are looking at the identity factors impacting one or other of these differences, but are unable to look at all of these differences simultaneously. If we are to understand these women’s location at “the margins” of society, we need to look at the intersections where women of colour experience simultaneous oppressions; these intersections demand a more complex and integrated analysis of their experiences.

Since Crenshaw wrote her analysis, there have been some white feminist scholars who have analyzed what they deem to be a more nuanced intersectional analysis. Johanna Brenner, a Marxist feminist, adds an insightful addition to the analyses of the women of colour who stand as the forerunners of intersectionality—Crenshaw, Evelyn Nkano Glenn, Chandra Talpade
Mohanty, and others—as she interrogates class differences among women in an attempt to determine whether there is a future for feminism. She points to the need for connections to be made between the civil rights and feminist movements at this moment in neoliberalism when both seem to be at a standstill. Specifically, Brenner calls for an analysis of “the division between white middle class (especially upper professional and managerial) women and poor and working-class women of colour” because, she argues, a class analysis “can open up new fields for cross-race coalition building and feminist theorizing.” However, when those path-breaking women of colour spoke to the need for an intersectional analysis in white feminist theorizing, their focus was primarily on the entire negation of race and all of its attendants that make the lives of women of colour across class, but most notably those of the working class, particularly challenging. Nuances of inter-race-class coalition building, though important, must be seen as secondary rather than parallel to the prior interest.

Crenshaw highlights this in her example of how the experiences of women of colour as victims of violence are the product of the intersecting patterns of racism and sexism. As she says, feminism and racism rarely intersect in feminist practice because the experiences of women of colour are always minimized. The result is that feminist efforts and antiracist efforts often function as if the two are “mutually exclusive.” Crenshaw helps us to further understand that intersectionality is also structural and political. So, for example, in the case of women of colour and domestic violence, poverty, children, and lack of job skills burden poor women of colour—all of which put them at a much greater disadvantage to be able to access support services. If/when they attempt to access those services, they encounter policies that were designed without them in mind, which further limits their access because of the services’ ineffectiveness or unresponsiveness. The failure to recognize the intersectional dynamics leads to frustrations for both the women of colour—as victims of a system that was not designed to accommodate their needs—as well as the service providers, who experience high levels of failure because the conditions they encounter in attempting to help women of colour make for insurmountable odds.
I have gone into much detail above to provide the foundation for what constitutes proper intersectional analysis. What is troubling about the discussion in Luxton’s current article is that she lays out how Marxist feminism should be done if it is to be inclusive and therefore effective. She even gives examples of its failures when this is not done. However, she explains this away as contextual to time and place, while claiming that the design of Marxism and feminism as political movements and theoretical projects has been inherently international and transnational, thus intimating that inclusivity is a given for Marxist feminism. As she writes:

[B]oth Marxist and feminist theories and politics are rooted in specific times and places. They have been shaped by imperialist and colonial histories, national identities, and issues of linguistic, religious, and cultural differences. They reflect local norms and practices relating to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, class politics, and other systems of inequality. For example, during the anti-Apartheid struggles, South African Marxism developed sophisticated analyses of race and class in which feminism remained marginalized. Indigenous peoples around the world raised issues related to the land and the relationship of people to their environments. In the same period, Marxist feminists in the United Kingdom and Canada developed sophisticated analyses of gender and class, but offered little on racialization until antiracist feminists challenged them. While such uneven developments may invite productive exchanges, they can also reinforce misunderstandings and political differences, undermining solidarity among activists from different places.¹²

The fact that Luxton as one of Canada’s best known Marxist feminists failed to do a genealogy of feminism in Canada that took account of Canada’s settler colonial history and the implications of that for its First Nations and peoples of colour, and specifically for the women of those groups, can hardly be reduced to misunderstandings and political differences. It is fundamental neglect and should be named as such.
I’d like to thank my sister colleagues, Beverly Bain of Laurentian University at Georgian College and Angela Robertson, formerly of Toronto Women’s Press, both long-time feminists and scholar-activists in Toronto, for brief but significant discussions that helped my recollection of some of the facts here, including the IWD saga of 1986.

5. See blog by socialist feminist Judy Rebbick: http://canadiandimension.com/blog/3782/.
7. “Raced speaks to the fact that whites tend to racialize all others except themselves. So a white feminist writing about the WC does not racialize it because white is not "raced." It follows that she is blind to that fact and her failure to pay attention to the “Others.”